



Reimagining Political Horizons

Anthropology Matters!

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Anthropologists have long been engaged in resistance and activism. “Social movements have been important spaces for generating anthropological theory,” Leith Mullings insisted in her bold 2013 presidential address, entitled “[Anthropology Matters](#).” After participating in the 1963 March on Washington, and watching in horror as her fellow civil rights activists were beaten and attacked with dogs and fire hoses, Mullings found that anthropology mattered to her because it offered comparative and historical perspectives on issues of war, violence, racism, and poverty. Mullings maintained, “Anthropological theory and methodology are uniquely positioned to make a decisive contribution to solving human problems through education, advocacy, and empowering subaltern groups.”

During my own anthropological fieldwork, I also situated my research within a movement for justice and peace. After witnessing a series of massacres in West Papua, I found that anthropological knowledge can matter in policy realms. In the early days of the George W. Bush presidency, I began accompanying indigenous Papuan leaders to Washington, DC, where they were seeking help from inscrutable foreign powers. As we established relationships with Members of Congress and their staff, we were able to influence foreign policy. Together with congressional allies we used a variety of mechanisms—like introducing resolutions, circulating Dear Colleague letters for congressional signatures, testifying at hearings—to end US military aid programs to repressive foreign governments and help bring about the release of Papuan political prisoners.



2017.02.04 No Muslim Ban 2, Washington, DC USA 00518.” Ted Eytan/ Flickr CC BY-SA 2.0

Even while testifying as an expert in Congress and working to shape policy, I studied the dynamics of power in Washington. The structural inequalities shaping the global balance of power remained intact although I found that small policy victories were possible—even in a Republican-controlled Congress that was hostile to human rights concerns. As I worked on piecemeal, molecular, changes in policy realms with Papuan intellectuals, I joined with them in imagining more sweeping changes to the horizons of political possibility.

The Monday after Donald Trump’s election I found myself back in Washington, DC. Feeling shell-shocked on the eve of a new epoch—when dreams would be dashed, livelihoods destroyed, and carefully constructed policies dismantled—I set up appointments with congressional offices that had long been supportive of human rights in West Papua. Representative Raúl Grijalva (D-AZ), the Co-Chair of the Progressive Caucus, was storming around his office shaking a newspaper with headlines about Trump’s latest xenophobic statement, while I quietly sat chatting with Norma Salazar, his legislative aide for immigration. The Progressive Caucus, now the largest group of Democratic lawmakers with over 80 members, has a broad platform that encompasses issues like workers rights, environmental justice, and gun control. The People’s Budget of the Caucus proposes increased spending on education and healthcare, financed by decreased military spending. During this meeting, I learned about how the Progressive Caucus had pressured the Obama Administration to end aggressive raids and deportation by Immigration and Customs Enforcement Agents. Under the Trump Administration, Salazar said that many of the important battles on immigration would be fought at sheriff’s offices and in municipal governments.

The atmosphere was more subdued in the office of John Conyers, who is the longest serving member in the US House of Representatives and a founding member of the Congressional Black Caucus. Conyers's aide shared my shell-shocked feelings on his first day back at work after Trump's election. I thanked him for the continued support of West Papua, and I asked how a semi-empowered intellectual like myself might help accomplish parts of the Progressive Caucus and Congressional Black Caucus policy agendas under the Trump Administration. Rather than just play "whack-a-mole," and simply fight every controversial administration policy, Conyers's aide suggested that the moment was ripe for forming progressive intersectional political coalitions behind important pieces of legislation. We talked at length about [H.R. 40](#), a bill that Representative John Conyers has introduced every year since 1989. This bill would establish a "Commission to Study Reparation Proposals for African Americans to examine slavery and discrimination in the colonies and the United States from 1619 to the present and recommend appropriate remedies." It is very unlikely that this bill will pass in the current Republican-controlled Congress, or be signed into law by Trump, but it stands as an example of an imaginative piece of legislation that could be possible if Democrats regain control of the legislature in the next electoral cycle.

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Policy conversations in Washington are often dominated by academic experts from other disciplines: economics, political science, and law. Anthropologists have the opportunity to play important roles, as organic intellectuals, doing the difficult work of translating the concerns of communities we study and articulating these concerns to the legislative process. To again borrow the words of Mullings, anthropologists have "a role to play in imagining and perhaps enacting new possibilities for human society."

With these convictions in mind, I helped assemble a group of 23 anthropologists at the AAA headquarters in May 2017 to explore the contours of power in Washington, DC. Donning suits and ties—and following the vague Republican rules on "proper decorum" for women—we fanned out into the office buildings of Congress to study the policy process as participants and observers. Our group included an organizer in the Movement for Black Lives, Native American scholars who were involved in Standing Rock, archaeological experts on cultural resource protection, medical anthropologists who were already working to protect the Affordable Care Act, queer scholars, experts on Latin American immigration, and environmental justice, and Mullings herself. Our aim was to meet congressional staff members who were working on policies related to our research interests, and advocate for concrete policy changes.

Fanning out across Capitol Hill—in groups of two or three—we had over 40 congressional briefings. Some of our meetings were in offices with a popular following: Senator Al Franken (D-MN), Representative Maxine Waters (D-CA), and Representative John Lewis (D-GA). Other meetings were with staff members of lesser known politicians. Throughout we took careful notes about issues where anthropological expertise could matter. We learned about the **Therapeutic Fraud Prevention Act**, introduced by Ted Lieu (D-CA) as the first federal bill prohibiting “conversion therapy”—dangerous techniques that aim to change an individual’s sexual orientation or gender identity. In the office of freshmen Pramila Jayapal (D-WA), we learned about a series of environmental justice bills to address the disproportionate impacts of climate change on communities of color, low income communities, people with limited English proficiency, indigenous peoples, and people living with disabilities.

We met with Bertha Guerrero, a senior staff member who led Congressional support for Standing Rock in 2016 while working for Grijalva, the Co-Chair of the Progressive Caucus. Shortly after Trump issued the **Executive Order** in January to expedite pipeline construction at Standing Rock, Grijalva joined protestors in front of the White House, saying: “Even for a president who mistakes his own whims for the rule of law and corporate profits for the public interest, these orders are irresponsible....The damage to water quality, public health, and eventually our climate will be on his hands.” Guerrero told us that cultural anthropologists and archaeologists have an important role to play in responding to a lesser known Trump Executive Order about Bears Ears National Monument—a site where millions of acres of land have been designated for protection from drilling, mining, logging and ranching.



"2017.02.04 No Muslim Ban 2, Washington, DC USA 00526." Ted Eytan/Flickr CC BY-SA 2.0

Congressional officials are quick to recognize anthropologists as experts, particularly on issues related to indigenous peoples. And, like many publics that we address, they are quick to connect with narratives of lived experience that illustrate situated knowledge. Nisrin Abdelrahman, an anthropology PhD candidate at Stanford University, accompanied me in a meeting with the office of Bonnie Watson Coleman (D-NJ), my own congressional representative. Nisrin talked about how she was among the very first people detained under Trump's "Muslim Ban," while returning home from her dissertation field research in Sudan where she was studying social movements, land reform, and extractive industries. After Nisrin told her story—about how she was detained, handcuffed, and questioned about her political affiliations, simply because she was travelling with a passport from one of the countries on Trump's list of majority Muslim nations—the Congresswoman's Legislative Director was quick to offer help.

Anthropologists can play an important role in policy debates on mainstream issues—like immigration—by decentering the debate and recentering it on issues that are central to structurally marginalized communities we study or represent. Nisrin deftly did this work, focusing the conversation on a relatively obscure immigration policy—Temporary Protected Status or TPS—that impacts many people who are already in the United States and originate from countries targeted by the Muslim Ban. TPS affords temporary rights to people who have been displaced by ongoing armed conflicts or environmental disasters. Nisrin reminded Congressional officials that TPS was in immediate jeopardy for immigrants from Haiti, who came to the United States following the 2010 earthquake.

The AAA members who gathered in Washington, DC, last May joined Nisrin and advocacy groups around the country in asking their congressional officials to support an extension of TPS for Haiti. Weeks after our visit to Washington, we learned that our Congressional advocacy had helped score a minor victory with the Trump Administration. On May 22nd, Secretary of Homeland Security John Kelly announced his decision to extend TPS for Haiti by six more months.

On other issues, our advocacy was less successful. AAA members also worked with Grijalva's office to help gather support for Bears Ears National Monument. Eighty-six Congressional Representatives sent a letter to Trump's Secretary of the Interior on May 25th, noting, "While stewardship of America's national monuments is your solemn responsibility, the continued existence of those national monuments is ours." Even though he might not have the legal authority to do so, Interior Secretary Zinke recommended reducing the size of Bears Ears National Monument in a June report.

A new group of AAA members, the [Congressional Action Network](#), has emerged to identify and track policy initiatives that are of direct concern to the field of anthropology and the communities

we study. Our aim is to draw on the body of anthropological knowledge to influence contemporary policy debates. We will host a workshop, “[Congressional Advocacy 101](#),” at the upcoming Annual Meeting in Washington. Alongside experiments in practical advocacy, we will be creating spaces for generating anthropological theory. In Washington, we will also report back to the broader AAA membership about our work as participants in and observers of overlapping political spheres during the Executive Session “[Reimagining Political Horizons](#).” While discussing near-term political possibilities against the backdrop of hostile forces, we will also consider more sweeping changes on future horizons.

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