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Refugees, Immigrants, and Trump's Executive Order: Six Anthropologists Speak Out

🕒 February 2, 2017

👤 Carole McGranahan

By: Catherine Besteman, Elizabeth Cullen Dunn, Tricia Redeker Hepner, Carole McGranahan, Nomi Stone, and Marnie Thomson

The Racist Gift of Immigration and Citizenship Bans, Again

Catherine Besteman

How can we understand Donald Trump's executive order banning the entry of immigrants from Syria, Libya, Yemen, Somalia, Sudan, Iran and Iraq, as well as all refugees? As an act of national security, the ban makes no sense. Rather, I read them as a racist gift to the white Christian alt-right that formed President Trump's initial core base. The United States has a history of bans and color bars to entry and citizenship, about which we are rightfully embarrassed in hindsight. The Naturalization Act of 1790 restricted citizenship to only white immigrants, a law that remained on the books until 1952. Entry to the US remained open to anyone, however, until the implementation of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and then the Johnson Reed Act of 1924, which imposed the first comprehensive control over immigration. The Act placed a cap on the number of people to be admitted, set national origins quotas based on the 1890 census for entry, and barred anyone ineligible for citizenship from entry. By using the 1890 census, the national origins quotas intentionally favored immigrants from northern Europe and restricted Jewish immigrants because of anti-Semitism and fears of Communist influence.

Furthermore, the Supreme Court declared ineligible for citizenship everyone from Japan to Afghanistan, with the exception of the Philippines, then a US territory, thus creating a new racial category of "Asian" to be universally banned. When comprehensive immigration reform in 1965 removed national origins quotas and bans, it was heralded as a rejection of racist barriers to entry and a victory for American values of justice, human rights, and fairness. A dog whistle to those lusting for white Christian hegemony, the bans are an initial step to return America to a time when Muslims were barred from entry and immigration to the US was controlled by and for whites only.

The Politics of Naked Cruelty

Elizabeth Cullen Dunn

Since the end of the Cold War, global politics has been animated by "humanitarian reason"—a curious mix of violence and care used by nation-states to pursue their own geopolitical interests while ostensibly acting altruistically to provide aid.

No more.

Donald Trump's refugee ban signals a dramatically new basis for global politics: a politics of naked cruelty.

Humanitarian reason carefully cloaked even its most violent acts in the treacle of human rights and emergency aid. The occupation of Afghanistan, the "liberation" of Iraq and the targeted bombing of Libya were all presented as military action taken to care for the impoverished, oppressed, or forcibly displaced.

Trump's refugee ban makes no such pretense. Instead, it pretends it is indifferent to what happens to the millions of people who will be oppressed by their own governments, killed in conflict zones, or left to linger in the eternal limbo of displacement. "We have to take care of our own first," is the constant refrain.

The politics of naked cruelty turns the humanitarian stereotype of refugees-as-innocent-victims on its head in order to justify state-sponsored mass violence against them. Already, Republicans in Congress have proposed that

the US withdraw from the UN—which would mean cutting funding funds for housing and feeding displaced people. The right to turn away from starving refugees is baked right into that policy.

The only upside to the politics of naked cruelty is that it is naked. We no longer have to work to unmask the complex workings of neoliberal biopolitics. Power is now unmasking itself, which makes it fundamentally easier to oppose. That is why whether or not we care about refugees—and there are plenty of liberals willing to accept the sacrifice of refugees as unavoidable collateral damage as they focus on populations they deem more important—it's worth continuing to fight the ban. It's an obvious place to contest the underlying principle of the politics of cruelty: the right not to care.

Refuge, Refugees, and the Fears We Share

Tricia Redeker Hepner

What is daily life like under a regime that abuses its own people, disregards the rule of law, targets vulnerable and minority groups, and fails to hold perpetrators of human rights abuses unaccountable? How do reasonable people exist – and resist – in a society where those in power have created a nightmarish alt-reality and convinced others to go along with it? At what point does fear become action, pushing one to wager life itself against intolerable repression? These are precisely the dynamics I have explained – literally hundreds of times – to US immigration officials adjudicating asylum claims filed by people from Eritrea. While some of the fears that drive people to flee are indeed subjective and contextually specific enough to require translation, many are not. Being detained for one's religious beliefs, beaten to death in prison, or subjected to torture require no culturally specific explanations to establish their moral repugnance or illegality. Rather, in explaining to US immigration officials the subjective fears of an Eritrean, or an Iraqi, a Kurd, a Syrian, or Afghan, what we are really doing is helping to narrate a story not about them but about us.

For "refuge" is really an elaborate ritual in which we affirm the predictability, integrity, tolerance, fairness, and inherent respect for justice and basic human rights we imagine characterizes America. Asylum in theory, if not practice, reiterates how America differs from the authoritarian, human rights-abusing states from whence refugees come. That is, until the day we wake up to

realize that the refugee narratives we have helped tell for others, the subjective fears we translated as though alien, are really our own. Battered by xenophobia for decades, the US refugee system endures all-out assault by the very political dynamics it was once designed to subvert. In "Make America Great Again" we hear an echo of the lamentations of untold millions throughout time and space who have fought, died, and fled from dictatorships and wars that too often America helped create. But who will testify for us?



Protest at Castle Clinton National Monument, the point of departure and arrival for Statue of Liberty tours in New York City. AP photo

Sacred Grounds and Stolen Land, or, White Supremacists are Immigrants Too

Carole McGranahan

We Are All Immigrants. Make America Immigrate Again. Immigrants Built This Country. Signs such as these are prevalent in ongoing protests against Trump's executive order banning individuals from seven countries from the US, including legally-approved refugees as well as legal permanent residents of this country. His action took place in the midst of other nefarious actions seemingly built on a platform of hate, lies, and destruction. Many have called his Muslim immigrant ban un-American, claiming this is not who we as Americans are. Others might disagree. The internment of Japanese-

Americans during World War II and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 are early precursors to this moment. However, we need to go back further, to the founding of the United States of America and to a different protest sign:
#NoBananStolenLand

Immigrants did build the USA, but they did so through the dispossession and subordination of other people: the millions of sovereign Native American peoples already living here. These were someone else's lands, someone else's sacred grounds. Immigrants also "built" the USA through slave labor. We are not all immigrants. Some of us are immigrants. Some of us are refugees, fleeing war and political violence. Some of us are descendants of slaves, sold and forced to "migrate" to this country. And some of us are native. Who are immigrants then? Those of us, including me, whose ancestors chose to come to this country. And: white supremacists. White supremacists are immigrants.

In his first days in office, advised by white supremacist Stephen Bannon, **Trump has left Jews out of a statement remembering the Holocaust, has instituted a ban on Muslims coming into this country, ordered the Army Corps to expedite approval of the Dakota Access pipeline near the Standing Rock Reservation, and embarrassed just about everyone but himself by not knowing who Frederick Douglass was in his "speech" marking Black History Month.** He followed this with the suggestion that **the governmental Countering Violent Extremism program would no longer have a focus on white supremacist groups who have carried out violence in the USA, but will instead focus solely on Islamic communities.**

I regularly testify as an expert witness for asylum applicants from Nepal and Tibet. Some of these are individuals who have escaped unimaginable political violence. They are looking for a safe haven, a place where they will not live in fear, a home for their children. This country is not perfect. Our history—past and present—is one that includes trauma and unjust war. Acknowledging injustice is a key step in working for justice now. One refugee here in the US told me that as his plane was descending into JFK, as he entered the fabled America for the first time, he looked out the window expecting the streets to be made of gold. He laughed as he told me this, at how as a young boy then man, he had taken this to be literal truth. Our streets are not paved with gold. Our myths obscure the often-painful realities of hierarchy and difference and violence in this country. We cannot let white supremacists and those who live in gold towers dishonor these sacred grounds or all of us for whom they are sacred.

Signs, Accusations, Fates

Nomi Stone

The morning after the Trump's Immigration Ban went into effect, an Iraqi friend of mine, who now lives in America, sent me a picture of two trees that had just fallen in his yard: a prone cactus, spines pointing upward, and a larger trunk, a cracked triangle of earth around it. "It is a sign," he said: "It is not safe here." He, like many of the Iraqis I interviewed for recent fieldwork, had worked with American military personnel as a contractor and translator during the 2003 Iraq War, dreaming of a more just post-Saddam Iraq. Yet as Iraqi resistance to U.S. occupation grew, many Iraqis I interviewed described how they increasingly faced accusations of being informants to the U.S. military. Returning to Iraq terrified many of my interlocutors. As the news of the Ban sank in, people wondered what might be next. One friend with a Green Card said: "As long as they don't kick us out. We finally got here." And another told me anxiously: "I think he [Trump] will eventually send all Iraqis back, even if they have Green Cards. Iraqis can't feel safe anywhere." In a moment of despair, a friend who had nearly been killed by a militia for working for the U.S. military told me that Iraqis who blamed him for his wartime choices said: "we deserve this, to be treated this way now that we're here." As I formulated my thoughts today, I began rereading Hassan Blasim's *The Corpse Exhibition*, thinking of the image in one story of a miraculous compass, light as a butterfly in the hand of its bearer, that turns blood-red to signal a turn in the story and the fate of the characters.

More Than a #MuslimBan

Marnie Thomson

Trump has issued a 120-day ban on ALL refugees entering the United States. Supporters of this measure stress that it is 1) **only a temporary ban**, and 2) it will only last until the **vetting system has been improved**. But does the ban's impermanence and stated purpose justify this order? No. Here's why:

The vetting of refugees is already, to use Trump's word, extreme. It usually takes two or more years to screen refugees. The screening takes place in their country of refuge, before they ever set foot on U.S. soil. The process includes

many rounds of interviews with UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) personnel, an interview with the State Department, multiple background checks and finger print screenings, a review of the case by U.S. Immigration Headquarters, **an in-person interview** with the Department of Homeland Security, medical examinations, U.S. cultural orientation, and finally a multi-agency security check prior to departure. For more details, please see this **White House infographic** and this **U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) testimony**.

Refugee vetting works. **Zero fatal terror attacks** on U.S. soil have been perpetrated by refugees. A **risk analysis of immigration terrorism** conducted by the Cato Institute found that the chance of a refugee murdering an American in a terrorist attack is 1 in 3.64 *billion* per year.

Temporary bans have permanent consequences. While **Iraqi refugee resettlement slowed** in 2011, halting all refugee resettlement is unprecedented. While impossible to know all of the **ripple effects**, it is certain that the ban will cause further harm to innocent people who have fled violence and languish in the **harsh conditions of refugee camps**. It will not improve national security. It will increase the **burden of refugee hosting on other countries and institutions**, and it will cost the U.S. its recognition as a **global humanitarian leader**.

Republican Senators **Rob Portman, John McCain, and Lindsey Graham** have already pointed to the irony that while refugees already undergo extreme vetting, **this executive order clearly did not**. Following **its own language and logic** then, this order should be banned until sufficient changes have been made to ensure that it is consistent with national interest.

AUTHORS

Catherine Besteman is the Francis F. Bartlett and Ruth K. Bartlett Professor of Anthropology at Colby College. She is the author and editor of many books, including *Unraveling Somalia: Race, Violence, and the Legacy of Slavery* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), and most recently, *Making Refuge: Somali Bantu Refugees and Lewiston, Maine* (Duke University Press, 2016).

Elizabeth Cullen Dunn is an anthropologist and Associate Professor of Geography at Indiana University. She wrote about refugee protection and resettlement problems in the May 13, 2016 issue of *Science*. Her book *Unsettled: Humanitarianism and Displacement in the Republic of Georgia* is forthcoming from Cornell University Press.

Tricia Redeker Hepner is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Tennessee. She is the author of *Soldiers, Martyrs, Traitors, and Exiles: Political Conflict in Eritrea and the Diaspora* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009) and co-editor of *African Asylum at a Crossroads: Activism, Expert Testimony, and Refugee Rights* (Ohio University Press, 2015).

Carole McGranahan is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Colorado. Her current research is on political refusal and refugee citizenship in the Tibetan diaspora. In May, *American Ethnologist* will publish her article "The Anthropology of Lying: Trump and the Political Sociality of Moral Outrage."

Nomi Stone is a Postdoctoral Research Associate in Anthropology at Princeton University. Her second collection of poems, *Kill Class* (based on her fieldwork within war trainings in mock Middle Eastern villages erected by the US military across America) is forthcoming from Tupelo Press in 2018. Her article "Living the Laughscream: Human Technology and Affective Maneuvers in the Iraq War" is coming out in *Cultural Anthropology* this February.

Marnie Thomson recently defended her PhD thesis "Stories of Darkness: Congolese Refugees, Humanitarian Governance, and a Neglected Conflict" at the University of Colorado. In 2012, *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* published her article "Black Boxes of Bureaucracy: Transparency and Opacity in the Resettlement Process of Congolese Refugees."

📁 **Blog post**

📌 **Carole McGranahan, Catherine Besteman, Donald Trump, Elizabeth Cullen Dunn, immigration, Iraq, Marnie Thomson, Nomi Stone, refugees, Somalia, Tricia Redeker Hepner, white supremacists**



I am an anthropologist and historian of Tibet, and a professor at the University of Colorado. I conduct research, write, lecture, and teach. At any given time, I am probably working on one of the following projects: Tibet, British empire, and the Pangdatsang family; the CIA as an ethnographic subject; contemporary US empire; the ongoing self-immolations in Tibet; the Chushi Gangdrug resistance army; refugee citizenship in the Tibetan diaspora (Canada, India, Nepal, USA); and, anthropology as theoretical storytelling.

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One thought on “Refugees, Immigrants, and Trump’s Executive Order: Six Anthropologists Speak Out”



Proshant

February 3, 2017 at 2:40 pm

Hi Carole,

Thanks for putting together these remarkable and highly

needed insights in these terrifying times. My comment is basically a reiteration of what I've previously tweeted about, i.e., the need for perspective to place this latest ban on immigrants in an already-racialized international migration regime. The existence of "white" and "black" lists for countries, for instance; or the flow of cheap labour from the global South to the north, or to wealthier and exploitative countries in the South (Qatar, U.A.E., Saudi Arabia...) Global travel is a privilege most immigrants don't have; indeed, violent borders have existed long before the Wall, or the ban (I find Mezzadra and Nielson's 2013 book *Border as Method* quite informative here). The ban or the wall is the most extreme, violent end of this spectrum of constrained movement (which also includes the mass watery graves in the Mediterranean, the detention centres in the Pacific – all a part of a violent border regime). These must be protested, but not at the cost of past and existing struggles.

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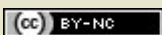
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