Barbara Lee’s Peacebuilding Discourse as Transformative Social Justice Politics

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Abstract
This essay explores discourses of Congresswoman Barbara Lee (D-Calif.), appreciating her intersectional standpoint as a leader in Trumpian times, and as the lone AA woman dissenter who has long advocated peace over war in the United States’ Congress in the aftermath of two politically seismic shifts: (1) September 11, 2001 and (2) the rise of right wing politics in the U.S. and internationally. As bellicose and right wing politics have expanded, Lee’s nonviolent voice has persisted, offering critiques of (1) post 9/11 and (2) Trump Administration era xenophobic rhetoric, policies, and systems. Rhetoric of White male politicians pervades discourse studies, yet comparatively little has been studied on countervailing peacebuilding discourses of U.S. Congresswomen. This study refocuses discourse scholarship on sociopolitical justice rhetoric across the activist career of Congresswoman Barbara Lee. Lee’s career-spanning politics bears study as successful peacebuilding leadership. Lee’s political discourses espousing peacebuilding exemplify contemporary women of color’s activism, which rebalances foci in discourse studies between necessary critiques of right politicians and legislation. Studying transformative politics recenters leaders of social, environmental, and economic justice who buck status quo via peacebuilding discourse (PD).

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Thank you for having the courage to dissent today. While everyone else is too afraid to stop, think, and take a moral stand—being too swept up in xenophobic fervor and low-populist patriotism—you are representing well the people of the East Bay, people no less patriotic or American for thinking that the rhetoric and path of war are not the best ways to seek justice for this week’s [9/11] atrocity. (Anonymous constituent letter to Congresswoman Barbara Lee in fall 2001, quoted in Friedersdorf, 2014)

When I try to envision the future of our country, I see a nation where peace, and the conditions that are necessary for peace, are top priorities. —U.S. Rep. Barbara Lee (quoted in Peace Alliance, 2015)

In 2019 to 2020 U.S. Presidential campaign, Democratic candidate Bernie Sanders preened as if he were the only senator to vote for peacebuilding initiatives, when in fact Sanders admitted he had voted for the Iraq war in 2001; the U.S. led long-term conflict in Iraq was destabilizing, fomenting bloody civil conflicts in Iraq, Syria, along Turkey’s border, and beyond. Labeled a socialist, Sanders seemed like a Maverick. However, another member of U.S. Congress whose lifelong justice activism bears exploring. To that end, this essay studies Congresswoman Barbara Lee (D-Calif.) as the lone dissenter who advocated peace, not war, in U.S. Congress after September 11, 2001 (Nichols, 2001); and as a coalitional ally with fellow women of color in the U.S. Congress attacked by President Trump. Lee offers a critique of both post 9/11 policy (Friedersdorf, 2014), and of conservative politicians’ xenophobic discourses. Much research is published on White politicians (Albritton, 2009; Taber, 2014), yet comparatively little has been researched about peacebuilding discourses (PD) of U.S. Congresswomen with underrepresented minority standpoints. As detailed below, PD refers to the rhetorical invention and use of nonviolent communication, including peacebuilding symbols and activism; further, analysis (PDA) critiques oppressive power and violence, and creates preconditions for sociocultural, economic, and environmental justice.

The goal of this PD research study is to illuminate the activist peacebuilding of less well-known, under-researched yet powerful political figures like Congresswoman Lee, who have largely eluded scholarly attention because first, race is discursively silenced (Schwartz, 2015); and second, nonviolence
is silenced, including historical, political, cultural, and research contexts (Stoskopf & Bermudez, 2017). This discourse study showcases Lee’s leading role in fighting discrimination and bellicose policies; Lee aligns with fellow Congresswomen of color of diverse intersectional standpoints to decry far-right rhetoric and bills in Congress, using coalitional Caucus power to build and pass legislation (Tate, 2003). At a time when Congressional gridlock rules, this study highlights peacebuilding within discourse studies to indicate transformative potential in gleaning lessons from underdog politics. Peacebuilding discourse (PD) is posited in this case study of Congresswoman Barbara Lee as serving a transformative function to advance politics for equity and justice.

To define key terms in this essay, “discourse” encompasses a wide array of visually, verbally, embodied, recorded, and replayed symbolic modes of intentional and suasory communication. Interdisciplinary research into “critical discourse studies” focuses on texts of rhetorical communication that occur and are interpreted in politically and culturally contested spheres of public life. Introduced by Foucault (1978) decades ago, and as will be elaborated below, discourse and critical studies of discourse as visual, symbolic and other multimedia artifacts of communication in the contested realm of sociocultural politics is about much more than words and texts. At stake in discourse studies (DS) broadly, and in critical discourse analysis (CDA) research specifically, is engagement with hidden assumptions on what a given democracy values or rejects as underpinnings of its systems. CDA aims to ferret out and highlight communicatively covert biases, inequalities, and harms such as racism or militarism, as a means to call it out, name it, and then enable democratic participants, including politicians like Barbara Lee, to use discourse to counter violence and to offer peacebuilding alternatives as a means of advancing democracy for social justice.

This essay appraises Lee’s justice oriented, peacebuilding discourse (PD). As evidence of her PD, I explore textual artifacts representing Lee’s influential presence in contemporary U.S. politics. As Ferris (2020) observed, “The 22-year House veteran is renowned across the Capitol for her resolute approach to holding to account all occupants of the White House: Clinton’s bombing in Yugoslavia, Bush’s surge in Iraq, Obama’s air-strikes in Syria and . . . Trump’s drone targeting of an Iranian leader.” Building on Royster’s (2000) rescue/recovery work, and on critical peace-building research of scholars such as Gavriely-Nury (2014), Clarysse and Moore (2017), I recover Lee’s pro-peace expressions, offering the heuristic contribution of PD[A] as means publically and politically (1) to espouse and propose legislative bills to codify peacebuilding for justice; and (2) to oppose war, both of which go against the grain of militarist politics of both major
American political parties (Gadarian, 2010; Whitten & Williams, 2011). In short, instead of exploring “peace” as hollow rhetoric deployed to advance war as Gavriely-Nury’s (2014) study, I am doing the opposite: exploring peace as a substantive political alternative to its resources and life-taking antitheses, violent conflict and war. Across American political history, Lee stands among a select few elected representatives consistently offering pro-peace, justice oriented messages.

To advance conceptual, theoretical and practical balance toward peacebuilding in DS literature, this essay will unfold as follows. First, I explain what discourse is, why critical discourse analysis matters to those who care about governance to foster social justice and why CDA explicates Barbara Lee’s pursuit of peacebuilding. Second, I explain methodology in examining Lee’s extraordinary career, which serves as textual grounds for her anti-racist, anti-war, pro-peace standpoint. I recap how her college experiences in grassroots African American (AA) women’s activism informed and sustained all her peacebuilding efforts and set her apart from most politicians. Third, I present a rationale for why it is fruitful to study the anti-groupthink discourse exhibited in Congresswoman Lee’s PD and political activism for justice, given many of her political contemporaries often run, herd-like, in the opposite direction into conflict and war. I examine discursive exemplars of Lee’s PD statements to showcase her uniquely critical abilities to separate from American political groupthink of discourses valorizing violence/war, which prevail among her largely White, mostly male political counterparts. Last, I conclude by suggesting heuristic directions for continuing research appreciating Lee’s PD specifically as an activist gold standard for AA women and feminists of color broadly in steadily rising political leadership and contributions to American public life and democracy. Overall, this essay will demonstrate PD as driving Lee’s proven, successful Congressional record of bipartisan political problem-solving, undergirded by her staunch advocacy promoting discourses of peace with justice via legal frameworks and institutions that support equity, inclusiveness and nonviolence.

Defining Terms Linking Critical Discourse Studies with African American Studies

To foreground Lee’s peacebuilding career and discourse, it is helpful to unpack meanings of the terms “discourse” and “critical discourse analysis (CDA).” In traditional humanistic and social scientific studies of textual artifacts of purposeful communication, “discourse” refers to more than mere
words. “Discourse” encompasses multifaceted modes of communication, from simple social movement slogans, gestures, or symbols, like the raised fist of the Black Power movement, to full speeches, such as abolitionist Frederick Douglass’s eloquent oration, “What To the Slave Is the Fourth of July?” In the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement context of July 2020, celebrities, activists/citizens, performed Douglass’s speech, which was replayed on social media, bringing renewed vigor and meaning to American democracy following the murders of African American (AA) citizens, from Breonna Taylor to Ahmed Arbury to George Floyd and too many others across centuries, named and unnamed.

Discourse studies (DS) have contributed to knowledge by focusing specifically on ways systemic inequalities and political disenfranchisement are normalized through micro- and macro-aggressive political discourse, such as President Trump’s uses of sexism (e.g., “Hillary is a Nasty Woman!”) or racial/ethnic epithets (i.e., calling Senator Elizabeth Warren “Pocahontas”). However, a weakness of DS is that while foundational and productive, DS/CDA have tended to be Eurocentric (Huckin et al., 2012). Traditional DS mainly explores White creators of rhetorical pieces of communication and White artifacts of study. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) scholarship expanded from Foucault (1978), to van Dijk (1993, 2014) via Hall (1978) and Fairclough (2014). Hall was “a foundational figure for scholars . . . [globally], opening new avenues for thinking about race, politics, culture and identity” (Alexander, 2009). American counterparts in DS span Tannen (1981) to Guillem and Toula (2018). Much American, Afrocentric CD research remains to be done to explore ways oppressive discourses pervade historical systems and institutions, and to recognize uplifting discourses envisioning democracy’s egalitarian possibilities.

A dynamic area of CDA investigates political discourses and activism to advance rights and consideration of a greater diversity of stakeholders. As aspects of democracy bearing inquiry, CDA helps to explain processes of historical marginalization of groups of people, of non-human animals, and destruction of shared environmental places sentient beings inhabit across cultural systems. This essay participates in an exciting branch of contemporary DS that explores and reinterprets under present-day circumstances AA political discourses, artifacts and activists who speak out, boldly decrying injustices; re-envisioning an inclusive, equitable democracy; prioritizing peace with justice over war/conflict; and advocating for grassroots community organizations over impersonal (often brutal) policing (Whitehorn, 2003). Barbara Lee’s opus bears study within a pathbreaking politics of using discourses for activism to build a more peaceful, just society.
**Method: Peacebuilding Discourse Analysis**

This study employs a DS method informed by Cos’s (2007) study of Barbara Lee’s political activism as ethical rhetoric. The resulting peacebuilding discourse analysis (PDA) as method is a fusion of critical discourse analysis (CDA) methods within an explicitly peacebuilding theoretical framework. CDA concerns political justice and equity critique. Likewise, PDA is an intuitive, common-sense practice of political inquiry that entails questioning textual artifacts in light of intersectional experiential knowledge and an equity/justice-orientation. Standpoint awareness is conducive to understanding how a rhetor invites her audiences to take a peace-with-justice perspective on contentious issues, such as America’s contested history of racism.

PDA for Barbara Lee entails decrying perpetuation of Confederate symbols, such as Robert E. Lee statues scattered across the U.S. South, many erected in post-WWII era in direct symbolic response to Civil Rights activism. As will be demonstrated in the analysis that follows, I observe that Lee’s PDA rejects symbols of hatred while opening public space for inclusive peacebuilding. Lee’s PDA calls out privileged, WM discourses that undermine and disenfranchise historically underrepresented individuals. Lee condemns divisive politics, such as President Trump’s tweets mocking women as “nasty,” exhorting his base to demonize Latinas like Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.) and legal immigrants like Congresswoman Ilhan Omar (D-MN), whom Trump (mis)portrays as illegal aliens (Rogers & Fandos, 2019).

The analytical and explanatory method applied here below builds on Schwartz’s (2015) observation that race is a central factor in determining whose politics are heeded and whose are subtly or overtly panned. Lee’s PDA is informed by feminist activism expressed through AA women’s rhetorical-critical methods. “Womanist” is author Alice Walker’s (1983, 2020) term for the standpoint-critical, back-talking attitude of girls and women of color, which combines being critical of racism from an embodied standpoint with discursive practices of fighting oppression with powerful truthful words rather than from fists or weapons. Womanist method here is refined by Collins’ (1990, 2004) standpoint conscious concept of intersectionality, which acknowledges the interplay of multiple forms of oppression, including sex-/gender-, race-, and class-based subjugations, among other variables (Hamlet, 2000).

**Rationale for Methodological Expansiveness**

In conceptualizing and applying PDA as object of study, exploratory process, and research method, I cull peacebuilding textual artifacts from Congresswoman
Lee’s (2008) interviews, speeches between 2001 to 2020, and consider her Womanist standpoint as portrayed in her memoirs, *Renegade for Peace and Justice: Congresswoman Barbara Lee Speaks for Me*. Methodologically, looking at the larger historical picture (rather than plucking a single strand of text) across time enables Lee’s PD to be discussed within Royster’s (2000) “rescue/recovery” framework to refocus attention on AA women’s rhetoric and politics. Examining PD across time in Lee’s career entails Crenshaw’s (1988) critical race theory (CRT), which originated in and prioritizes legal justice rhetoric, which is what a legislator like Ms. Lee proffers. As Lovell (2012) puts it, legal rhetoric applied to conditions of injustice can curb “coercive” conditions of race (p. 12; 185). This essay appreciates Lee’s PD platform via her standpoint-informed activism to decry and problematize armed conflict, perennial war, racist violence, and to build conditions for peace by creating laws and institutions supporting equity and justice.

Lee’s career-long PD evinces Galtung’s (2015) “positive peace” constructive vein that seeks to build peace with justice. Contributions of exploring Lee’s PD include igniting greater research interest in Lee’s and her fellow women of color in U.S. politics uses of discourse to actively build peace (rather than to singly decry violence or injustice, as do many studies utilizing CDA). The thrust of Lee’s legal activism entails advocating for the creation of a Department of Peacebuilding (DoP) to shift U.S. culture and institutions away from the violent history of the Department of Defense (DoD) and toward a nonviolent future. Given that Lee, who has been honored for her decades of service (Nichols, 2014), and who continues her Congressional tenure today (Ferris, 2020), it is timely to engage with her career-long opus through a DS framework.

**Lee’s Unique, Long-term Contributions to Peacebuilding**

Few activists manage to keep one foot in two competing camps—grassroots activism and legislative politics—successfully. For example, U.S. President Barack Obama successfully transitioned from grassroots community organizer, to public politician first as U.S. Senator and President, then back to private citizen in 2016; but he was not both simultaneously. Among women of color, fewer still achieve both, like Nobel Peace laureate Wangari Maathai. As the discussion below will demonstrate, Representative Lee presents U.S. political culture with a remarkable achievement connecting her lived experience as a nonviolent activist of color speaking for and in her grassroots community, then taking that experience, elevating it to national legislative politics. Lee has remained able to retain legitimacy over a long period of time in the eyes of community-based change agents and her fellow and sister legislators.
The political sustainability of Lee’s grassroots sensibility and connection across over five decades, from high school and college years into her present status as mature legislator in the U.S. Congress is rare among politicians.

How does Lee’s nonviolent philosophy take shape, enabling her to evolve into power politics while retaining her progressive voice over time? Lee’s PD propel her to dissent along with grassroots constituents to interrupt historical discourses of oppressive power. Meanwhile, Lee debates formally with colleagues within democracy’s imperfect system, making incremental inroads. How does Lee use discourse to transform and transcend power politics? Investigating such questions is important to appreciating Lee’s position as a women’s role model and as an AA leader in U.S. politics as a bastion of mostly older, WM. Afrocentric women’s socio-cultural and political leadership entails being “First. Only. Different” (Rhimes, 2015), which encapsulates Lee’s activist career.

Congresswoman Lee’s political chops formed when she was a college student of left-leaning progressive activist in electoral politics. Lee is proud she worked “with Bobby Seale and Huey Newton and the Black Panther party,” while also serving on the campaign team of the first AA candidate for president, Shirley Chisholm (USCHS, Interview, 2011b, p. 1). Congresswoman Lee applies her AA feminist standpoint to do what every other politician claims to do, but seldom achieves: to maintain an outsider, working class person’s perspective on social needs and justice while serving in the ultimate of insider clubs in politics, the U.S. Congress.

For example, Lee’s pro-peace/anti-war position has remained steadfast despite death threats against her for repeatedly voting against war and questioning populist pro-war stances of Congressional colleagues amidst patriotic fervor following the attacks of September 11, 2001. Friedersdorf (2014) reports that over seven of the 12 file storage boxes of letters written to her after her historic 2001 vote, which are archived at the library of Ms. Lee’s alma mater, Mills College, “contain letters . . . expressing disapproval.” Countering claims peace is unpatriotic, Lee has said, “I understand what patriotism really means. It’s about having the right to dissent. You cannot have a democracy that does not allow for dissent. . . . Peace is patriotic” (as quoted in Zook, 2005, p. 6). Her detractors and supporters alike were certain her anti-war stand would cost her Congressional post; they were all wrong. Lee has defied the odds: she has continued to have been re-elected, and still holds her seat in Congress at this writing in 2020. Moreover, she is a formidable leader among women of color in Congress, supporting beleaguered colleagues by standing up to Trump’s racist, sexist, xenophobic tweets (Ferris, 2020).
Lee’s continued political success is rare. Unlike majority WM politicians who support expensive, open-ended wars costing lives and deepening U.S. budget deficits, Lee focuses energy and funds for America’s infrastructure decays (Kroft, 2014; Wines & Schwartz, 2016), and her state’s (California) and overall U.S. national healthcare system. Lee’s perennial healthcare system activism is salient in COVID-19 pandemic crisis in 2020. As we shall see, Lee’s views proffered via PD yield intersectional insights weaving race, class, gender, and justice toward a new political fabric of peacebuilding taking primacy over the antiquated model of militaristic policies and political discourses. The U.S.’s “arsenal of democracy” featuring conventional troops, arms and nuclear weapons could neither save Americans nor allies from global pandemic. Lee’s decades of community and Congressional activism for improved healthcare infrastructure encompasses pandemic planning.

Lee channels her political power into Congressional committee service and legislation designed to assist working people and individuals from traditionally underrepresented minoritized demographics, which sets her apart from majority WM politicians who have tended to be beholden to, and take campaign contributions from, elites and corporate interests, and from lobbyists like the National Rifle Association (NRA). Lee enacts PD by consistently using her rhetorical might to shift peacetime resources to support social safety-net infrastructure, while critiquing routine government/lobbyist revolving door of kickbacks for elites, including weapons manufacturers and military contractors thriving while small businesses succumb to economic downturns.

**Barbara Lee’s Activist Life of Peacebuilding Discourses**

Barbara Lee was born in El Paso, Texas in 1946. From Lee’s birth, at which her AA mother was initially denied access to a hospital due to segregation, Lee’s life has been informed by awareness of race-based injustice (Lee, 2008; Simon, 2002). Her family moved to California in 1960, where, as a teenager Lee was immersed in progressive politics, including activism to end the Vietnam War, and raising awareness of environmental issues (Lee, 2008).

Lee’s formative social justice consciousness was put into action, while “[as] a high school student attending San Fernando High School, [she] successfully challenged a school district policy that prevented her from trying out for the cheerleading team because of her race” (Meet Barbara Lee, 2015). On the website for her reelection campaign, “Barbara Lee Speaks For Me,” Representative Lee’s first official challenge against injustice is pictorialized PD. On her campaign website, the first, top-positioned picture of Lee shown from her high school time is a black and white photograph of Lee, immaculately coiffed with
fashionable 1960s beehive hairdo, wearing her cheerleading uniform as evidence of her first political activism victory. To portray Lee’s continued trajectory of social justice activism, the cheerleader photo is juxtaposed with a picture of Lee as a young woman in her 20s at U.S. Capitol in the early 1980s, picketing against nuclear weapons, with the Washington monument in the background; Lee is shown holding a hand written sign, proclaiming, “A nuclear bomb is an equal opportunity destroyer!” (Meet Barbara Lee, 2015). These images serve as symbolic visual markers of PD in her life, contextualized in memorable milestones in 20th century American history.

Lee’s early activism and PD is rare among mature women in Congress. Many of her Boomer-era political sisters either spent their youths as apolitical students, then housewives, or businesswomen, before running for Congress; most had White privilege, and, for women leaders like Nancy Pelosi or Liz Cheney, came from well-connected political dynasty families. Hillary Clinton was an activist in college, but then worked in lucrative private business as an attorney before entering public service. Lee, however, put herself through graduate school, always remaining politically active. Lee emphasizes in her memoirs that as a single mother, she was sensitized to working class community needs for childcare, and access to healthcare and education. As a legislator, Lee has championed causes she understands experientially rather than abstractly. Lee’s PD remains steadfastly grassroots, even after her rise to fame in national politics.

Lee’s Womanist standpoint is pictorially represented as career-spanning PD. Lee’s early activist career displays her mode of PDA, as a foundation of her reliable, long-term Congresswoman self of today. Lee’s website displays another picture capping her evolving PD progression, showing Lee as the senior-citizen representative she is now, wearing a business suit, the photo’s caption noting she is a grandmother. As exemplars of Lee’s PD, these Web-centric messages reiterate Lee’s evolution as an AA woman participating in democratic activism first as an outsider visiting D.C. from California, across historical time, to her standpoint now as a political insider within Congress, a singular representative who is not afraid to take on America’s political war machine (Burroughs, 2007; Conniff, 1999). Her life portrayed in words and pictures as her PDA models her career of nonviolent activism as feasible means to transcend conflict and build peace, across Congressional aisles and demographic differences.

Lee’s Black Panther Party Education in PDA. As a college student, Lee strengthened her political skills, serving as president of the Black Student Union at Mills College in Oakland, California. During Lee’s undergraduate studies she also “volunteered with the local chapter of the Black Panther Party’s (BPP)
Community Learning Center” (USCHS, Bio, 2011a). Engaging in grassroots issues, Lee also “became a campaign coordinator for Representative Shirley Chisholm, the first AA woman to run for president” (Simon, 2002, p. 387). Today, as a longstanding, continuing member of U.S. Congress, Lee uses PD to quell sensationalistic portrayals of her past brief association with the BPP with her far longer lifetime of steady, “polite” Congressional service (Ferris, 2020). Of her college activism, Lee recalls,

I was working with the BPP on their survival programs. I helped put together the community school. . . [and] the clinic. So I worked on a lot of the community oriented ten point programs of the BPP . . . I was not a party member but I felt this organization was so important I needed to work in the community through that vehicle. . . . (Lee as quoted in USCHS, Interview, 2011b)

In this passage, Lee applies PD to show how the BPP used community organizing in conventional ways that presaged similar activism that would later be taken up by Barack Obama as the U.S.’s first AA President. Lee applies PDA, applying peacebuilding to education and healthcare in the AA community, which sets her apart from BPP as often misconstrued by audiences who forget BPP institution-building. Lee’s PD and its substantive, materialized peacebuilding activism embraces Womanist identity while she sets herself apart from stereotyped BPP imagery of guns, favoring instead nonviolent imagery of Lee assisting with community kitchens and tending to healthcare needs of AA community members who have been systematically disenfranchised by a racist healthcare system. Lee’s community healthcare experiences later led her to social work on mental health issues, which originated in her formative, Black Power consciousness-raising experiences volunteering with BPP community organizations. Following her graduate studies, she would take her community service experience and use it to build her community’s social service organizations (Lee, 2008).

Lee uses PD noting that during her studies at Mills College, she took a course that required community activism. It was as part of that course that Lee got involved with the groundbreaking campaign of Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, who long before Obama, ran as the first AA candidate for the U.S. Presidency. Of this heady time, Lee reminisces,

I invited Shirley Chisholm to the campus [to speak] . . . she was the first AA woman elected to Congress. . . . she announced she was running for president, and so I went up to Mrs. Chisholm and said, “You know, I loved what you said, you’re against the war in Vietnam, you understand what it means to eradicate poverty, [and] you’re an immigrant” . . . [who] spoke fluent Spanish. I mean she was a very progressive AA woman. (Lee as quoted in USCHS, Interview, 2011b)
Here, Lee’s Womanist standpoint informs her PD, explaining how her political engagement with Chisholm was a peacebuilding experience. Marking her political progression from decrying injustice toward PDA that builds community infrastructure, Lee presents her work on Chisholm’s campaign as further influencing Lee’s campaign against war and advocating for peace with justice. Beyond anti-war sentiment, Lee’s PD expands her scope of issues concerning her constituents, including pressing for social justice for underrepresented communities, such as AA women and immigrants who were Chisholm’s political base. In such discursive representations of autobiography, Lee reminds us that her political strength and knowledge builds from that of Chisholm. In this passage, Lee also reaffirms her longstanding social consciousness of issues important to working class people and immigrants. In short, Lee’s own autobiographical statements serve as PD, informing Lee in demarcating her human-rights-based definition of patriotism, offering a peacebuilding option for counter-political expression.

After college, Lee went on to earn a Master’s degree in social work from the University of California, Berkeley. Next, as a social worker, she gained further first-hand experience. As a single, working mother with two children, Lee understood problems of working class people, and the pressing need to address issues that many political figures preferred to ignore (Lee, 2008). Lee entered politics first as chief of staff to a member of the U.S. House of Representatives, Ron Dellums of California (Simon, 2002). She served 8 years in California’s State Legislature. When Dellums retired in 1998, Lee was elected to serve in the House, where she has served with distinction ever since (Birtel, 1998; Birtel & Greenblatt, 1998; Ferris, 2020; Mock, 2009).

Lee’s Congressional service exemplifies positive peacebuilding institutions to create political change, such as Congressional Black Caucus, Women’s Caucus, Gun Violence Prevention Task Force, and Human Rights Caucus. Lee also tackles environmental problems with the House Oceans Caucus, and the Bicameral Global Climate Change Caucus or the Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency Caucus (US Congresswoman Barbara Lee, Committees and Caucuses, 2015). These commitments underscore Lee’s career-wide focus on peacebuilding.

When interviewing Ms. Lee, [author] asked her about discursive strategies for communicating to advance peace and justice. She said,

The basic thing is you have to do is to break things down to where people can understand foreign policy, international affairs, and global peace and security issues on a very local level. Actually, that’s why I introduced the bill for the Department of Peacebuilding (DoP) because we talk . . . in that legislation about violence prevention both in the United States of the gun violence and
domestic violence as well as violence of war, so we look for diplomatic solutions before we use the military option of war abroad. So the [DoP] legislation . . . has gained wide traction because . . . we really need to have a cabinet level department that focuses on peacebuilding and violence prevention. . . . we need to relate it to people who don’t have a global perspective, and to render it relatable to their local and their daily lives (Lee interview with author, 2015)

In this way, Lee presents her PDA, connecting causes of violence with working-class neighborhoods awash in guns. Lee applies PD to extrapolate local violence to the global system of militarism that too often opts for war instead of “diplomatic” interventions.

When asked about her thoughts on some of her most critical uses of discourse for peacebuilding and justice, Lee (interview with author, 20xx) reflects, “On September 14, 2001, when I voted against the use of force, against the doctrine of preemption . . . and also my speech at Riverside Church where Dr. King spoke. My speech is also called ‘A Time To Break the Silence.’” Lee’s nod to Dr. King’s nonviolent discursive critique/activism globalizes her mission to uplift lives of women and children among the working poor, domestically and abroad.

Lee’s sensitivity to issues of the working poor and immigrants harkens to political history full of AA social reformers and anti-war activists like Angela Davis. Lee states, “peacebuilding refers both to activities that target the root causes of violence as well as the broad measures used to prevent violent conflict and create sustainable peace” (Lee, 2015a). When asked about her most important speeches, she speaks with reverence about her advocacy “to address the AIDS/HIV epidemic, both with . . . [Obama’s] Administration and others on this concept,” which she said was challenging due to their lack of awareness, but that she “kept pushing and hammering away at it. . . when you’re talking about global HIV/AIDS you’re talking about addressing the U.S. domestic epidemic as well as globally as far as Africa and around the world. You’ve got to talk about it in real terms, not just in ‘Washington-ese.’” With these observations, Lee presents her stateswomanship and diplomacy in common sense, PD terms, which are relevant to pandemics from HIV/AIDS to COVID-19, which affect millions of people worldwide, especially women and children of color, working class people, with destabilizing effects, across developed and undeveloped nations. Lee’s PDA connects stability and economic prosperity to health and wellbeing of populations. Lee advocates peacebuilding as a productive everyday activity, not an ideological practice for politicians.

Lee’s PDA stands apart from her contemporaries in politics, who advocate a patriotism through bombs and bullets (Friedersdorf, 2014). As Gadarian
(2010) affirms, “Americans reward candidates and parties perceived to hold hawkish positions but even more severely punish candidates perceived to be dovish” (p. 1046). Lee’s biography of nonviolent service as PD stands in sharp relief to masculine, soldier-hero patriotism pervading American politics. Congresswoman Lee’s emphasis on human rights contrasts with discourses of macho anti-terrorism, xenophobia and Islamophobia (Bakker, 2014).

Barbara Lee’s Peacebuilding as Transformative Politics

U.S. politics has long been beholden to war interests articulated in President Eisenhower’s fears of military industrial complex (Sherry, 1995). Congresswoman Barbara Lee’s statement on September 14, 2001, at the moment of the imminent passage of the Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) via Senate Joint Resolution 23 proved prophetic: She said, “As we act, let us not become the evil that we deplore” (cited in Solomon, 2013, p. 12). The Senate vote to attack Afghanistan was 98 to zero; in the House it was 420 to 1: Barbara Lee was the one and only “nay” vote (Friedersdorf, 2014), a fact which dogged Democratic Presidential candidate U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders in 2019 to 2020. Queally (2019) observed, “During the Democratic presidential debate . . .[in December], Sen. Bernie Sanders admitted his 2001 vote as a member of the U.S. House of Representatives to authorize the invasion of Afghanistan was a mistake—and credited Democratic Congresswoman Barbara Lee of California for being the only lawmaker in Congress to get that decision right. . .” Lee’s PDA sealed her fate as a visionary leader in U.S. history and politics, choosing peace over war, people over weaponry.

The AUMF in Afghanistan fatefully clinched three U.S. Presidents’ Administrations’ regional mission creep. Continued conflict in Iraq, Syria, and Turkey might have been averted had more members of Congress shared Lee’s PDA. Pondering U.S. troops’ and war-torn civilians’ deaths in hindsight, Lee’s PDA expressed foresight and courage to vote “No” to war’s inherent potential for such problems. Recognition of Lee’s defiant act of PDA in 2001 marks her unique leadership role in American political history, and her continued relevance in transforming U.S. politics today.

Finally Congresswoman Lee’s long-time underdog role in anti-militarism leadership has been validated (Friedersdorf, 2014; Nichols, 2014; Queally, 2019). Her PDA made her solitary stance possible. By 2013, Lee introduced House Resolution 198 to repeal the AUMF because, in her PDA, it “had been used to justify a broad and open-ended authorization for the use of
military force”—instantiating perpetual, borderless international conflict (as cited in Solomon, 2013, p. 12). Politicians of both U.S. parties, including Sanders and Jeb Bush, belatedly acknowledged excesses of the AUMF (O’Keefe & Costa, 2015).

In contrast to a mostly WM political pack, Lee’s PD via political activism has remained consistently against war and for peacebuilding. With regard to expanded U.S. military incursions into Syria in 2014, Lee’s PDA is evident in her assertion,

The rapid escalation of another war in the Middle East underscores the danger of the blank check for endless war passed by Congress in 2001. I could not support this blank check for endless war or the 2002 blank check for war in Iraq. I have introduced legislation to repeal the 2001 and 2002 . . . [AUMFs] and continue to build bipartisan support for their repeal (as quoted in Nichols, 2014, p. 15).

Lee’s PD differs from pacifism, since she does not reject all uses of force. Nonetheless, Lee’s PD has been cautionary, rejecting endless war, which she finds wasteful in terms of human life and funds better spent in conflict prevention and socioeconomic justice.

Lee’s PD exemplifies nonviolent social justice values. For instance, Lee has assembled and lobbied to produce pro-justice measures such as House bills to curb the excesses of the WoT following September 11, 2001. Lee has applied PDA in her political activism to transform perceptions of how to create peace with justice. Examples of Lee’s activist, peacebuilding voice in Congress include: she signed bills to remove the African National Congress (ANC) from the US’s official list of terror organizations (circa 2008); Lee led a delegation to Cuba, promoting American travel to Cuba (2009); she urged US Foreign policy (2009) to officially acknowledge the Armenian Genocide during Turkish Ottoman Empire circa 1915 to 1923 (i.e., denied by Turkey); and she earned high rating by the Arab American Institute (AAI) for having voted on 15 different bills and measures supporting human rights for Muslims in the US and abroad (Barbara Lee on Foreign Policy, On the Issues.org, 2014). She has also defied Pelosi and stood with fellow women Congressional colleagues of color on key issues (Ferris, 2020).

Lee has initiated transformational government initiatives for peace with justice at home and abroad. For instance, Lee has been instrumental in pressing for the US government to create peacebuilding counterbalance to ever-ballooning military edifices like the Pentagon, CIA, and NSA. To advance and support nonviolent governance politics and practices, she has also taken over Congressional efforts begun by Dennis Kucinich in 2001 (and which continue presently) to institute formally House Resolution (H.R.) 808, the Department of Peacebuilding Act of 2013 (Lee, 2015a). Lee explains why
Americans must commit to addressing problems of violence through nonviolent means: “The [DoP] . . . has the potential to reduce suffering on a national and global scale while saving billions of dollars through violence reduction and increased economic productivity,” (Lee, 2015b). Lee prioritizes meeting social needs systemically through institutions, offering a nonviolent alternative to perpetual violence and warfare.

Lee’s PD initiatives such as these cut to the core of America’s socio-political culture of “support the Troops,” which reifies soldier-hero discourses. Lee maintains respect for some military service, given her father’s Army career, albeit she prefers fewer families having to make military-driven sacrifices; she envisions careers in the DoP as viable means to achieving security and peace. Lee explains,

This culture of violence that we live in is unacceptable. On our streets and across the globe, the pervasive presence of violence has infected the lives of millions, and it is far past time we address it as a nation. We invest hundreds of billions each year in the Pentagon, in war colleges, military academies, and our national defense universities all to develop war tactics and strategies. Now we need that kind of investment in peace and nonviolence here at home. (Lee, 2015b)

She applies PDA to assess a cost-benefit ratio of investments; her political base, her colleagues and her detractors are invited to realize that by investing in “Pentagon, war colleges, military academies,” we reap what we sow: violence. Then she creates the nonviolent counterpoint: a new kind of “investment in peace and nonviolence here at home.” Lee’s pragmatic PD rejects violence-prone politics, instead favoring an achievable peacebuilding system.

H.R. 808 envisions leadership “by a Cabinet-level Secretary of Peacebuilding, who would have a seat on the National Security Council,” thereby reducing structural, ideological stranglehold of warhawks in government decision-making (Kasperowicz, 2013). Despite H.R. 808’s blockage, Higgins (2015) reported Lee “introduced H.R.1111 for consideration, entitled ‘Department of Peace Building Act of 2015’” (p. 1). Lee is the latest in a little recognized historical line of peacebuilders using PD activism, fostering democratic practices for peace with justice. The first such bill to institute a DoP was introduced “in 1935 by U.S. Senator Matthew Neely, a Democrat from West Virginia” (Lee, 2015a). Throughout Lee’s career of social justice activism, by persistently advocating for systemic peacebuilding, Lee demonstrates PD, bringing closer to fruition Senator Neely’s peacebuilding institution for American democracy.
Conclusion: Lee’s Transformative Peacebuilding Politics

This study has appraised career-long exemplars of Congresswoman Barbara Lee’s peacebuilding discourse (PD) and its analysis (PDA) as intersectional political justice activism. One contribution of this essay is that it centers the leading role of Lee and women of color in American politics. History-making U.S. politicians like Lee advance strong countervailing rhetoric of peacebuilding. Another benefit of this study of Lee’s PD is it clarifies the need for more discourse studies (DS) featuring intersectionality. Especially needed are DS validating gendered, historically underrepresented socio-political vantage points, which teach publics about hidden or systemic aspects of violence, while actively supporting the creation of peacebuilding infrastructures from local to global levels.

This study surveyed peacebuilding statements, writings, symbols and images representing Lee’s career-long activism. Applying CDA as method informed by Womanist standpoint enables a richer understanding of Lee’s discursive process. Lee’s PDA emphasizes common sense, pro-peace (beyond simply anti-war) perspectives in politics. Lee (2008) has said she serves her constituents through a universal “quest to create livable communities in a peaceful world.” Appreciating Congresswoman Lee’s PD necessitates connecting meaningfully women of color’s peacebuilding critiques. Exploring underrepresented individuals’ and communities’ PD offers a constructive means for DS to surpass exclusively critiquing injustice. Although condemning injustice is a useful preoccupation of DS, equally vital is examining leaders’ capacities to envision and build peace with justice. Lee’s PD models politics to create support systems to uplift historically disenfranchised people, and to safeguard the natural environment for future generations.

This study of Lee’s PD suggests that, despite serious challenges posed by post-9/11 militarism and White supremacist politics, her career-long application of PD/A has been productive. Lee’s political longevity has surprised critics and supporters alike. Congresswoman Lee has been an effective advocate for contemporary human rights, social justice, and peacebuilding domestically and internationally. Activism of women politicians of color advocating for peace with justice remains underappreciated in rhetoric, DS, and related multidisciplinary areas of research. Thus among this essay’s contributions is to increase visibility and accessibility of peacebuilding subject matter to scholars in the field, to students in our classrooms, and to media, changing outmoded attitudes to and substantiating peacebuilding to the public. Highlighting the PD of Congresswoman Barbara Lee helps to open the door to validating more studies uniting electoral politics with social justice.
advocacy of women of color. Areas of future research into Lee’s long career of ethical public speaking await (Cos, 2007). Lee’s peacebuilding rhetoric and activism demonstrate fearlessness and independence of thought, and adept public communication skills. Lee’s courageous post-9/11 stance encapsulates PD, offsetting bellicose American political culture, interrupting inequities with achievable benchmarks for peace with justice.

Studying Congresswoman Barbara Lee’s PD affords critics a view to greater appreciation and impetus for DS appreciating the rising generation of underrepresented women activist-orators and politicians. These under-sung women, such as Baltimore’s District Attorney Marilyn Mosby, Chicago Mayor Lori Lightfoot, Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms, Sen. Catherine Cortez-Maso, and Congresswoman Omar, have successfully run for and at this writing in 2020 are ably serving their constituents in public office (Women of Color in Elected Office, 2019). Analyzing evidence of their growing body of PD promises to be heuristic and heartening lines of inquiry that advance scholarship while modeling intrepid leadership in American politics for future peacebuilders to follow.

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