

Talking Points

Dear America: Letters of Hope, Habitat, Defiance, and Democracy

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The talking points (and other resources) are organized into sections that correspond with the sections of the book.

Calls to Action

A few talking points:

- What rhetorical strategies make a call-to-action persuasive?
- Which letter was most thought-provoking?
- Ever Jones (page 26) says, “privilege is an insulation.” What does that mean?
- How are environmental issues linked with racism and sexism?
- How can we figure out what’s really going on in what Gregory McNamee (page 19) says is the “Age of Lies”?
- Can books, poetry, music, and art change the culture we live in?
- Can we make a list of the specific atrocities these writers are protesting?
- Fenton Johnson (page 31) goes beyond just a call-to-action and gives a list of actions he thinks a citizen should be taking. How would you summarize those actions? What would you add to the list?
- How does Robin Wall Kimmerer (page 36) connect the Trump administration to the long history of how indigenous peoples have been treated in this country?

- 7 Alison Hawthorne Deming, Letter to America
- 9 Ana Maria Spagna, This Land Is (Still) Our Land
- 12 Erin Coughlin Hollowell, From the End of the Road
- 15 Seth Abramson, Americas
- 19 Gregory McNamee, Of Truth, Post-Truth, Alternative Facts, and Lies
- 24 Martha Silano, I don’t know how to write a letter to America
- 26 Ever Jones, An American Song
- 28 Jennifer Case, November, Third Trimester
- 30 Suzanne Frischkorn, It’s Time to Teach My Daughter How
- 31 Fenton Johnson, My Mother’s Vote
- 36 Robin Wall Kimmerer, The Windigo

Consider also:

[Beyond Hope](#) by Derrick Jensen in *Orion*

[The Honorable Harvest](#) by Robin Kimmerer, a TEDx talk

Extractions, Extinctions, and Depletions

A few talking points:

- Taylor Brorby (page 43) talks about his family’s history with the coal industry. What do those experiences add to this essay?
- Taylor Brorby says “without each other, we walk our paths alone.” What other writers in this book stress the need for community building, for nurturing relationships with each other and with the land? What might this look like?
- What will it mean if we succeed in ending the fossil fuel industry? What will that look like? Do we have a vision of the world in which we don’t use fossil fuels?
- What does the loss of species mean for our species and our life on this earth?
- After reading Barbara Hurd’s Lamentations (page 55), look up information on the [Remembrance Day for Lost Species](#). How can we grieve the loss of species?
- What does Deborah Thompson (page 49) mean by “latte capitalism”? Share your favorite quotes from this piece.
- What would our daily life look like without plastic? Can we envision that? Let’s pretend we are a committee who can dictate to the world what plastics we would allow. What would be on the list? What plastic items would we outlaw?

- 43 Taylor Brorby, Notes to America
- 46 Georgia Pearle, Refinery I
- 47 Amanda Hawkins, After the Election
- 48 Brian Laidlaw, I Had Heard
- 49 Deborah Thompson, Latte Capitalism
- 53 Dana Sonnenschein, Let Sleeping Wolves Lie
- 55 Barbara Hurd, *Lamentations*
- 59 Catherine Staples, *Swallows: Common yet Declining*
- 60 Derek Sheffield, *What Will Keep Us*
- 62 Todd Davis, *In the Garden*
- 64 Sherwin Bitsui, *A World Departs*
- 65 Andrea Cohen, *Stone Age*
- 66 Todd Boss, *She’s Going to Be Beautiful*

Consider also:

[Bee Orchid](#) from XKCD

[Drowning in Apathy](#) Roxana Robinson

[Remembrance Day for Lost Species](#)

(Perhaps plan a campus or community event to honor the day.)

Geographies of Exclusion

A few talking points:

- What are some of the most compelling images in this section?
- Bob Ferguson (page 75) is the attorney general of Washington State. What is the story he tells?
- Why do many of the writers focus on children when of course there are also many adults also being treated unfairly? Is that an effective rhetorical strategy?
- Linda Hogan (page 81) says that tribal nations “have been locked and held inside your long-standing desire for gold.” What does she mean by that?
- What happened at Standing Rock? Do some research if you need to. Why was the rallying cry “Water is life”?
- What do you know about the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II? How is this atrocity connected to current events?
- How is birdwatching (and other ways we “connect with nature”) more limited and more dangerous if you’re black? What are the ways that white privilege affects who gets to enjoy “nature”?
- Why would a law enforcement ranger arrest someone for leaving water and beans in the desert? What is it that Scott Warren is doing?
- How does border militarism (and border walls) affect wildlife? Scott Warren says that “conservation in the borderlands, if it is to succeed, must find common cause with humanitarianism, human rights, and indigenous rights.” What would that look like?
- How are the ways we treat other human beings connected to how we treat other species and the earth we live on? What are the connections?

71 Francisco Cantú, *Assembly-Line Justice*

74 David Hernandez, *History Kids*

75 Bob Ferguson, *A President, a Travel Ban, and a Playdate*

79 Peggy Shumaker, *Red Sky*

81 Linda Hogan, *The Earth Was Once Water*

83 Juan J. Morales, *20,000 Pallets of Bottled Water*

84 Scott Warren, “*Virtually Uninhabited*”

88 Christian Wiman, *Club*

89 Naomi Shihab Nye, *Invitation to the NSA*

90 Allison Hedge Coke, *Song for Long America*

93 Karen An-hwei Lee, *Dear America, Sanctuary of a Posthuman Exile*

94 Traci Brimhall, *Aperture: A Photoless Photo Essay*

98 J. Drew Lanham, *Still Birding While Black*

100 Ellen Bass, *The Red-Bellied Woodpecker’s Tongue*

Consider also:

[Birding While Black](#) by Drew Lanham

[Nine Rules for the Black Birdwatcher](#) by Drew Lanham

[Gate A-4](#) by Naomi Shihab Nye

[How to Raise a Black Son In America](#) by Clint Smith

[Place Matters](#) by Clint Smith

Climate Change and Science Denial

A few talking points:

- In Kurt Caswell’s piece (page 109), he talks about shootings, sexual misconduct scandals, the American dream, consumerism, climate change, Navajo history, and the extinction of humans. How does he make connections amongst all of these things?
- Christopher Merrill (page 114) says that a commitment to the free flow of information and freedom of expression are essential to any enduring creative enterprise. How have those been threatened?
- In an earlier piece, Greg McNamee (page 19) says, “... to have weight, opinions have to be matched by data, and by expertise—which is why we consult with the experts when we need to know something.” In Diana Liverman’s *Our Climate Future* (page 116), how does she establish her credibility before she begins talking about climate change?
- According to scientist Anita Desikan (page 120), Trump’s response to the California wildfires was exploitative and dangerous. Explain what she means by that.
- Jacob Carter (page 123) is a climate change scientist. What do we learn from his unique perspective on the Trump administration?
- Sarah Inskeep (page 129) talks about how we “can declare independence from an unsustainable way of life.” What would that look like?
- In this section, we hear from several scientists, but we also read several poems. What can poetry add to the discussion of climate change?

- 107 Debra Marquart, *Come November*
109 Kurt Caswell, *The River between Us*
113 Christopher Merrill, *Please Do Not Spit Everywhere*
116 Diana Liverman, *Our Climate Future*
120 Anita Desikan, *Science under Fire*
123 Jacob Carter, *Letter from a Concerned Scientist*
127 Sarah Inskeep, *To Think Like a Mountain*
130 R. T. Smith, *Whirling Disease*

Consider also:

[Climate Change Debate: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver](#)

[Tombstones by the Sea by Rick Van Noy in Terrain.org](#)

[Interview with Bill McKibben in Vox](#)

[Speech by Greta Thunberg](#)

[The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Turned into Haiku](#)

[Why We Won't Quit the Climate Fight by Kathleen Dean Moore and SueEllen Campbell.](#)

[Reading a Poem: 20 Strategies](#)

Memories (Imaginings) and Other Americas

A few talking points:

- How has anyone considered “other” been treated in this country? Were any of the historical facts in these pieces a surprise to you? What are the lessons we can learn from our history?
- Lauret Savoy (page 135) says that “forms of *othering* have always been central to the democratic project that is the United States.” What does she mean by that?
- Amanda Gailey (page 139) tells the history of Tecumseh, Nebraska. What are the most shocking details in her narrative? How does this history relate to current events?
- What does Anne Beatty’s piece (page 143) say about education in this country? What can we learn from this glimpse into a school?
- Lee Ann Roripaugh (page 148) compares the gaslighting done by the Trump administration to the kind of gaslighting done by an old person with dementia. What are the implications of that comparison? What is the point she makes about aperture?
- What does Sandra Steingraber (page 152) mean when she says she’s “not a good German”? What are the implications of that?
- What has the American flag come to symbolize in this country? What does Yelizabeta P. Renfro (page 156) say is the main difference between the United States and the Soviet Union? What does she say about the flag as a symbol?
- Look at the fourth paragraph of Lee Herrick’s letter (page 161). He says that nine of the first eleven U.S. Presidents owned slaves. He says that there are 892 active hate groups in this country. Why include those particular facts? What is the overarching point he is making?
- Allen Gee (page 164) describes the community at the end of the San Luis Pass pier. What is appealing about that community? Have you ever experienced such a community?

135 Lauret Savoy, *An American Question*

138 Jericho Brown, *Duplex*

139 Amanda Gailey, *Left to Themselves They Tell Lies*

143 Anne P. Beatty, *Look at the Ways We Work upon Them*

147 Diana Babineau, *First Picture Day in America*

148 Lee Ann Roripaugh, *Dear America / Dear Motherland: An Essay in Fractures*

152 Sandra Steingraber, *Not a Good German*

156 Yelizabeta P. Renfro, *As American as Turning Your Back on the Flag*

161 Lee Herrick, *Each One a Bright Light*

163 Miriam Marty Clark, *What You’d Want to Remember*

164 Allen Gee, *The End of the Pier*

169 Elena Passarello, *Receiver, Achiever, Reliever, Believer*

174 Jasmine Elizabeth Smith, *Drowned and Reborn*

176 Chris Dombrowski, *To the First of Getting Longer Days*

178 Rhina P. Espaillat, *Crayons*

Consider also:

The anthology [Black Nature: Four Centuries of African American Nature Poetry](#) edited by Camille Dungy

The anthology Reinventing the Enemy's Language: Contemporary Native Women's Writing of North America edited by Joy Harjo and Gloria Bird

The anthology Ghost-Fishing: An Eco-justice Poetry Anthology edited by Melissa Tuckey

Ambient Violences and Misogynies

A few talking points:

- How does Aimee Nezhukumatathil (page 191) use her own life experiences (and those of her parents) to make her point?
- Sometimes we are confronted with racist/sexist/anti-Semitic symbols or words in our own communities, in places like the grocery store. What are some ways to handle that situation?
- How do we manage daily necessities of life when it feels like the whole world is burning?
- How is racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, and misogyny embedded into our language? Can changing the words we use change our actions?
- If you wrote an obituary for America, what would you say?
- Brenda Hillman (page 204) speaks directly to gun owners. What is the effect of this rhetorical strategy?
- What rhetorical strategy does Heather Ryan (page 210) use “In Case of Active Shooter” to put the reader in the place of a student hiding in a classroom during an active shooter situation? What is the effect of that strategy?

- 183 José Angel Araguz, *American Studies*
185 Robert Wrigley, *Somewhere I Have Never Traveled*
187 Debbie Weingarten, *The Woods and the Weeds*
191 Aimee Nezhukumatathil, *Something Like Tenderness*
195 Blas Falconer, *Fatherland*
197 Erin Malone, *No One Expects an Answer*
199 Lesley Wheeler, *The South*
201 Colleen J. McElroy, *To Occupant*
203 Victoria Chang, *Obit*
204 Brenda Hillman, *Titration*
208 Tod Marshall, *Sentinel*
210 Heather Ryan, *In Case of Active Shooter*
218 Alexandra Teague, “My Country, 'Tis of Thee”
220 Sholeh Wolpé, *Reply All*
221 Sandra Meek, *Abracadabra*

Consider also:

Dawn and Mary by Brian Doyle

The Power of Panic / The Power of Art

A few talking points:

- Scott Minar (page 228) says “there are consequences for our actions in the world.” What does he mean by that?
- What is the purpose of art? Of literature? Of online journals? What can they achieve?
- Jen Hirt’s essay (page 231) describes a car accident which becomes a metaphor for the Trump administration. What metaphors would you use to describe the current political climate?
- In Kathryn Miles’ essay (page 241), a young man from Syria asks, “How will I know which of my stories are worth dying for?” How would you answer that question?
- In Elizabeth Dodd’s essay (page 245), she realizes that the people she buys food from voted for Trump. In the era of a polarized America, divided by Trump, how do we negotiate our everyday lives?
- Many writers in the book describe earth as *home*. What are the implications of that? How might thinking of earth as our home change legislation, policy, or design? How might it change our culture?
- Kathleen Dean Moore (page 253) gives us the image of activists all over the world, always someone working somewhere. She says, “What we cannot do alone, we can do together.” What other writers in this book have talked about this need for community and unity? What might this look like?
- Michael Branch (page 257) talks about the “immense power of humor to expose misguided values and destructive practices.” Can you think of examples of comedians, talk show hosts, writers, or vloggers who use humor? What do they achieve?
- Nicole Walker (page 265) says that “if we’re going to be able to change the way people use their vote to vote not only for themselves but for their neighbors or even the betterment of those they have never met but can only imagine, then we’re going to have to tell our individual stories to make that imagination fully sensible.” Can stories teach empathy?

- 227 Scott Minar, *Mortar Shells, Lunch, and Poetry*
231 Jen Hirt, *I Am the Witness: Accidents in a Time of Trump*
235 Rob Carney, *Poetic Justice*
240 Jane Hirshfield, *Spell to Be Said against Hatred*
241 Kathryn Miles, *Hasten to Understand*
245 Elizabeth Dodd, *That Corpse You Planted in Your Garden*
249 Rose McLarney, *Reach*
251 Anne Haven McDonnell, *In the Wake*
253 Kathleen Dean Moore, *A Great Dawn Chorus*
255 Laura-Gray Street, *Storm Season*
257 Michael P. Branch, *Closing Time*
261 Nicole Walker, *Shoes*
265 Joy Castro, *The Little Painter*

Consider also:

[“I am Writing Blindly”](#) by Roger Rosenblatt

[The Influence of Art at Yosemite](#) by James McGrew

Images from the Front

A few talking points:

- How can images communicate in a way that words cannot? What is the power of an image?
- How do the images in Patri Hadad's essay (page 277) enhance what she is saying?
- What are Pete Souza's credentials? (page 289) Where is he getting his insight and information? Does that put him in a unique position to speak?

272 Dean Rader, *In Which Twombly and Rader Consider the Letter*

276 Ellen Welti, *The Lacunose*

277 Patri Hadad, *You Are Not the Only America*

284 John Gallaher, *Jeffersonian 2016*

285 Sarah Skeen, *To Tell the Past from the Future*

289 Pete Souza, *Not of the Highest Character*

290 Pete Souza, *Of the Highest Character*

Consider also:

[Shade: A Tale of Two Presidents](#) by Pete Souza

[You're not going to believe what I'm going to tell you](#) from *The Oatmeal*

The Power of Satire

A few talking points:

- In John Price's essay (page 295), written like a letter to a lover in a toxic relationship, he also includes facts and details about the prairie where he lives. What do we learn about the prairie ecosystems? Why does he include those details? What is his relationship to place?
- If you were writing a letter to America, what details would you include about the place where you live?
- Richard Kenney's poem *#donaldcommanderintweet* (page 299) draws attention to Donald Trump's twitter account. Analyze some of the tweets in that account. Are the facts accurate? What's the tone? What can we learn about the president from this direct communication?
- Andrew Yang (page 300) creates an index of America. What would you add to that index?

295 Kim Stafford, *Presidential Alert*

296 John T. Price, *We Need to Talk*

300 Richard Kenney, *#donaldcommanderintweet*

301 Andrew S. Yang, *America: In Theory and Practice*

308 Vince Gotera, *Fourteen Donalds*

309 Dennis Held, *Why I Am Not President: A Campaign Speech*

310 Tarfia Faizullah, *I Go In*

Geographies of Inclusion and Renewal

A few talking points:

- Sean Hill (page 316) tells the story of a roadtrip with his father, who grew up in the segregated South, and talks later in the piece about the events of a white supremacist rally in Charlottesville. Why does he frame this essay with the story about the roadtrip? What does that story add? His hope seems to be that “perspectives can shift”? What does he mean by that?
- David Gessner (page 322) argues that saving wilderness is important, even in an overheated world full of violence and racism. Do you agree? Why is it important to save wilderness?
- Joe Wilkins (page 326) begins his essay by describing a rich, imaginative outdoor experience as a boy. He says, “This is what the land allows, if we let it.” What is to be gained from children spending unstructured time in nature? What do we lose as a culture if they can’t?
- Lawrence Lenhart (page 329) writes his essay as a letter to his infant son. How would you explain current events and the political climate of this country to a small child? What would be the most important thing you would want future generations to understand?
- What is the moment in DJ Hollars’ essay (page 334) in which he realizes the role privilege has played in how he’s been treated during his road trip? Have you had such a moment in your life?
- Both Sean Hill (page 316) and DJ Hollars (page 334) tell us about father-son roadtrips. What are some of the similarities and differences as you compare these essays? What are some of the shifting perspectives?
- Tim McNulty (page 346) tells the story of the Elwha River Restoration. What are the factors that helped make this happen?
- How does Camille Dungy (page 355) make a statement about diversity as she talks about biodiversity in her lawn? Can gardening be an act of advocacy?

315 Gary Soto, *After His Election, I Make a Zen Garden*

316 Sean Hill, *The World Is Large and Other Things You Thought You Knew*

322 David Gessner, *A Still Hopeful Geography*

326 Joe Wilkins, *New Names*

329 Lawrence Lenhart, *Dear Milo*

334 B. J. Hollars, *Geography Lessons*

339 Sandra Alcosser, *Begin Again*

341 Cherene Sherrard, *Driftless*

345 Arthur Sze, *Bridge*

346 Tim McNulty, *The Elwha: A River and a Vision Restored*

350 Jeremy Voigt, *Dear Dulce*

352 Elizabeth Bradfield, *January 8, 2017, Antarctica*

355 Camille T. Dungy, *Diversity: A Garden Allegory*

359 Pam Houston, *Hell Bent On*

Consider also:

[Last Child in the Woods](#) by Richard Louv

[The Concession to Climate Change I will not Make](#) by Jedediah Britton-Purdy

Talking Points, Dear America: Letters of Hope, Habitat, Defiance, and Democracy

Togethering

Some talking points:

- John Lane (page 367) tells an anecdote that becomes a metaphor. Aisha Sabatini Sloan (page 369) sends letters and art to electors. What is the power of story, of words, and of art in times like these?
- Amy Knight (page 372) writes about defending a man who has been charged with felonies for giving humanitarian aid to migrants. Where does she find hope in this situation?
- Steve and Sophie Church (page 375) show us a letter to the future president, written by an eight-year-old. It's a list of things she thinks should be changed in the next four years. What would your list look like?
- Scott Russell Sanders (page 378) talks about how Trump has encouraged Fear of Other. What does he see as the difference between tribalism and empathy, two parts of our evolutionary legacy. What happens when we combine empathy with compassion? How can we defy hatred?
- Elizabeth Rush (page 384) says "the only personal action that can slow the tide of the climate crisis is to create a coalition that is bigger and more powerful than the individuals of which it is comprised." Do you agree? What might that look like? How do we make it happen?
- What advice do these writers give us, moving forward?
- How does Rick Bass (page 395) weave the plight of the last 25 grizzlies into his essay? How does he get us to care about the grizzlies?

365 Deborah Fries, *November 2016, a View from the National Zoo*

367 John Lane, *High-Dollar Papayas*

369 Aisha Sabatini Sloan, *Unfold Your Love*

372 Amy P. Knight, *Thoughts from an Empty Courtroom Following the Hung Jury of a Man Tried for Harboring Migrants*

375 Steven and Sophie Church, *Letter to the Future President*

378 Scott Russell Sanders, *Defying Hatred*

382 Elizabeth Rush, *Dear Soon-to-Be-Sprout*

385 Kimiko Hahn, *The Augury*

386 Catherine Venable Moore, *July Fourth*

390 Katrina Goldsaito, *Dear Katrina*

393 Rick Bass, *Dinner with America*

Consider also:

[Got Tape?](#) BK Loren from *Orion*

[The 3.5% Rule: how a small minority can change the world](#) by David Robson, BBC Future

[Forget Shorter Showers](#) by Derrick Jensen