INTRODUCTION

IN SEARCH OF OUR FUTURE

Stephanie Feldman and Nathaniel Popkin

In the bicentennial year of the Declaration of Independence, U.S. Representative Barbara Jordan, a veteran of the civil rights movement, gave the first address by a black woman to the Democratic National Convention in New York City. She opened her speech by describing American sentiment in the aftermath of Watergate and the Vietnam War: “Many fear the future. Many are distrustful of their leaders, and believe that their voices are never heard. Many seek only to satisfy their private work.” Jordan wondered what would become of American civic life and worried that it would dissolve into perpetual conflict, “city against suburb, region against region, individual against individual.” “If that happens,” she asked, “who then will speak for America?”

Forty years later, in the immediate wake of the 2016 election of Donald J. Trump as president of the United States, many of us recognized Jordan’s assessment of the national mood. Trump had embraced white supremacist supporters and run a divisive, fear-mongering campaign that openly targeted marginalized communities, including Latin American immigrants, Muslims, and people with disabilities. The new vice president, Mike Pence, the former governor of Indiana, had a disturbing record of Christian extremism and radical homophobia. Both men displayed antipathy toward science and scholarly inquiry. Would their administration continue this assault, through both policy and rhetoric? Our home city, Philadelphia, which had rebounded after nearly sixty years of population decline, felt particularly vulnerable. Immigrants, people of color, and sexual minorities are central to the city’s cultural vibrancy. Diversity, an object of Trump’s scorn, is a public good. Moreover, higher education, medical science, and biotechnology fuel the city’s economy. What if the new administration and its allies in the Republican Congress followed through on their threats?
As writers, we sensed still another danger: Trump had targeted—and, in his electoral triumph, damaged—elements of civil life long protected by our social contract, such as respect for the constitutional balance of power and recognition of the essential role of the media in a free society. The Trump campaign jeopardized people’s lives and well-being, but it also revealed the vulnerability of American political institutions. His campaign’s proclivity for lies—or, as his spokesperson would later say, “alternative facts”—threatened the function of democracy itself. Were we facing a tyranny of lies? For writers, this felt like an urgent personal challenge. What is the place of writers when the media is under threat and when language itself is abused and turned into a weapon?

A new vocabulary emerged. Activists, both experienced and novice, began to speak about normalization and kleptocracy, and Trump’s opponents coalesced around the idea of resistance, asking ourselves what issues we would prioritize and what skills we might bring to the new political movement. Writers flocked to the grassroots plan for a Writers Resist campaign and organized over one hundred literary protests—rallies for free expression and democracy—on January 15, 2017, the weekend before Trump’s inauguration.

While the flagship protest in New York City was cosponsored by PEN America, events elsewhere were conceived and organized locally. In Philadelphia, we, along with poet Alicia Askenase, gathered our community on Independence Mall, where foundational American protests occurred. Poet Erin Belieu, founder of Writers Resist (now Write Our Democracy), encouraged each group to craft an event that attended to local concerns. We wanted Philadelphia’s Writers Resist protest to reflect the city’s present-day diversity, as well as its political history.

As organizers, we soon realized that the act of protest was an act of imagination. There was an inherent tension in resisting an administration that had yet to take office. We were resisting Trump’s campaign practices and promises, yes, but the precise target of the resistance, in early 2017, remained nebulous. Furthermore, we didn’t want to launch an event founded on the negative: on rebuttal and condemnation. Instead, we wanted our literary protest to be visionary. To protect the American idea—democracy, pluralism, free expression—we had to present an American idea, from inception to present, worth fighting for.

To find that American idea, we organizers began combing through the rich archive of American protest literature.

From the start, American literature was driven by dual impulses: to preserve Western Enlightenment ideals and, simultaneously, to push away from conservative European tradition. These two impulses carried on together for over a century, well past the formation of the United States. Protest against
political and religious authority was fundamental to American literature, and some of the most brilliant early American texts emerged from and helped shape the American instinct toward resistance. American writers ever since have sharpened their poetry, fiction, and polemic into weapons of political change.

We recruited thirty-five poets, novelists, journalists, translators, and essayists to read from legacy and contemporary texts that would resonate in the climate of resistance forming against the incoming president. With Trump taking aim at free expression and civil rights; immigrants, Muslims, gay, lesbian, and transgender people; environmental protection, research science, and inquiry; and even protest itself, Philadelphia Writers Resist beckoned to the voices of its literary ancestors and contemporaries to inspire the public into a mode of opposition. After all, American freedoms have been earned, one at a time, by people willing to articulate them and then fight to make them real.

As we began assembling the readings, we came to recognize the iterative, and often dialectic, nature of American protest writing: texts in various genres come together in a centuries-long conversation about the meaning of liberty. The religious visions of Puritan and Quaker writers, written in a spirit of imaginative dissent, established a framework for others like Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison to follow. And that was only the start. We chose several texts that turned the words of the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution against their authors, who directed the freedoms granted in those documents to white men only. In a 1799 petition, the Reverend Absalom Jones, a leader of the free black community of Philadelphia, mounted “We the People” with subversive force against the protectors of the slave trade. In 1876—which marked both the American centennial and the end of Reconstruction—Susan B. Anthony and members of the National Woman Suffrage Association aimed the Declaration of Independence back at its signers and, by corollary, America’s image of itself, asserting that “the men of America are political monarchs, with their wives, their sisters, and their daughters as subjects.”

Times of unease, as we have learned, provoke reactionary political movements, as well as progressive ones, and our twentieth-century readings also emerged from particular moments of conflict and contention. The 1930s produced Langston Hughes’s “Let America Be America Again”—a prescient rebuke to Trump’s slogan, “Make America Great Again”—and President Franklin Roosevelt’s 1936 Democratic Convention speech, which invoked the Declaration of Independence to oppose economic tyranny. The movements against racial injustice, pollution, and war in the 1960s engendered an extraordinary range of American protest writing; we chose passages from James Baldwin, Allen Ginsberg, and Martin Luther King Jr. The economic
crisis of 2008 and the election of the first African American president, Barack Obama, and the backlash it produced, marked another period of literary resistance. During the Obama administration, literary protest helped define struggles for women’s and gay rights and for multiculturalism. From this deep pool of poetry, prose, and polemic, we chose readings from Grace Lee Boggs, Gloria Anzaldúa, Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, Naomi Shihab Nye, and Claudia Rankine.

On January 15, we rallied, and on January 20, 2017, Donald J. Trump was sworn in as the forty-fifth president of the United States. While Trump’s early term has been bogged down by infighting and incompetence, he has indeed followed through on the promises—implicit and explicit—of his campaign. He has elevated white supremacists to high positions in the Oval Office and organized a cabinet largely of white male conservative evangelical Christians; attempted to institute religion-based travel bans, increased immigration raids and deportations, and discontinued Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), the program that protects the children of undocumented immigrants from deportation; dismantled government safety and environmental protections; and instigated international conflict. He continually threatens journalists, whom he has called “the enemy of the American people.” The only voices that seem to matter speak for wealth, whiteness, and privilege.

In 1976, Barbara Jordan followed her question “Who will speak for America?” with “Who then will speak for the common good?” She indeed equated the idea of America with the notion of the common good, based on inclusion, equality, and generosity. These ideals, in sharp contrast to those of the president and his party, form a thread of this book. The question of who will speak for America is perhaps the most urgent of our time, as it begs us, as a nation, to look in the mirror—and at each other.

The contributors to this anthology—among them immigrants and refugees, men and women of color, gay and trans people, Christians, Jews, and Muslims—tackle the question of American identity and society, offering visions rooted in our history but attentive to our future. In *Who Will Speak for America?* we offer these visions: of pain, of fear, of resilience, of love, of confusion, of terror, of bravado, of absurdity, of beauty, of dystopia and utopia, of history, and of the future. The contributors continue the conversation that the American colonists began and that generations of activists, in their efforts to perfect our union, have elevated and amplified.

In Part I, “Speaking to America,” writers address their attention to their families in the first days after the election (in the section “To Our Families”), to their own mental and emotional landscape during the first months of the administration (section “To Ourselves”), and to the country, already beset
by racial injustice, poverty, misogyny, and violence (section “To Our Americas”). In Part II, “Speaking for America,” writers wrestle with the meaning of America and American identity and imagine diverse futures (section “For the Nation”). Some of these futures necessitate practical political change, patience, organizing, and resilience; others depend on the elemental power of community (section “For the Future”).

The Obama years brought encouraging signs of social progress: a steep reduction in the uninsured, legal gains for gay and transgender people, a drop in the federal incarceration rate, and a vast increase in accepted refugees. The America of 2016 was becoming more inclusive and more tolerant for the common good. The culmination of this might have been the inauguration of a new kind of president—the first woman president—as poet Eileen Myles, who ran for president in 1992, imagines in “Acceptance Speech (Nov 6 2016),” the preamble to this book. Myles unfurls a national plan for fairness, love, compassion, and fun. “We’re going to massively fund libraries,” Myles writes, “open twenty-four hours, and they will not be filled with homeless people because they will have homes, so the libraries will be filled with people reading and watching movies, and going into the conversation rooms and having conversations and so on.” Myles reminds us that on November 8, 2016, we lost not only the progress intrinsic in electing the first female president but also the privilege of dreaming beyond the borders of banal political discourse. As we learned during the Writers Resist protest in Philadelphia, we must not condemn but imagine anew; as Myles instructs, we must open the library of American voices to everyone.

Yet, here in the present, the election and the first year of the Trump administration have shattered any sense of American well-being. “Today America screams, ‘Go back to where you came from!’ which I take to mean / back to the darkness inside her,” writes Joy Ladin in “America in Winter,” the clear-eyed poem that sets the scene for Part I. Trump’s reactionary policies may turn out to be a temporary reversal—the march to freedom is long and the road often rutted—but nevertheless, the president bears down on us, breaking up immigrant families; sending other immigrants into hiding; deputizing sexual predators and white supremacists, neo-Nazis and nativists; and eviscerating the government regulatory structures that protect us from environmental and safety risks. The effect has disturbed the most intimate form of our communal lives: the family.

In “To Our Families,” a haunting essay by Carmen Maria Machado and a defiant poem by KC Trommer situate the injury of the election within the realm of private family memory. Other writers, like the scholar Tahnee
Oksman, the novelist Diane McKinney-Whetstone, and the poet Adam Vines, observe themselves and their children processing the fear and confusion of reactionary political change. Parent-child conversations in the weeks and months after the election are both fraught and a kind of solace; Melissa Febos extends the conversation to her students, whom she wants to protect as much as enlighten and inspire. The inauguration, writes Herman Beavers in the poem “20 January 2017,” is “time to consider the whereabouts / of the precious and the prized.” As the fiction writer Sarah Rose Etter seeks perhaps the impossible—to reconcile her political beliefs with her father’s pro-Trump opinions—Bassey Ikpi carefully observes the relationship between her ten-year-old son and her elderly father in the months after the election. She concludes, “This is where my hope lives.”

In our invitation to these writers, we asked them to consider “American ideals, identity, and citizenship in this age of political crisis and opportunity” and suggested that they might evoke or educate, provoke or reflect, or explore an explicitly personal dimension. So often, as in Ikpi’s narrative, political changes refract inside the space of our personal lives. Literary writers, perhaps more than journalists or historians, have the capacity, or freedom, to shift scales, from the intimate and communal to the personal and interior and back out again to our wider society.

As we reconsider our relationship to our country as citizens and families, we must grapple with our own beliefs and psychological experience as unpredictable, terrifying, and destabilizing events unfold. In “To Ourselves,” science fiction and fantasy writer Fran Wilde confronts Trump and GOP leaders’ deception and doublespeak on plans for health care, taxes, and the environment: “That morning the officials / stole all the words” and turned them “upside down.” Similarly, the cartoonist Liana Finck portrays her attempt to assimilate the political chaos, fear, and confusion of 2017. Finck observes life under Trump, a serial liar and abuser, whose power comes from displaying constant shifts in belief, or “gaslighting.” The effect of gaslighting on the abused may be, as she suggests, emotional distance and denial. Juan Martinez embodies this feeling in the figure of the abyss:

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The abyss asks that you please not laugh.  
His retinue says the same. The retinue

of little abysses demands respect, silence,  
a smidgen of fear. Won’t you please fear him,  

please? Won’t you shake at the immensity  
of his nothingness? Won’t you cry or rage
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The dissonance has been exacerbated by the intrusion of the Trump regime into our personal lives—conversations are hijacked, leisure time replaced by organizing and protesting, and sleep interrupted. In the poem “Reclaiming Time,” Airea D. Matthews describes a sleepless night filled with worry: “When the sun rises,” she asks, “will the sickness value / your sons above a sweat bead, field, or ring?”

Novelist Ken Kalfus also tackles our new experience of time. He expresses a desire to “seize a moment” to slow the “blur of news” and writes against the abyss by documenting three random days of the Trump era, “if only so that I will understand how these days were actually experienced before they became a segment in the arc of a longer history, given new meaning by future events.”

That longer arc of history is the subject of an essay by the novelist Madeleine Thien, introducing her English translation of excerpts from the Cambodian writer Khun Srun’s work *The Accused*. The translation reveals, in harrowing melancholy, the experience of a man living under tyranny and terror. Thien wants us to meditate on this particular “storm of history,” asking how a person can “live a moral life in a time of devastating, and escalating, violence.”

“The walls surrounding me are their laws, their police, their prisons, their guns,” writes Khun, who was executed by the Khmer Rouge in 1978.

Walls are their business, trade, and profit.
All that subjugates people.
All that reduces them to the rank of objects.

“I fear the world we are unleashing,” writes Thien, who argues for a radical awareness of the Other that could lead to nonviolence.

But is political violence ever justifiable? The novelist Sandra Newman shares four beguiling short histories that force us to question our values and instincts. Fiction writer Sam Miller, in the story “Yellow for Ephemeral,” considers the search for purpose amid tragedy. Along with Newman and Thien, Miller asks us not only to observe and face the abyss but to dwell in it, for in confusion there is always hope for clarity.

In confronting the abyss, we acknowledge that it has always been here; we must investigate and document the society that created Trump. We need to frame and reframe, approach and reapproach until we understand the forces that produced this political crisis—or at the very least know what kinds of questions to ask. In this way, the novelists, essayists, and poets in “To Our Americas” face the nation that brought us to the 2016 election. They ask
America to lay its violence bare, without necessarily needing an answer or expecting a response.

In an excerpt from his novel *Year of the Rat*, Marc Anthony Richardson explores how incarceration poisons African American men. Poet Jericho Brown excoriates the terrorizing and murder of black men by police officers in “Bullet Points” and further explores the particularly American objectification and commodification of bodies in “The Legend of Big and Fine”:

Long ago, we used two words
For the worth of a house, a car,
A woman—all the same to men
Who claimed them: things
To be entered, each to suffer
Wear and tear with time

These themes of fear, violation, and possession carry through the poems of Cynthia Atkins and Lynn Melnick. In “Domestic Terrorism,” Atkins evokes the fear the powerful (men and boys, bosses) use against the powerless (prisoners, girls, employees). “I’ll tell you about terror, the kind you feel when the neighborhood boys are chasing you home to see what’s under your skirt, the downy fur between your legs. They want to own it,” she writes.

In “National Pastime,” Melnick meditates on the portrayal of rape. “Anything can be begged into art,” she writes, warning us that our attempts to make sense of America’s sickness might merely further our own obsessive desire for creation. In “Who Has the Right to Tell This Story?” the novelist Liz Moore asks a similar question: What is the role of the artist in portraying the suffering of others? Along with the photographer Jeffrey Stockbridge, she revisits recovering addicts, many of them sex workers, she interviewed years ago in Kensington, a Philadelphia neighborhood devastated by the opioid epidemic. She speaks to therapists and community activists in an effort to understand the possibility and limits of art to reshape narratives and reform lives.

Indeed, we as writers want to know: What are we accomplishing? Perhaps we’re giving dimension to suffering and also renewal. These things can’t be real to you, the reader, or to us, as writers, unless we write them. Through literature we become responsible for each other, for the present and the future. “I am on a cross where time and space intersect,” writes Alice Notley, the poet, in “I Enter the Real Memory.”

You come and go via me the crystal exaltation
And the keeper of the layers of speaking and knowing:
You are in my hands.
Perhaps the point of asking a rhetorical question like “Who will speak for America?” is to assert that we all—including the incarcerated and murdered, the abused and neglected among us—speak for the nation. And in speaking for it, we keep each other in our hands, as a society of linked interests, each person treating the other fairly—a radical view in Trump’s America. Because, as Edwin Torres writes in his poem “Who Will Speak for Whom, America?” in Part II:

most of humanity is used to showing emotion, used to showing compassion, empathy, honor, humility, human traits that characterize us as human beings who understand another’s plight, another’s approach.

Torres helps us make the turn from speaking to America to speaking for it, arguing that as individuals and a collective “we,” we ought not lose ourselves in the speaking. Otherwise we each might lose the very humanity that makes our speech matter. We live in an age of verbal excess—politicians’ deceit and doublespeak, a frenzied media landscape, and a digital environment that allows marginalized voices to thrive while also giving new power to propagandists and hate speech. Words are simultaneously more and less powerful.

How can our voices overcome the powerful segmentation of American society? Do we speak for our own identity group, for those without voice, for all humans, for some construct of “America”? Do we speak for us, today, or for the future? Do we somehow speak to the past that seems to inspire and taunt, that never relents? Do we reaffirm a historical sense of Americanness? If so, on what basis?

In asking these questions we might return to Barbara Jordan and her 1976 speech to the Democratic National Convention:

I could list the problems which cause people to feel cynical, angry, frustrated: problems which include lack of integrity in government; the feeling that the individual no longer counts; the reality of material and spiritual poverty; the feeling that the grand American experiment is failing or has failed. I could recite these problems, and then I could sit down and offer no solutions. But I don’t choose to do that either. The citizens of America expect more. They deserve and they want more than a recital of problems.

We are a people in a quandary about the present. We are a people in search of our future. We are a people in search of a national community. We are a people trying not only to solve the problems of the present, unemployment, inflation, but we are attempting on a larger
scale to fulfill the promise of America. We are attempting to fulfill our national purpose, to create and sustain a society in which all of us are equal.5

The writers in this book answer Jordan’s call. The act of being American, they show, is an act of personal and civic imagination and experimentation, of conjuring what America is and what it could be. Just as those who have claimed various rights and responsibilities have always done, speaking for America means interrogating its complexities while protecting its singular ideas of liberty, justice, and equality.

In “For the Nation,” poet Cynthia Arrieu-King describes the ongoing making of her American identity as she negotiates her place within her communities. Samira Ahmed also portrays her Americanness as a process. She learns rejection as a child, learns the rules for acceptance as a young woman, and ultimately reclaims her American identity by asserting her whole self: “You claim your joy. / You lay your roots: / Blood and bone and fire and ash. / And in this land of the free and home of the brave, you plant yourself. / Like a flag.”

Novelist Carlos José Pérez Sámano, a recent immigrant, wonders if America will force him to mask his Mexican-formed self or if it will embrace that self. He envisions an American culture built of the “little differences” of immigrants from all over the world, one that acknowledges its connection to the thirty-six countries that make up the continents that share its name. In “Blood and Spirit,” poet Cynthia Dewi Oka explores the emotional landscape of a refugee about to cross the border to the United States, to “enter America (future / tense).”

In both poetry and prose, Mohja Kahf also recognizes the little differences that we share as children, as activists, and as minorities, along with our indelible global connections. She imagines an America, and a world, that makes room for the self and Americans who learn from each other’s experience of—and fights against—oppression.

In speaking for America, we must face up to the absurdity of a brash, militaristic, and hungry America that devours and commodifies our differences. This is Herman Beavers’s reminder in “Untitled: A Comedy.” Writer Linh Dinh, in “Pigskin, Beauty, Death, and a Huggable Rat,” and poet Craig Santos Perez, in “America (after Allen Ginsberg),” stretch Beavers’s comedy to expose the sickness of an insatiable nation. “Much more than land, America invades minds,” Dinh writes. “There is scarcely a brain alive that’s not / Constantly titillated and harassed by / American culture.”

How can any of us speak for this domineering nation that calls itself “America,” as if to claim half the world? The poet and fiction writer Ana-
Maurine Lara seconds Pérez Sámano’s call to imagine America, the nation, embedded in its hemisphere, of a piece with North and South and Central America, while at the same time the product of its unique polyglot history, the sum total of little differences. Seeing America this way, as “América,” her body stretching “from the silver sun of the Arctic / to the blazing blue of Antarctica,” transforms our vision and with it our sense of what’s possible. When Lara writes, in the refrain of her poem “América,” “I do not speak for América; / I cannot contain América,” it isn’t because she lacks a voice but because América—America—is an immeasurable thing.

This immeasurability demands radical imagination; our future demands the same. We begin the final section of the book, “For the Future,” with a drawing by the fiction writer and cartoonist Adrienne Celt. Here is the body of America, the dry desert mesa of Arizona, where Celt lives, and the faces of black, brown, and white women on horseback, uniting in a stampede. This is “Life After,” a vision of the America that was already forming before Trump—egalitarian, determined, and well aware of the long road ahead. Rene Denfeld, novelist and death-penalty investigator who works to exonerate the innocent and find mercy for the guilty, describes this long road in her essay “The Gates to Freedom.” She writes:

Right now, many of us feel like my clients, trapped in terrifying circumstances that are out of our control. And like my clients, we are hoping someone will show up with a key and release us. But that is not going to happen. It’s going to take us a long time to remedy the political crisis and to reverse injustice and inequality, just as it took us a long time to get here.

Denfeld’s essay is sobering but also hopeful. She traces Trump’s victory, in part, to mass incarceration—of African Americans, who have been disenfranchised, and whites, who have been radicalized in prison as neo-Nazis and white nationalists. Her success relies on careful and relentless work, a model for all of us who fight for a more just society. The nonfiction writer Veronica Scott Esposito provides another model for achieving a just future: the recent history of California, whose electorate has transformed from politically reactionary and anti-immigrant in the 1990s to progressive today. Esposito’s essay, “If You Can Keep It,” draws not only on California’s recent history but on her own, as a once-happy young conservative who cheered anti-immigrant measures. She locates her personal change in her study of early American political history and the Constitution’s Enlightenment ideals. To fight cyclical waves of illiberalism—like the one we face today—we must bolster education about our founding principles and, foremost, “be courageous. Be ambitious.”
And if our courage and ambition fail? Ganzeer, an exiled Egypt-born artist and writer who now lives in Denver, describes a futuristic earth colonized by waves of interplanetary immigrants, replicating the tension between Americans’ ideals and Americans’ worst tendencies. His story, “Charlie and the Aliens,” does not shy away with from the damage of our society’s approach to immigration, but it retains a hopeful note: that American core values of liberty, equality, and justice are unkillable. In “The End of the Incarnation,” Malka Older, a specialist and scholar in international aid and development, envisions a mass secession from the United States. As borders shift and disappear, the country’s disintegration culminates in the flourishing of a new ideal: one’s birthplace should have no bearing on one’s rights.

Novelist and editor Charlie Jane Anders ends the book with a depiction of communities forming, failing, and reforming after a far-future destruction of American civilization. “Because Change was the Ocean and We Lived by Her Mercy” ends with a vision of enduring—if imperfect and ever precarious—community. “Then we went back to staring down at the wasteland,” says the narrator of Anders’s story, “trying to imagine how many generations it would take before something green came out of it.”

And so the work—and the questions, the arguments, the personal stories and fantasies and poems—continues. Just like the historical authors of our collected resistance texts, we find ourselves in another moment of political crisis. Writers, as well as musicians, performers, and visual artists, are being transformed by the moment; their work, some of it collected here, will come to define the resistance and the future shape and direction of American civic life. They are continuing the conversation the earliest American resistance writers began.

The answer to the question “Who will speak for America?,” it may turn out, is the repetition of the question itself. As the central question of the American experiment, it begs us to ask and to listen.

Notes
4. Jordan, keynote address.
5. Ibid.