



UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

Advocacy Letters: An Invitation

Yates-Doerr, E.

Publication date

2020

Document Version

Final published version

License

CC BY-NC-SA

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Yates-Doerr, E. (Author). (2020). Advocacy Letters: An Invitation. Web publication/site, Somatosphere. <http://somatosphere.net/2020/advocacy-letters-an-invitation.html/>

General rights

It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations

If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: <https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact>, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

June 24, 2020 (<http://somatosphere.net/2020/advocacy-letters-an-invitation.html/>)

Advocacy Letters: An Invitation (<http://somatosphere.net/2020/advocacy-letters-an-invitation.html/>)

By Emily Yates-Doerr (<http://somatosphere.net/author/andrewr/>)

This article is part of the series: Advocacy Letters
(<http://somatosphere.net/series/advocacy-letters/>)

Somatosphere is launching a new series to share political and social advocacy letters. Please submit your open letters to emilyjff@gmail.com

Dear Reader,

2020 is a year of multiple chronic crises resurfacing and converging. Many of us feel moved to respond through protest, writing for public audiences and posting on social media. We are launching this series to provide space on Somatosphere for another important medium for responding to crisis: letters to government, non-government, or corporate actors on the social and political issues that most concern you. Although I intend the reach of this initiative to travel well beyond US borders, the 2020 US elections on Tuesday, November 3, 2020 will serve as an endpoint of the series, marking another crucial tipping point in the political course of the 21st century.

The intention of the series is twofold. First, we hope to give your letters an audience beyond the individual to whom they are addressed, sharing academic expertise on pressing political issues with our readers. Second, the broader hope is that these letters will inspire others to write, and thereby mobilize our knowledge in the service of political change.

I came to the genre of the political advocacy letter through teaching. Two years after I received my Ph.D., I had the chance to return to my hometown to teach at the University of Washington. Temporary jobs have a lot of drawbacks, but an unexpected benefit of the position was that I taught a class designed by Prof. Janelle Taylor. Her syllabus included an assignment unlike any I'd had as a student myself: twice over the quarter students were assigned to write an advocacy letter. They needed to draw on course materials, form an opinion, and find an audience — a real person with a real address. They did not need to send the letter, but many students took the assignment seriously and did.

I've incorporated Dr. Taylor's 'advocacy letter' assignment into many of my courses in the years since teaching this class. Students value the concrete engagement with broader social and political processes and the opportunity to develop their voices. As an employee at a public institution, I cannot direct them toward a political position, but I can help them navigate the practice of taking a position. They tell me that they get inspiration and build comradery from workshopping the letters with their classmates and they appreciate the empowerment that comes with the skill of writing. Forming an opinion is one generative challenge, but they also learn from the process of figuring out where to go to reach someone with the power to act on the change they hope to see.

*Science,
Medicine, and
Anthropology*

A collaborative website covering the intersections of medical anthropology, science and technology studies, cultural psychiatry, psychology and bioethics.

Advocacy letters have few formal rules. Here's advice I've heard: advocate for a specific issue with clear and direct action; establish your expertise — whether this comes from your research or personal experience; support everything you offer with evidence; make your message timely; be succinct. If your letter is for politicians, you should write to your own representatives. (Here are [tips from the ACLU](https://www.aclu.org/writing-your-elected-representatives) (<https://www.aclu.org/writing-your-elected-representatives>), and the [American Psychological Association](https://www.apa.org/advocacy/guide/letter-email) (<https://www.apa.org/advocacy/guide/letter-email>)). The advice that has always resonated more strongly to me than anything else: write from the heart.

Letters are widely held as an effective means of political engagement. I have also found that writing advocacy letters can help in other domains of writing. One of my mentors, Annemarie Mol, used to tell me that if I was ever faced with writer's block, to forget about academic writing and instead sit down to write a letter. It is advice I have shared widely, especially given that letter-writing to colleagues and mentors from the trenches of fieldwork is one of the unsung practices of our field. We also see the powerful possibilities of letter-writing in anthropologist Laurence Ralph's new book, *The Torture Letters* (<https://press.uchicago.edu/ucp/books/book/chicago/T/bo26783305.html>), which uses the genre of the 'open letter' to carry out academic scholarship with concrete political efficacy.

My former advisee, Argenis Hurtado Moreno, recently closed his graduate thesis with a series of letters to the different audiences his work addressed. He started the letters with a quote from Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldúa.

“It is not easy writing this letter. It began as a poem, a long poem. I tried to turn it into an essay but the result was wooden, cold. I have not yet unlearned the esoteric bullshit and pseudo-intellectualizing that school brainwashed into my writing. How to begin again. How to approximate the intimacy and immediacy I want. What form? A letter, of course.”

Anzaldúa, cited in Hurtado Moreno, 2020.

Anzaldúa's message is a good one for this moment. Throughout the pandemic and the protests, I have felt my expertise fold inside out. My students, reading news about [sexual abuse scandals](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ishDCAoDyB1wTmnjgZBqNlsvD5BqP2zzzTWARX36Fi0/edit#heading=h.1ocohmwbbbr) (<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ishDCAoDyB1wTmnjgZBqNlsvD5BqP2zzzTWARX36Fi0/edit#heading=h.1ocohmwbbbr>) in elite anthropology departments, or simply looking toward activist circles where some of the most effective theorization for social transformation emanates, have come to me doubting that anthropology's tools for critical thinking are any good. Sara Ahmed's warning of non-performativity — the performance of transformation that holds a system in place — must be reckoned with today.

“Why should we write for the academy?” they ask me. “Can't you see the world is burning and we must reach beyond ourselves?” I understand the concern, as I have lost interest in much of the writing I used to enjoy. I still appreciate nuance and deliberate specificity of language — the anthropologist's capacity for careful listening and deep reflection is as important as ever. But my students are demanding that our modes of communication keep pace with the fire of the time — and they're right to ask this of the field, right now.

I know many of you already regularly write heartfelt and impassioned letters that you send to your representatives. This series hopes to give those letters an audience while amplifying advocacy letter-writing as a mode of engagement within the anthropological field. Perhaps you're contacting your congressional or parliamentary representative with an argument to expand health care services. Perhaps you're reaching out to your faculty senate to divest from the police, or writing to your city council member explaining why

rescinding rights for transgender people is as dangerous as it will be. Writing to local politicians is thought to be especially effective, but you might also want to write to widely known public figures ([this letter](#) (<https://skylight.is/2018/10/an-open-letter-to-president-donald-j-trump-and-the-government-of-the-united-states-of-america/>)) to the US President, by Guatemalan anthropologist Irma Velásquez Nimatuj, is one of my all-time favorites). If the subject matter of your letter fits with the broad themes addressed by *Somatosphere*, and if it is written from a place of academic expertise and personal commitment, we would like to broadcast its message to our readers. Though the series is timed around US elections, I welcome letters from anywhere.

I am available to think this through with you if you want to run an idea by me. I am caring for children, so if you do not hear back please resend your message. You can also submit finished pieces for me for review. If we aren't able to publish them, at least you'll have a letter to send.

Note, you can find style guidelines for submission to Somatosphere [here](#) (<http://somatosphere.net/about/>). For this series, you must also include hyperlinks to any claims to fact you make for cross-reference. I can be reached at emilyjf@gmail.com (<mailto:emilyjf@gmail.com>)>

Works Cited

Ahmed, Sara. 2006. "The Nonperformativity of Antiracism." *Meridians*. 7(1):104-126.

Ralph, Laurence. 2020. *The Torture Letters: Reckoning with Police Violence*. University of Chicago Press.

Hurtado Moreno, Argenis. 2020. *She is Somebody: The Care and Labor of Undocumented and DACAmented Mothers*. Graduate Student Thesis, Oregon State University.

Emily Yates-Doerr is an Associate Editor and regular contributor to Somatosphere. She has co-edited several other series, including [The Ethnographic Case](#), (<http://somatosphere.net/ethnographiccase/>) which was later published as an experimental [online book with](#) (<https://www.matteringpress.org/books/the-ethnographic-case>) with Mattering Press and [Thinking with Dementia](#) (<http://somatosphere.net/thinking-with-dementia/>). Her most recent contribution was a post titled "[Head Circumference](#) (<http://somatosphere.net/2020/head-size.html/>)," which was part of the series, [Historias of Zika](#) (<http://somatosphere.net/2019/historias-of-zika.html/>).

Similar Posts

Open Letter to U.S. Senators Ron Wyden & Jeff Merkley (<http://somatosphere.net/2020/open-letter-to-u-s-senators-ron-wyden-jeff-merkley.html/>)
Open Letter to Senator Jack Reed (<http://somatosphere.net/2020/open-letter-to-senator-jack-reed.html/>)
COVID-19 and The Lessons Anthropology Learned from HIV/AIDS (<http://somatosphere.net/2020/covid-lessons-anthropology.html/>)
Videos from "Science and Technology Studies: the Next 20 Years" (<http://somatosphere.net/2011/videos-from-science-and-technology.html/>)
Populist Pharmakons (<http://somatosphere.net/2020/populist-pharmakons.html/>)

[[view academic citations](#)]