Dear Members of the Class of 2021 and Transfer Students:

Welcome to Stanford!!! I feel extremely lucky to be the faculty moderator for Three Books this year. Three Books is your first shared intellectual experience at Stanford, and I am honored to play a role.

In writing this letter, I am remembering the summer of 1992, when Barbara Kingsolver’s *Animal Dreams* arrived in the mail, along with a letter encouraging me to read the book in preparation for a Residential Education discussion during New Student Orientation. Whereas my Stanford admission letter felt like the end of high school, the arrival of that book felt like the beginning of college. Also, at the same time that I am writing this letter and remembering my first year, I am watching my own son get ready to start college in the fall. So I have a feeling of straddling both your experience and that of your families – and in both, I am very excited to meet you and discuss these books!

This year’s theme is *Sustainability and Equity*. In addition to a technological revolution, your generation is facing a world of growing population, limited natural resources, a rapidly changing climate, and tremendous inequality – inequality of wealth and opportunity; inequality of access to Earth’s resources and a healthy environment; and inequality of protection for fundamental human rights. As you look out at the world that you will inhabit – and shape – over the course of your adult lives, sustainability and equity are inextricably linked. The global challenges that your generation will face are challenges of both sustainability and equity; indeed, they are one and the same.

The three books that we will read together bridge these twin challenges. Yaa Gyasi’s novel *Homegoing* is a study in the long history of how humans have mistreated each other, and how that mistreatment perpetuates inequality through the generations. Elizabeth Kolbert’s *The Sixth Extinction* is a study in the long history of how humans have mistreated the rest of life on Earth, to the point that we are now an agent of extermination on par with the most powerfully cataclysmic agents in Earth’s four-and-a-half-billion year lifetime. And Jesmyn Ward’s novel *Salvage The Bones* is a moving and powerful illustration of how inequality and environment converge to shape human vulnerability – and resilience.

All three of these books have had a deep impact on me and my thinking. I know that you will likewise benefit from the unique and insightful viewpoints of these three amazing authors. And, just as each of these books offers a sense of hope and optimism amid extremely challenging circumstances, I am optimistic that in discussing these challenges we can help each other find a sense of hope for the future!

The Three Books program is designed to introduce you to the experience of reading, thinking, and talking about challenging subjects as a member of Stanford's intellectual community. This community is global, diverse and inclusive. You will find peers, mentors, and teachers who are passionate about – and expert in – the full range of human endeavor. They will expand your perspective, and challenge your preconceptions. (And, if you are insecure like I am, they will intimidate you from time to time.) Like many topics that you will encounter at Stanford, the subjects addressed in these books are complex, and none of them has an easy, self-evident, or pre-determined solution. As an incoming student, Three
Books is your introduction to our community, and to the experience of engaging with peers and instructors around challenging topics, critically and respectfully, with an open mind. And it is a reminder that you belong here, in this community!

A highlight of the Three Books program is the author panel. This year, we are extremely lucky that Yaa Gyasi, Elizabeth Kolbert and Jesmyn Ward will all be together on stage in Memorial Auditorium during NSO, on the evening of Thursday, September 21. This is a unique opportunity for you to hear three amazing thinkers explore the joint challenges of sustainability and equity, along with their perspectives on creativity, discourse, and the craft of writing. This is the first of many amazing opportunities that Stanford will offer you – I encourage you to take full advantage by engaging with the books, engaging with your peers, and engaging with the authors.

One way for you to begin that process is through the online forum on Canvas. (Canvas is used in many Stanford courses; you will get to know it well!!) The Canvas forum will give you the chance to discuss the books with your peers, and with me, and with other Stanford faculty and staff. It will also give you a chance to help me frame the discussion with the authors by suggesting specific topics and questions, and by sharing your general insights about the books and their overarching themes. There is an open discussion thread already up on the site – you can log on and comment right now. :-) 

I am looking forward to connecting with all of you over the next few months, and to meeting you in the fall. As you approach Stanford, I encourage you to embrace the opportunity to think deeply about these books, and to begin engaging critically and constructively with your peers. Your time at Stanford is a rare and precious gift. My wish for you is that you fully immerse yourself in that gift, beginning with Three Books.

See you in September!

Sincerely,

Noah S. Diffenbaugh  
Professor, School of Earth, Energy and Environmental Sciences  
Kimmelman Family Senior Fellow, Woods Institute for the Environment

Stanford Class of 1996

diffenbaugh@stanford.edu