WHITMAN CONVOCATION ADDRESS
Professor Susanne Beechey - August 24, 2018

"Citizenship and the Liberal Arts"

Thank you to Dean Tipton for the kind introduction and to President Murray for inviting me to deliver this address today. I want to talk to you all about citizenship, and for the members of the class of 2022 especially, citizenship and the liberal arts.

I started thinking about citizenship earlier this summer when a photo popped up on my social media account to remind me it was the one year anniversary of my U.S. citizenship ceremony. The photo captures me, holding a certificate while standing next to a judge and an American flag. The photo marks the end of a relatively short application process after a relatively long period of building my life in the United States as a permanent resident but not a legal citizen. I was born in Canada and after my mother married an American, who became my dad, I moved to the United States with a "green card" as a toddler. I went to public schools in the United States, I came to political consciousness here. I protested and wrote letters to the editor; I talked to voters; I supported interest groups; I rallied, and leafleted, and even lobbied Congress. I contributed to communities and cared for those around me. I paid taxes and voiced opinions and looked out for the vulnerable. In many ways I was a very active citizen, but I was not a legal citizen. For a long time that legal citizenship struck me as a technicality. I couldn't serve on a jury or vote, but I could still be active in the political process. For a long time I meant to apply for citizenship but then my green card would be close to expiring and I would need to renew that and then there wasn't urgency anymore. Yes, of course, that lack of urgency on my part had everything to do with my race, my name, my native language, my whiteness. It had everything to do with privilege that marks another kind of citizenship that comes with an easy assumption of belonging that eludes many with legal citizenship in this country, who too often are presumed to not belong.

Urgency arrived on the day the Trump administration denied entry to permanent resident green card holders as it implemented a travel ban targeting entry to the United States from Muslim majority countries. I began my citizenship application the next day, as I envisioned separation from my U.S. citizen children, even in the face of my substantial privilege. It was time to take on the responsibilities of legal citizenship, not just for my own legal protection, but also in light of my responsibilities to others.

On that day my citizenship ceremony photo circled back to me on social media, I was also seeing lots of other photos: photos of toddlers, whose parents had brought them to the United States to build their lives together as a family; photos of parents and caretakers separated from their children at the U.S. border; photos of young children, like mine, incarcerated under horrifying conditions by the government of the United

States, while seeking legal asylum. Looking at those pictures I saw my sons Lucas and Emile; I saw myself, as a toddler and as a parent. I was reminded of a piece I read many years ago by the philosopher Eva Kittay who centers a feminist ethic of care on the insight that "We are all – equally – some mother's child."

Those children are all "some mother's child." Those parents, too, are "some mother's child." This weekend will mark one month that the Trump administration has failed to comply with a court order to reunite separated families. More than 500 immigrant children remain in government custody. Every one of those children is "some mother's child," and we all, especially those of us with U.S. citizenship, are implicated in what is happening to them.

As those photos circulated, I heard many react by saying "This is not America" but of course, yes, this is indeed America. This is the America built on chattel slavery—written directly into our founding documents—which ripped children from the arms of their parents and into forced labor. As Professor Nina Lerman, my colleague in the History department, will tell you, this is the America of the Chinese Exclusion Act, of Japanese internment, of Indian boarding schools—including those which forcibly separated families here in Washington State. This is the America of the genocide of native peoples, including those who once lived on the land we occupy tonight. This is the America of Jim Crow and mass incarceration, where Emmett Till was lynched and Trayvon Martin shot for being black boys. This is the America in which women citizens have not yet had the vote for 100 years. This is also the America of drone strikes. The America in whose name President Barack Obama authorized 542 drone strikes that, by conservative estimates, killed 3,797 people, including 324 civilians—and that number includes children, too. Those lives—all of them—represent "some mother's child." So yes, the separation of immigrant families, the detention of children seeking asylum is, in fact, America. Yet while I disagree when folks say "this is not America," I also am given hope, because in that statement they are reaching for a better nation, better communities that are centered on inclusion, not exclusion, on shared humanity and questions of what we owe one another, rather than what we each individually deserve. A world in which we can see each of those children as "some mother's child," and feel a responsibility to act.

As my story here demonstrates, citizenship is a pliable category that connects rights and responsibilities to places and peoples. Historically, citizenship has been seen as a process of ruling and being ruled. Citizens have been entitled to protection by a ruler and been declared beholden to that ruler. Citizenship has also meant collective self-governance, and referred to democratic relationships. More recently, there has grown a notion of citizenship as membership in communities, as webs of interdependencies, or as connections and affinities that transcend the nation-state. We might now think of global citizenship or digital citizenship alongside citizenship to a particular country. Citizenship can be understood as belonging, and at the same time be a site of exclusion. In her book The Citizen and the Alien: Dilemmas of Contemporary

Membership, Linda Bosniak writes "The idea of citizenship is commonly invoked to convey a state of democratic belonging or inclusion, yet this inclusion is usually premised on a conception of a community that is bounded and exclusive. Citizenship as an ideal is understood to embody a commitment against subordination, but citizenship can also represent an axis of subordination itself." Certainly, in the United States the rights and duties of, as well as the access to, citizenship have varied widely for different groups of people across time based on their gender, sex, race, national origin, sexual orientation, and ability. Citizenship can be understood narrowly or expansively. Narrowly we might think only of legal citizenship, but T. H. Marshall's classic formulation of social citizenship draws our attention to questions of distribution and recognition, to social rights and social welfare, which may or may not relate to legal citizenship status. If you are not a legal citizen, but reap the benefits of social citizenship, because of your wealth or race or gender, does that entail certain responsibilities toward others less advantaged? Conversely, if you are a legal citizen, but cannot reap some or many of the benefits of social citizenship, what then is the meaning of legal citizenship if you cannot access the social and public goods that you too rightly deserve? The concept of citizenship asks us to think about inclusions and exclusions, about rights and responsibilities, about connections and communities.

Class of 2022, whatever your citizenship status, you have come of age in chaotic times. If you grew up in the United States, for most of you, the United States has always been a national security state. Many of you were born as George W. Bush took office and likely have no memory of September 11, 2001. The increase in state surveillance and decrease in individual privacy which followed have always been part of your world. While you were a toddler, the Department of Homeland Security was created with ICE, Immigration and Customs Enforcement, serving a decidedly defensive, national security mission. You may have varying degrees of awareness that the United States has been at war for most of your life. You were in elementary school when Barack Obama was elected president, after winning the Democratic nomination over Hilary Clinton. He may be the first president you remember, making you the first generation for whom the U. S. presidency was never the exclusive domain of white men.You may or may not know about those drone strikes President Obama authorized while you were transitioning to and from middle school. You probably knew that folks had strong opinions about his health care plan. And you certainly remember the 2016 election of President Donald Trump.

During this same lifetime, you have witnessed substantial shifts in social citizenship, including movements for greater inclusion, and the identification of injustices that persist. Many of us in the LGBT community never imagined that we would receive state recognition of our relationships and families, and others of us never imagined that marriage had anything to do with the queer agenda. We still have no nationwide protection from being fired for being gay or nonbinary or transgender. There is still a lot of debate about wedding flowers and cakes, which have important implications for public accommodation protections, but there have been enormous strides toward

inclusion. You have also seen initiatives for the inclusion of classmates and loved ones, Dreamers, who have grown up in the United States without legal status. You have heard the growing awareness of police violence on black lives and the beginnings of a conversation about mass incarceration for non-violent, often drug-related, offenses in this country. You have heard us #sayhername and say #metoo, because too many lives are marked by violence. You have also witnessed open white supremacy rallies again in the United States.

And now, Class of 2022, you are entering college in a midterm election year, when the entire U.S. House of Representatives, a third of the Senate, and many state and local positions are up for election. Some of you are legal citizens who are eligible to vote. Will you join me, a new legal citizen, to vote this November? Now, I do teach Introduction to U.S. Politics, so allow me to put on that hat for just a moment. If you are eligible to vote, the Washington State voter registration deadline for the November general election is October 8. Elections are governed by state laws, so if you choose to register in your home state, the dates may vary. Be sure to request an absentee ballot (which is typically a separate process) if needed, and of course, remember you may only register to vote in one location at a time and only if you have the legal status to do so.

But voting alone isn't enough. Regardless of whether or not you are a citizen of the United States, and whether you understand citizenship as legal or social, national or global, citizenship requires skills and practice. Part of your task here at Whitman is to develop as citizens of an ever-changing world. You may imagine that learning about citizenship is best accomplished by enrolling in my Introduction to U.S. Politics course. While I certainly welcome you all to come learn about how a bill becomes a law, more than the formal procedures of democratic functioning, to develop as citizens you need the habits of the liberal arts—to think broadly, to analyze rigorously, to see, and imagine, and dream creatively.

Because exercising citizenship requires engaging with the multiple dimensions of difference and exclusion, take Professor Lisa Uddin's Art History course titled Blues, Blood, Bruise: Blackness in Art, or take the Introduction to Race and Ethnic Studies. Take Rhetorical Bodies with Professor Lydia McDermott, or the Introduction to Gender Studies. Take courses in the Arts—Studio Art, Theater, Dance, Creative Writing, Music—courses that expand your ways of seeing, and being, and stretch the horizons of your imagination.

Because literature enables you to inhabit others' worlds and allows you to expand the limits of your social location—skills that are critical to the exercise of inclusive citizenship— take Introduction to Shakespeare with Professor Mary Rascho, or Writing, Exile, and Migrancy with Professor Gaurav Majumdar. Take courses in Classics, in Philosophy, in Religion. Because understanding how the past shapes our present equips us to imagine different

democratic futures, both cautioning us from repeating the exclusions of the past, while reminding us of what must be valued and fought for, take a History course on Modern Africa with Professor Jacqueline Woodfork, or Islamic Civilization with Professor Elyse Semerdjian, or take another course in Asian and Middle Eastern Studies.

If you have the Spanish language skills, take Queer Latinidades with Professor Aaron Aguilar-Ramierz. Do study a language. Take language courses in French, or Chinese, or German, or Spanish, or Japanese. Studying a new language, or deepening your existing language competencies, will not only help you communicate with others in your community and around the world, but it will also give you a window into the ways language itself, and different social and cultural contexts, influence your perspectives on the world.

Because even as nationalism appears to be on the rise in the US and elsewhere, we live in an irreversibly interconnected world in which our obligations to each as citizens extends far beyond our national borders, consider studying abroad for a semester or summer, and keep an eye out for information on the brand new concentration in Global Studies from Global Studies Director, Professor Leena Knight.

These are but a few highlights. In fact, across the curriculum, from the Humanities and Arts, to the Sciences and Social Sciences, you will find classes that equip you with the skills for citizenship. Skilled citizens must be able to read carefully and critically, to distinguish facts from opinions, must be able to interrogate assumptions, draw inferences from data, and judge the authority of arguments and sources. Citizens must be able to ask difficult questions and be curious about what is at stake. Citizens must be able to disagree, to consider differing viewpoints and strive to understand experiences, histories, and material conditions different from their own. Citizens must be able to listen, deeply and empathetically, especially when they are uncomfortable, especially when they do not understand. Citizens must be able to communicate, in writing and in person, online and, sometimes, on stage. Citizens must be able to think creatively, to imagine worlds that do not yet exist and they must be able to collaborate, to work together to bring those visions to fruition.

These are skills you should learn and practice here, both inside the classroom, and beyond it. Class of 2022, today you all become citizens of Whitman College. Do not make the mistake of confusing citizenship with consumerism. Do not devalue your education by imagining your role here as merely sampling a set of curated experiences prepared for your consumption. If you mistake your education for a product, or a crass investment, you will miss out on the unique possibilities that a liberal arts education in this place, at this moment, affords you.

Rather than thinking of yourself as a passive customer, think of yourself as an active citizen of the community that is Whitman College. A member. A contributor. A co-creator.

Along with your citizenship in this community comes rights as well as responsibilities. You will hear a fair amount about those during orientation. One of the most important of these responsibilities is social world-making. What worlds do you want to create at Whitman? Worlds of inclusion or exclusion? Worlds that promote debate and foster critical inquiry? Social worlds that uncover and embrace the differences in experiences and viewpoints that already exist in this room? As you seek to find your place here at Whitman, do not let your inclusion and belonging rest on someone else's exclusion. Be skeptical whenever someone tells you there is "a Whitman way," there are many ways and you have much say in the worlds you will create here. Please—dissent, disagree, question. At the same time, don't let anyone tell you there are "two sides," or that you need to include "the other side," there are always many more than two sides, imagine instead a kaleidoscope of interests that converge and diverge, and attend to that diversity of perspectives. Then, have the courage to take a position, articulate an argument supported by evidence and cognizant of the complexity of the question at hand.

As you develop as citizens at Whitman College, begin identifying other spheres of citizenship and engage in important political questions beyond our campus. In that vein, I invite you all to join me in dissenting to the detention of children and to the exclusions of citizenship at the center of our immigration system. But I also invite you to disagree, because that too is part of citizenship.

Class to 2022, welcome to Whitman. I wish you great joy on the exciting journey ahead. Thank you.