

Episode 29: Reflections on Rhetoric and Citizenship

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Cue music: "Firefly" by Podington Bear

KSV: Hello everyone. Karriann here, welcoming our listeners to another season of *This Rhetorical Life*! We are very excited to continue sharing with you some of the conversations we've been fortunate enough to have with scholars in the fields of rhetoric, composition, communication, and other related fields, and to keep exploring issues that we deem relevant for today's cultural moment, keeping in mind the historical ramifications that have led us here.

This is very much the case for today's episode, as we talk to Karma Chavez and Cate Palczewski, who were both part of the "Rhetoric and Citizenship" seminar at the RSA Summer Institute in Madison, Wisconsin, this past summer. The topics discussed throughout the seminar were extremely insightful and of critical importance in considering how the term citizenship operates to benefit particular groups, while other groups are forced to struggle in order to comply with the parameters established around the category.

KSV: Hosting with me today is Kate Siegfried, graduate student at the Communication and Rhetorical Studies master's program here in Syracuse University. Welcome to the show, Kate!

KLS: Hello, thanks for having me.

KSV: Kate's voice is important for this episode, because she was also a participant in the "Rhetoric and Citizenship" seminar that prompted the questions we address today.

KLS: Yeah, my motivation for attending the seminar stems from an interest in how people conceptualize themselves as public subjects and enact that through performances of citizenship, or what we understand to be "civic."

KSV: In thinking about why to use citizenship as a rhetorical framework, to start, we asked Karma Chavez, Associate Professor of Rhetoric, Politics, and Culture at University of Wisconsin-Madison, to talk about the impetus behind the creation of a seminar on Rhetoric and Citizenship.

KC: The specifics of the seminar, you know, Cate was asked to do it—Cate Palczewski—and she asked if I would do it with her, in part I think because we have somewhat different

views on the importance of citizenship as a political and theoretical concept. So, I said, "yeah!" 'cause I think Cate's really smart, and so, I was excited to work with her on something. So, we started planning--I don't know--several months ago, and, for me, my kind of project is very much anti-citizenship, not in the sense that citizenship doesn't provide us with a variety of things, but mostly because of the ways that it's a very normalizing and violent kind of project. And, theoretically, I think the scholar who reifies citizenship, as either a taken for granted, or a good, or both, ends up re-inscribing those normativities and those violences. And I think that's problematic for scholarship to do, and I have politically invested interest in that not happening, as someone who spends a lot of time with a variety of communities who aren't granted full citizenship. So, those were kind of, I guess the impetuses for doing it.

KLS: As Karma suggested, the framework of the seminar was to explore how different scholars approach the topic by making appeals to citizenship, aim to reform the category of citizenship, or argue completely against the use of citizenship. So after talking about different terms that we could take up instead, and based on the RSA Summer Institute Keynote address by Roxanne Mountford and Bill Keith in their description of rhetorical performance as civic virtue, we asked if *civic* was a term that could engage similar issues and concerns, both for political and theoretical purposes, especially given the fact that *civic* seems to function as an enactment of citizenship.

KC: I just don't understand why we have to talk about every mode of belonging as some kind of citizenship. It just doesn't make any sense to me. I'm interested in people's practices of resistance. I'm interested in people's practices of belonging. I'm interested in people's practices of--I mean community itself is a problematic word, but-- of community building. I'm interested in people's practices of world-making. I don't know why we can't talk about those things, why we have to attach everything to this concept that has this history--*and present*--so connected to processes of governmentality, so connected to processes of exclusion. I don't know why we can't imagine more broadly than that. So, for me, I think as we were talking in the seminar, the question of the *civic* or *civics* is somewhat open still for me. I'm not sure how I feel about it, but I just don't know why those terms that are so connected to a kind of western, liberal, political structure, have to be what structures our meaning-making as scholars.

KSV: Karma Chavez's use of the concept of *world making practices* is particularly striking, so we asked about how she sees those moments happening.

KC: It depends, right? Everything's context-specific, like, you know, we were talking about Black Lives Matter at the end of the session today, and, you know, for me it's like, the kinds of things that a lot of folks--especially locally here in Madison--who are affiliated with Black Lives Matter, the kinds of things they are doing are about resisting the state. But they're also about trying to create the kind of community they want to live in; and so, for example, running freedom schools, running political education for youth, creating, just like, fun sessions for people to just, like, hang out, as part of their political project; where people can figure out new relationalities; where people can think together: how would we govern ourselves, if we had the option to govern ourselves? Those are all

world-making practices, right? And they're not always what we would imagine as political. But they're also, I don't think, practices necessarily of citizenship.

KSV: As we conceive of it now.

KC: Yeah.

KLS: The other concept we wanted her to expand upon was the concept of belonging—especially in terms of cultural, geographic, geopolitical, ethnic, and racial categories that are always-already exclusionary.

KC: Yeah, I mean, one thing we have to think about is we're never going to get out of processes of exclusion. But the question is, what kinds of exclusions? Right? So, when we use the logics of the state, inevitably we're then reproducing the state's exclusions. And, I think, for me, I want to think through that a bit more before I reproduce it. Right? Every time we build a community, we're necessarily not building community with someone else. So it's not exclusion per se, but it's what kinds of exclusions. You know, I exclude white supremacists from my realm, or I try to, right? So, exclusion itself is not inherently bad, but *kinds* of exclusions. And what kinds of exclusions happen over and over again through particular logics. So when we talk about citizenship: who does citizenship exclude over and over again? Whether it's legal citizenship, social citizenship, cultural citizenship, consumer citizenship, on, and on and on; how does it reproduce the same logics of the state? Those are the kinds of questions that I'm concerned with. So, yeah, everything, every practice of belonging is necessarily, definitionally exclusionary, which isn't inherently a bad thing.

Well, even just one other quick example: so, you know, I'm a non-black person of color, right? So I'm a Chicana. There are times when people who I organize with want Black only spaces. That's excluding me. That's not a negative exclusion. And there's times when it's just people of color, and white people are excluded. There's times when it's just people who are politically aligned, no matter their race, right? There's exclusion every step of the way, but those are exclusions that have a function that is toward, you know, a certain kind of world-making. And people who are bothered by those exclusions, probably are less bothered by the exclusions of the state, I would suspect, right?

KSV: After Karma's response, I was motivated to think through the ways in which exclusionary practices are enacted by dominant groups, including the co-optation of arguments in defense of oppressed groups in order to perpetuate domination--such as the All Lives Matter response--and how these reflect an imperialist stance that white supremacy and heteropatriarchy are meant to *safeguard*.

This discussion, I believe, also applies to representational politics: how does one represent something and for whom? And how is it being received, taken up and re-circulated? But we're left with a concern about the agency of publics. One of the activities in the seminar was to discuss the differences between audience, spectator, and witnesses. Exploring these differences in a small group discussion, a question came up: Is

there, for example, a continuum of *audience* as a more general term, *spectator* as a more passive stance, perhaps not as implicated in an act, and *witnessing* as enacting judgment?

KC: I mean, I think it's messier than a continuum, right? You might shift from the position of a spectator to a witness, to sort of a judge in the sense of a critic. I think a critic is always a judge, right? That's the task of the critic, is to issue her judgment. I think, for us as scholars, we're always doing that work of judgment, if we decide to engage in that way. You know, scholars might, if you think of us, we probably actually vacillate more from spectator to judge, than we actually do witness, because witness has, for me, an overtly political piece to it. So, I just returned from Palestine, and feeling very, very convicted--even using religious language is really the only way that makes sense--convicted to bear witness to what I saw. Not necessarily to issue scholarly judgment, but just as easy, and there were other people on the trip, who saw everything--same things I saw--maybe they'll issue some scholarly judgment; I doubt they'll do any sort of political witnessing. I maybe think of them in those ways, but I think even that's a little bit... it's a little too tidy; I'm not a big fan of tidy.

KLS: The previous question also relates to the role of a scholar and an activist, and how fluid those subject positions are. Fellow seminarian, Norma Musih, explored the practices of being a scholar and an activist, as she discussed her work as an Israeli advocating for Palestinians. One might say her practice as a scholar comes through in scholarship, and written texts, but the practice of an activist is ongoing. This statement allows for an exploration of where do we—or where *should* we—position ourselves when contending with multiple, overlapping subjectivities...what do we do, or what are striving for? Is there some kind of end-goal?

KC: The question of end-goals is hard. I try not to very oriented in that direction. I'm constantly thinking about creating spaces of livability, creating spaces of flourishing. That's a kind of abstract goal, but we can do that in moments, and we can do that in the long term. So, if you think about what ways does scholarship contribute to that? Most scholarship probably doesn't contribute to that, but if you sit on that bridge of being a scholar-activist, it does. As an activist, or as a community organizer, or whatever, *as a human*, I'm constantly thinking about, how do you create spaces where people can be present? So, what does that entail? Maybe it entails you need to make sure you have food at a space, or you have child-care at a space, or you have translators at a space, or whatever it is; like if you're doing an event, right? There's a variety of ways. I'm just kind of always thinking about creating those spaces of livability, hopefully spaces of flourishing. And I personally want my scholarship to contribute to that. I'm not sure it always does. And I don't know that scholarship generally does.

KSV: This last statement makes me wonder: if scholarship doesn't provide the materiality needed to create spaces of livability, what could it afford? One of the ways in which scholarship may be able to contribute to the creation of such spaces, is to continue exploring ways in which terms can be more productively questioned, such as the troubling term of recognition, wherein agency is granted to the recognizer. Chavez instead poses a *politics of the present*....

KC: I, in my work, I really advocate for a politics of the present, as in, we shouldn't always be oriented in these other directions. There's something about the present that doesn't have to be only pragmatic, that doesn't have to be reductive, actually; which pairs nicely with what Brandzel is talking about with the politics of presence, the kind of feminist concept of presence. And I think thinking of those in relation to each other is kind of an alternative to thinking about processes of recognition, and processes of... well, yeah, processes of recognition for sure.

KSV: Yeah...

KC: I, uh, I'm a big fan of Brandzel.

KSV: Yeah.

[Both laugh]

KSV: Cool. I guess she'll get the shout out. Alright, I would love to keep talking...but.

KC: You gotta go, I know.

KSV: Sadly, I have to kind of expand the idea of rhetoric—Américan rhetoric now. But thank you so much.

KC: Yeah, for sure. Thanks for doing the show.

Cue transition music: "Has Pluck" by Podington Bear

KLS: Karriann's participation in the Expanding the idea of Américan rhetoric, that is a rhetoric that accounts for the Americas more broadly, is akin to the politics of presence that Chavez refers to in relation to Brandzel's work. We started the week reading an excerpt of Brandzel wherein she argues against citizenship. As previously mentioned, the seminar was framed around the different approaches to the category of citizenship. We're lucky to have a reflection by co-leading seminarian, Cate Palzcewski, Professor at University of Northern Iowa, whose work spans the fields of Communication and Women and Gender Studies. Similarly, she starts reflecting about the need to focus on citizenship in rhetorical studies.

CP: The evolution of the seminar was to really think in some creative ways about citizenship and what it is we teach as scholars of rhetoric.

For me, I think I'm somewhere in the middle of the three types of citizenship we talked about. If you remember, Karma and I structured the seminar around sort of appeals to citizenship, attempts to re-conceptualize citizenship, and those who argue we should discard citizenship as a structuring form. The reason that I've come to engage with the concepts of citizenship in a way that reformulates it is that as I was studying appeals to citizenship, particularly from white women's suffrage activists, I realized that their

appeals to citizenship were very much built on the back of the exclusions of others, notably black women, and that if you really want to study citizenship you can't just accept it as a universal good because so often it is built on constitutive exclusions. And I also really started thinking about this after some NCA pre-seminars and pre-conferences, where the folks who were in them, many of them studied appeals to citizenship and looked at it as a rhetorical trope and how it can be an effective strategy for mobilization, while others really focus on how some bodies are excluded from the category citizen. And it seemed to me like thinking about these two interrelate becomes a really important way to understand the rhetorics of citizenship, and then when you add in some scholars' argument, Brandzel's, for example, that Karma introduced us to, about how the very conception of citizenship is necessarily built on the exclusions of others, I think you really start asking some hard questions about how we deploy citizenship and to whose benefit we deploy it.

At this point, I'm still very much in the camp of re-signifying, re-forming, re-conceptualizing the category. It's in part because I'm not sure how else we can get at appeals to civic obligations, except through appeals to people belonging within the category citizen, but also as an appeal to people performing the obligations that they have as citizens--here this is sort of influence by [Ariella] Azoulay--I don't know how to get to the notion of the civic contract without working through the notion of the civic as it's attached to citizenship. So, that's where I'm at, although I'm increasingly persuaded by those who argue citizenship is a toxic concept and a toxic term. When I do talk about folks who appeal to citizenship, I'm very aware of how often those appeals to citizenship are built on the constitutive exclusions of others, and that if we really want to mobilize a productive, an emancipatory sense of civic obligation and of civic duty we've got to figure out a way to do it without buying into a privileging conception of citizenship.

KLS: Keeping in mind that Karma's response to the concept of civic obligation reimagines what exists outside of those boundaries, as processes of belonging, community building, and world-making, we prompted Cate to reflect how she sees these happening in the current moment.

CP: Oh, my goodness. That's a big question given this is a 5-8 minute interview. So, processes of belonging: I see, increasingly, an appeal to the human, and a rejection of categories that are meant to demarcate us, and, often categories that operate as binaries do damage to those who do not fit within them, which makes you wonder why I still attach to citizenship at all, given it itself is a disciplinary category. But I think processes of belonging very much are happening along the lines of appeals to human, and perhaps shared conditions of vulnerability that we all belong within the world, not because we're atomized individuated, rights-bearing individuals, but we belong and we long for others because we're all vulnerable to abuse by the state, to abuse by others. So, belonging is very much about seeing the imminent humanity in everyone, and attending and honoring the vulnerabilities that we share.

Community building and world making: Part of it, you're asking about it in the current moment, but the problem is we're in a bunch of different moments. I think, depending on

where one is located in the world, the type of community building one has to engage in, or the degree to which world making has to occur differs. And, so I don't that there is a single form of community building, or a single act of world making that's happening. In some ways, I think, those of us who are privileged because of our race, of whiteness, or privileged because of socioeconomic stability, or privileged because of citizenship, our challenge to see how the communities and the worlds we've built have been built on the backs and the exclusions of others. In an interesting way, and maybe this is [José Esteban] Muñoz's work on disidentification that's influencing me, maybe what we're seeing is a necessary moment of questioning of community and questioning of the world so that we see the absences of particular peoples within it. Here, I'm very much talking from my own social location, that I've had the privilege of race, and of education, and of citizenship, and challenged by the immigration politics, and am challenged by the refugee crisis that is happening in the Middle East and Europe, and by the Black Lives Matter movement, to recognize that the world I've made, or the communities I've built, were made because of the exclusions or disidentifications with others.

KSV: In response to my question of the cooptation of arguments by groups in asymmetrical power relations, and their potential effects on representational politics, Cate makes distinctions between audience, spectator, and witnesses as processes, as opposed to static terms.

CP: That's such a good question. It seems to me that the sort of push for witnessing may not be so much about enacting judgment, as it is about guarding against the co-optative speaking for others. I think, you're right, that there's a lot of ways cooptation can happen, it can be a sort of ostensibly transcendent move that all lives matter in response to black lives matter, it can also be cooptation in the form of "let me make your arguments for you," it can be attempts at cooptation saying, "make your argument this way or I won't listen"--the threat of privilege. So, for me, it seems like witnessing, in the way that we talked about it in the class, is very much about attempting to see injustices in the world from the perspective of those who are experiencing it, and seeing it as injustice; not necessarily so that one can speak for another, as much as one can stand in solidarity with, speak in solidarity with, form coalition, function as ally, function as accomplice. Witnessing is about seeing, hearing, feeling the injustices and not seeking ways to explain them away. So, could audience be the general function? We audience. But the way in which we audience, we spectate or we witness, right? Audience as noun, spectate and witness as verbs. I think it's getting us thinking about [the notion that] there are different things audiences can do, and there are different practices that audiences are trained to do. So, we live in a visual culture—check. But, the way in which we've been acculturated has been to particular viewing practices that tend toward the spectator as opposed to the witness. It tends towards the spectator who seeks to be entertained by what it's seeing, as opposed to the witness who is induced to act on the basis of what it's seeing.

Those are just musings.

KSV: Attempting to think through orientations, the processes through which we strive towards some kind of end-goal--as scholars, activists, and scholar-activists, we asked Cate to reflect on Norma Musih's activism and scholarship.

CP: Here's what's interesting, I would probably rephrase part of your question. So, thinking about Norma's incredible work, I would say her practice of witnessing comes through as a scholar, comes through in her scholarship and in her written texts, and it comes through in her practice as an activist. And, I would argue, her practices as a scholar come through in her activism and her practices as an activist come through in her scholarship. Here's the other thing too, coming out of argumentation, I'm trained to recognize that belief, conclusions, ultimate arguments are contingent, are sometimes ephemeral, are always open to change. So, there might be an end-goal of an essay, but I don't think of it as an end-goal. This is also some Kenneth Burke, where he writes about scholarship as a conversation, where we dip our oars in various points in the ongoing conversation. So, the end-goal framing isn't working for me.

Although an essay I write may be fixed in print, I don't think it's ever the last word on the subject and it's probably not my last word because there'll be responses, or there will be new information, there will be new interactions, so my conclusions might change, they're contingent on the probable, not on the certain, and I think that to have an end-goal you've got to have certainty. How I think about scholarship isn't necessarily in terms of end-goals. I think scholarship is as ongoing as activism, and activism needs this thing we call an end-goal as much as scholarship. There have to be moments of intervention and they are contingent. So, [in relation to Norma's work], the photography work, the placement of life-size images in taken lands was an end-goal. That in itself--maybe this is it! Maybe we need to be talking about the instrumental and the consummatory? As opposed to the ongoing and the end-goal. I think it makes sense to think about all these things--activism, scholarship--as having both instrumental and consummatory moments and neither of them as having end-goals, because, let's face it, if you've gotta have an end-goal in activism you're going to get frustrated pretty quickly. It takes years, decades, centuries for some of the deep social change for which we're arguing to be completed. So, yeah, I guess those are my thoughts on end-goals. But I'm not sure I'm don't with those thoughts. How's *that* to enact thinking and scholarship as a process?

KLS: As we close this episode on rhetoric and citizenship, we hope that the reflections we've presented today can help us think through the ways in which we engage citizenship as a mode of belonging, how we enact scholarship, and to think of these processes as interconnected.

KSV: Thanks to Karma and Cate for taking the time to speak with us. And thank you all for listening!

Cue music: "Por Supuesto" by Podington Bear

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