



**Situated Citizenship:  
The Americas in a Global Context**

Convocation Address

2011

Grant H. Cornwell

President

**Introduction**

Welcome. Welcome faculty and staff of the College. Welcome students. Welcome alumni, members of the community, and guests. Today we begin, officially and in earnest, a new year of liberal inquiry. It is an honor, a privilege, and a joy to launch our noble work together.

Let me extend a special welcome to those students, faculty, and administrative staff members for whom this is their **first** new beginning at The College of Wooster. Know that you are joining a community of learners that has been committed to the enterprise of liberal education for over 140 years.

Today I will share thoughts about our mission, our common purpose as a liberal arts college, and your role in that mission. I think it is important to remain mindful that our work here together is a **social investment into the future**, not just the future of our students, but of global civil society. This is why we are gathered here. It is why The College of Wooster was founded in 1866 and why it exists today. Though we have a variety of roles in this undertaking, we are each here to engage in this important work in the only way it can be done: **together**.

### **Our Common Purpose**

What is our purpose? Why do we exist? What are we doing here? What justifies our existence, gives purpose to our gathering? It is this:

The College of Wooster is a community of independent minds, working together to prepare students to become leaders of character and influence in an interdependent global community.

That's it. This is why I am here. It is why I get up in the morning and it is what I think about when I go to bed at night. This is why the deans, the librarians, and the coaches are here. This is why all of the wonderful people are here who prepare your food, who take care of the campus and your residence halls, who manage

the technology and business of the College. They are all part of this noble, common project. It is why they have my utmost respect and deserve yours.

Most importantly, this is why your professors are here. They are a brilliant and committed group of people, each of whom has chosen to be at Wooster, devoted to liberal inquiry. Their professional purpose, their calling, is to help you graduate from Wooster with greatly expanded capacities as creative and independent thinkers, with exceptional abilities to ask important questions, research complex issues, solve problems, and communicate new knowledge and insight.

### **Situated Citizenship**

In the remainder of my remarks I want to talk about the upcoming Wooster Forum series, what it is, why we do it, and why it matters to your education.

The Wooster Forum is a thematic series of intellectual and cultural events that we offer each fall, the purpose of which is to enrich our campus with seeds of provocative ideas, theories, insights, and perspectives. If we are successful, you will be inspired, challenged, provoked, and be given cause to think about things in ways you haven't before.

This year's Forum is titled "The Americas: Contact and Consequences," and it is a multi-disciplinary series of speakers, art exhibits, and performances. As Dean Kreuzman, who has worked diligently with others to create the series, puts it: "Our objective is to illustrate the economic, political, environmental, and cultural connections between the American hemisphere and other parts of the world."

Most of you are Americans, and those of you who are not – and we are so pleased to welcome you to our campus and to our community – have chosen to pursue your studies in the Americas. But what is America, as a space, as a collection of nations, as an artifact of both geology and history?

Let me first clear away a linguistic confusion. Many of us in the United States **of** America, and this is true outside of the United States as well, will tend to refer to the nation where we live as "America" and to ourselves as "Americans". That is, in this usage "America" is coterminous with The United States of America. But of course, our Canadian and Mexican neighbors as well as those from throughout Central and South America will sometimes remind us that they are also "Americans". I want to suggest that this equivocation of the term "America" is not simply faulty for its lack of precision, but that its usage is one of a host of

examples of an over-reaching self-perception, one could even say a colonizing mindset, so prevalent in the U.S. as to seem natural or normal. I am reminded of Michael Jackson's song, "We Are the World." But we are not, of course; we are not even the continent.

So the first thing to realize is that the Americas are a geological construction that has, through history, become a social construction of many, many disparate nations. The second thing to recall is that this construction was not called "America" by any of the many peoples who lived here prior to European colonization. The term "America" appears to have been coined by a German cartographer in 1507 who referred to these continents by citing their purported "discoverer", the Italian explorer and cartographer Amerigo Vespucci (1454-1512) who made two trips to the New World as a navigator and claimed to have discovered it.<sup>i</sup>

I have always had a bit of trouble with this notion of "discovery." I mean, the term suggests that one is uncovering something previously hidden or unknown. But what about the centuries of tens of millions of people who lived here before Europeans arrived. Presumably the existence of their land was not news to them.

In any case, my point is that the history and meaning of the Americas are ripe for critical interrogation, and that is what this College is here to promote.

After European conquest of the Americas, of course, this land became a patchwork of colonies. Most of the people who lived here – the Native Americans, as we call them – were killed through disease or genocide, and most of those who have survived have, over time, mixed and mingled with those of European descent.

What this means is that the current population of the Americas in general and the United States of America in particular is a tapestry woven of overlapping diasporas. Let me explain. A diaspora is a dispersion of a people from their homeland, and it usually connotes movement of a people that is forced, unwanted, or unwarranted. Its original use was in reference to Jewish people being driven out of Israel, but it now is used to refer to all manner of mass movements of people out of their homelands.

The reason it is conceptually important in understanding all of the Americas in general and the United States of America in particular is that the history of the peopling of this so-called “New World” is a history of overlapping diasporas. Most of the European colonists who settled here were motivated, if not

driven, to leave Europe due to economic or religious repression. Infamously, people of African descent who came to the new World during the colonial era were stolen from their homelands and sold as slaves. I could talk about Irish and Chinese diasporas in the Americas, and so on. The best historical account of this global peopling of the Americas is given by the scholar Ronald Takaki in many of his works, the most famous of which is *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America*. Dr. Takaki, who chaired the Ethnic Studies Department at Berkeley, was a College of Wooster graduate.

Thus for almost no one here today are the Americas your ancestral homeland. We are not from here, in a sense; our ancestors left the places they were from for reasons that in most cases were not happy or even freely chosen, and they took possession of homelands that belonged to others.

Consider the example of Edwige Danticat, author of the book read by you first-year students and your faculty, *Brother, I'm Dying*. Ms. Danticat is a person of African descent, as we say. What does that mean? She was born in Haiti of Haitian parents. Though I am not certain of Danticat's particular heritage, it is reasonable to imagine that her ancestors, as those of so many African Americans, were stolen from Africa several generations

ago and sold as slaves. Probably through a circuitous route of being bought and sold as chattel, they wound up in Haiti, and were forced to into the brutal labor of growing sugar for the French colonists. Through the course of a political history that would take a long time to unravel, Haiti, one of the poorest and most destitute nations on earth, was also the first postcolonial Black nation to cast off slavery and declare its independence from the European colonial regime.

In *Brother, I'm Dying*, we learn that many Haitians, as is true of many people throughout the Caribbean, belong to doubly diasporic communities; Danticat is a person of African descent whose immediate ancestors perhaps lived in Haiti for generations, but who now has family living in Haitian communities in New York.

Questions of citizenship or nationhood often bring up vexed issues of belonging. Imagine Danticat at a border being asked by a customs agent where she is from. Imagine she were to answer existentially and historically, rather than read off her political papers. What would she say? What would you say?

Let me zoom in on the United States **of** America for a minute and look at its composition through a more contemporary lens. You have a mental map of the 50 states that comprise the nation,

I am sure. But what makes us a nation? Who belongs here? Is this a different question than who can claim citizenship? You would be hard-pressed to point to those markers typically definitive of nationhood: we do not have a common religion, a common ethnicity, a common language, or even, if you look beneath the surface, anything one could identify as a common culture. You could make the case that what defines us as a nation is our common legal standing as citizens, but that is both fraught and flimsy.

In a fascinating essay by Orlando Patterson called, “Ecumenical America: Global Culture and the American Cosmos” he makes a very compelling case that sociologically, culturally, and even economically, the contemporary U.S. can better be understood divided into a network of regional cosmoses each of which extends beyond the U.S. border.<sup>ii</sup> Patterson says:

The regional cosmos is best conceived of as a system of flows between a metropolitan center and a set of politically independent satellite countries within... a "transnational space."(9) People, wealth, ideas, and cultural patterns move in both directions, influencing both the metropolitan center as well as the peripheral areas, although asymmetrically.

He devotes much of his essay to the analysis of what he calls the West Atlantic regional cosmos, the cultural capital of which is Miami, but whose reach extends throughout the Caribbean, Central, and South America. He says, “Miami is no longer an American city: it is a West Atlantic city, more vital to, and more dependent on, the needs of the circum-Caribbean societies and cultures than it is on the other sectors of the U.S. economy. It is the political, cultural, social, and economic hub and heart of the Caribbean” (12).

He goes on to talk about the Tex-Mex regional cosmos of the Southwest, the Pacific Rim cosmos of the Northwest, and so on. His most general point, and the reason I bring this up, is that the very idea of the United States as a nation is contested.

I hope you will debate the merits of this framework in your residence halls and classrooms, tonight and throughout the Wooster Forum series. Why? Because part of what it means to be liberally educated is to have well-reasoned opinions about your situation and those of others in a global-historical context. Hence the title of these remarks, “Situated Citizenship: The Americas in a Global Context.” All citizenship is situated in space and time, including your own. I believe that one of the qualities of liberally educated persons is that they are critically aware of

their own situations – how they are situated politically, economically, culturally, politically, and racially – in a context of their relations to the situation of others.

I think this is important not just because this is what it means to be sophisticated and cosmopolitan, but because each and every situation is ethically laden. That is, you all come to this education with a set of rights and responsibilities that are inherent in your humanity, and these you share in common. But you each – individually – come here situated with a kind of ethical particularity that is defined by your network of relationships, historical and current, that you need to be mindful of as you make your way through the world.

Let me make this a bit more concrete. I make my way through the world as a tall white male of European descent who is also a U.S. citizen, comparatively economically advantaged, married, and a father. Each of these markers of my identity are ethically laden in that they situate me in a social context and mean that I have certain rights and responsibilities, certain privileges and challenges that attach – legally, culturally, and socially – to the qualities that define my particularity. Whether they confer social advantage or disadvantage, most of them are accidental, unearned, and undeserved.

I am suggesting that you all come to this opportunity to pursue your education with a certain commonality inherent in your humanity, but also with specific particularities that define, in some instances empower, and in some instances constrain you.

That is a big claim, I know, and I invite you to explore its merits and criticize it as you will. After all, that is what we are here to do.

Where are you from? Where do you belong? What rights and duties, liabilities and privileges, opportunities and limitations inhere in your identity? How have you benefited or been disadvantaged by your race, your ancestry, your gender, your socio-economic status, or any of the other socially constructed markers of identity that history and contemporary culture favor or disfavor? How are you situated in a global context, and what does your situation imply for your education and life course?

These are some of the questions Danticat raises in her book, that the Wooster Forum will raise for your consideration, and that we suggest you would do well to think about in the course of your liberal education.

So it is time to get on with it. Whatever your particularities, you have in common the exceptional privilege of pursuing a liberal education here and now. Therefore, with great respect for

our common purpose and profound optimism for our common future, the 142<sup>nd</sup> year of liberal education at The College of Wooster is hereby convened.

---

<sup>i</sup> america. (n.d.). Online Etymology Dictionary. Retrieved August 05, 2011, from Dictionary.com website: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/america>

<sup>ii</sup> Orlando Patterson. Ecumenical America: Global Culture and the American Cosmos. World Policy Journal, Summer, 1994.