Sonya Sotomayor: “My Beloved World”

A talk by Assistant Professor of Politics Amanda Hollis Brusky

Good evening Class of 2019. Tonight, I have one goal. That goal is to convince you that your freshman book - this book; this book that you’ve spent the last few months diligently and dutifully reading, highlighting, underlining, posting about on Facebook, tweeting about and discussing with your friends and family at the beach – that this book, despite the lovely title and the smiling, disarming portrait of Sonia Sotomayor we see on the cover - is actually pretty radical.

I think it’s radical in two ways: first, the very idea that a sitting Supreme Court Justice would write so openly and so intimately about her own life, to open up in a way that is entirely uncharacteristic of this tradition-bound and closed institution – an institution that, for all intents and purposes, is shrouded in mystery, cloaked in secrecy. An institution where the Justices deliberate in secret – there is no written or oral record of their deliberations, no cameras allowed in the courtroom. Where the law clerks take a vow never to reveal what they have heard or seen in the Justices’ chambers. This is an institution where nine men and women emerge in dramatic fashion from behind a velvet curtain clad in long black robes to deliver their rulings on matters such as access to health care, marriage equality, citizenship status, employment discrimination, and religious freedom – just to name a few. The idea that Sotomayor would write this memoir, and do so during her first few years on the Supreme Court, is radical. It is ground-breaking, it is novel, and it is radical.

Now, as you know, My Beloved World is not about what happens after Sotomayor becomes a Supreme Court Justice – she doesn’t comment on cases, or discuss the inner workings of the Supreme Court, and she doesn’t comment on her fellow Justices, about whom – and I don’t think I can stress this point enough – we know almost nothing. So Sotomayor is not breaking any rules by writing My Beloved World. But she is – and here’s what I think makes it radical – redefining the terms of the relationship between the High Court and the public – she is coming down from the bench, taking off her robe, she is approaching us as a human being with a human story to tell. She is also the only (and probably the only ever) Supreme Court Justice to go on ABC’s daytime talk show The View. This really struck me when I saw this so I want to play a clip from that appearance here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ALrejfMH2Os

According to a very trusted source (Wikipedia) ABC’s The View has anywhere between 3-4 million viewers. 3-4 million viewers. Let me put that in perspective: a Supreme Court Justice, touring around making speeches at law schools and professional associations in between terms, maybe reaches five to ten thousand people a year – and nearly all of those people, I want to emphasize, are law students, law professors or practicing lawyers. 3-4 million people watched Sonia Sotomayor on The View – many of whom, I guarantee, had almost no sense or real understanding of the Supreme Court, what it is and what it does. And Sonia Sotomayor’s face – that of a Latina woman – is the first and maybe the only face that they will ever associate with
the Supreme Court. If you’re not persuaded that that’s radical, then I hope you can at least agree that it’s very powerful.

But there is a second way that this book is radical and it has to do with the purpose of the book itself. Though told through the deeply personal – through stories, anecdotes, and recollections – I think this book is actually deeply political; and purposefully so. In it, for example, we can find both an explicit and implicit argument for affirmative action – active recruitment of underrepresented minorities in higher education – as a vehicle for access.

ACCESS –

As Sotomayor describes it, the purpose of writing *My Beloved World*, is to make her example accessible, to make her path accessible to others like her – those similarly situated, those growing up in poverty, those growing up in immigrant families, adult children of alcoholics and dysfunctional families, first generation college students, those with childhood diseases and health struggles. In this way, her message is about access – about trying to redefine in people’s minds who can and who should have access to positions of power and influence and what the consequences of that are – both for individuals and for entire groups of people.

We often use the metaphor of the ladder, of climbing the ladder – whether it be the corporate ladder or the socio-economic ladder – to describe success in America. Don’t believe me? Google it. You will find dozens of inspirational poster quotes that you can put above your dorm room bed. I’ve selected two such poster images containing inspirational quotes from equally renowned and respected political and philosophical figures – Ayn Rand and Arnold Schwarzenegger. [READ]. You *know* you want this one in your dorm room!

The assumption behind these quotes and behind this metaphor is that there is a ladder, it is accessible to anyone and everyone and all we need do as Americans is work hard and persevere and we will slowly climb up that ladder towards success. “Just take your little girly hands out of your pockets and climb already!” (Arnold voice). Or, in the case of Ayn Rand, just be a superior human like Jon Galt and once you’ve reached the top of the ladder, bend the world to your will and we will all be better off for it. Sorry. That’s my *Atlas Shrugged* in one sentence. I should’ve given you a spoiler alert warning.

Well, as we all know, the reality of social and economic mobility and of success in this country is much more complicated than that – it’s complicated by our legacy of slavery, of policies and practices that worked to exclude large groups of people – women and minorities – from the political realm for most of our country’s existence, by a public education system that 61 years after the decision in *Brown v Board of Education* still remains largely segregated, separate and unequal, and by tax policies that are upwardly distributive, making it nearly impossible for those in the most impoverished areas of our country unable to even find that ladder of success, let alone climb it.
Given Sotomayor’s sharp mind, her determination, and her perseverance, there was never any doubt that she could climb the ladder. She didn’t walk around life with her hands in her pockets, to once again quote the misguided wisdom of Arnold Schwarzenegger. But she might have never found it – or found such a powerful express ladder such as her Princeton education would become – were it not for her friend Kenny Moy, the Bronx born Chinese American who had against all odds found and scaled that Ivy-covered wall into another world. In that fateful phone call Kenny told Sotomayor to, “Try for the Ivy League.” So she did. Reflecting on her journey to Princeton and how it so vastly differed from the majority of her classmates’ journeys, Sotomayor writes, “The typical undergraduate had been guided to Princeton by relatives, by prep school guidance counselors, or else by teachers savvy about the system. Minority kids, however, had no one but their few immediate predecessors: the first to scale the ivy-covered wall against the odds, just one step ahead of ourselves, we would hold the ladder steady for the next kid with more talent than opportunity.”

Now, if you ask me, I think that last part would make for a much better – and far more realistic – inspirational dorm room poster. For your convenience, I have put together a mock-up of one here. I’m open to suggestions, for ideas about how to make the graphics pop better. Maybe I should add a cat in there somewhere. If you’re interested, come see me in my office. I’m sure we can work out a deal.

What Sotomayor did not fully understand at the time she was applying to colleges, but what she now admits was critical to her own success – to gaining access to this high powered ladder, this fast track to success – was the existence of affirmative action programs in higher education – programs that consciously target, recruit, and work to retain groups of students that are or have been historically excluded from or underrepresented in higher education – chief among them, blacks, latinos, and women.

As Sotomayor writes in Chapter 17, p 146, “In high school, I was vaguely aware that affirmative action existed, but I had no idea how or to what extent it worked in practical terms. When the two Hispanic students met me at the station in New Haven to show me around Yale, I was inclined to see their ethnicity as more a matter of pleasant coincidence than a programmatic effort. At most, I figured, they were being nice to one of their own kind, rather in the way Ken had encouraged me to consider Princeton and the other Ivy League colleges, not out of any political agenda. My innocence was the result of being unaware of just how few Latinas there would be in a place like Princeton, or for that matter that my being one could have figured so much in my admission.”

Princeton, as she admits, opened up doors that would never have been available to her had she stayed and gone to city college in NY or to SUNY Albany, where her high school sweetheart and eventual husband, Kevin, ended up. Sotomayor had incredible faculty mentors, a campus job where she learned basic computer skills, avenues for involvement in issues that mattered to her on campus and off campus and, most importantly, the brand the Ivy League credential. She
graduated summa cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa and was accepted into the top law school in the country.

But for all the doors that being at Princeton opened up for Sotomayor, all the benefits she reaped on account of the school’s affirmative action outreach and admission policies, with these benefits came other burdens. And Sotomayor does not shy away from talking about them. Recall her uncomfortable exchange with the high school nurse after receiving a “likely” from the Princeton admissions office. The nurse asked her, in an accusatory tone, “can you explain to me how you got a ‘likely’ and the two top-ranking girls in the school only got a possible? As Sotomayor writes upon reflection, “Her question would hang over me not just that day but for the next several years, while I lived the day-to-day reality of affirmative action.” Then, while at Princeton Sotomayor describes finding the Third World Center during her sophomore year, a space of “psychic refuge in an environment where an undercurrent of hostility often belied the idyllic surface.” She recounts letters routinely published in the Daily Princetonian lamenting the presence of affirmative action students. In what I think is one of the most powerful passages in the book, Sotomayor writes:

“There were vultures circling, ready to dive when we stumbled. THE pressure to succeed was relentless, even if self-imposed out of fear and insecurity. For we all felt that if we did fail, we would be proving the critics right, and the doors that had opened just a crack to let us in would be slammed shut again” (p. 145).

Sotomayor is also honest about the amount of remedial work she had to do to get up to speed - studying and catching up on the basics of grammar over the summer, reading on her own books her classmates had engaged with in high school – Huckleberry Finn and Pride and Prejudice, trying to as she writes “fill in the gaps” of knowledge from her upbringing. She writes that at some point during her Princeton career she realized that she would need to be “a student for life,” always playing catch up and always anxious that someone might discover the gaps in her knowledge. She doesn’t write this in a begrudging way. In fact, she says it has actually been her pleasure to be one, “long after the virtue has ceased to be such a necessity.”

For all her honesty surrounding the burdens Sotomayor has faced and carried throughout her education and professional career, burdens that stemmed from her status as an affirmative action student at Princeton – I still read My Beloved World as a powerful endorsement of affirmative action – it is an argument for access, for redefining how we think about and understand merit, for not mistaking opportunity for talent, and not letting the lack of the former (opportunity) cause us to overlook and misevaluate the latter (talent). It is not an argument from principle, grounded in constitutional or moral theory – though that argument is available to her. It is an argument grounded in Sotomayor’s lived experience and the experiences of those around her.

Returning to my inspirational dorm room poster here, I read My Beloved World – at least in part – as Sotomayor’s effort to hold the ladder steady for the next generation; to make sure programs
like the one that found and targeted her – whether or not we call them affirmative action – are in place and accessible to the next generation. As a Supreme Court Justice, Sotomayor is discouraged and even forbidden from engaging in politics and political action. She can’t openly endorse policies or political positions, she can’t align herself with interest groups or social movements. In fact, in the next segment of that clip I played from The View, Barbara Walters tries to pin her down and get her to say “Yes, I endorse affirmative action programs.” She strategically dodges the question and reminds Barbara that she is not allowed to comment on cases pending or that might come before the Supreme Court (which is basically the entire universe of issues, by the way!).

So while Sotomayor can’t outright say, “Yes, I endorse affirmative action programs,” while sitting on the Supreme Court what she can do is write a book – this book and to go onto The View; to tell her story to as many people as will listen - to tell her story to you.

There is so much more to discuss in this book. For example, your discussion leaders and I talked on Wednesday about the role empathy plays in the memoir – Sotomayor talks about empathy, about listening and understanding as critical to her survival as a young child; she talks about how she learned to pick up on cues from the adults around her, many of whom she considered unreliable. She also talks about empathy as critical to her professional success; to connecting with a jury – recall Sotomayor’s retelling during Forensics Club in high school of the tragic story of Kitty Genovese and the bystanders in her neighborhood who heard her screams as she was being attacked and did nothing. She asked the jury to imagine themselves as those bystanders, hearing those screams. Sotomayor also talks about empathy – or lack thereof – in the powerful analogy she draws between her neighborhood in the Bronx and William Golding’s Lord of the Flies. Reflecting on that book all summer, she remembers asking the question, “How do things break down?” Thinking about an episode she witnessed between a cop and a fruit vendor in her neighborhood – where the cop takes two full bags of fruits from the vendor in exchange for continued protection of the area – Sotomayor writes, “How could the cop not imagine what two large shopping bags full of fruit might measure in a poor vendor’s life, maybe a whole day’s earnings? Was it so hard to see himself in the other man’s shoes?” And, in reflecting on that episode, she answers the question that had haunted her all summer: “I was fifteen years old when I understood how it is that things break down: people can’t imagine someone else’s point of view.” You can read this, and I do read this, as a prescription for more empathy as political practice – empathy as that missing component of our social fabric, the lack of which causes community and social order to break down.

Finally, there is a lot that I connect with personally in this book – and maybe you do, too. Like Sotomayor, I came from a very tumultuous home life. I grew up with an alcoholic parent, though she did eventually get sober before the disease could kill her. Like Sotomayor, I sought refuge, safe haven from the storms at home, in the homes of my friends, my aunts and uncles, and of my grandmother (who I call Grammie not Abuelita). And, like Sotomayor, I am a first generation college student. Her comments about her own fears surrounding the gaps in her knowledge and
having to be a student for life, fearful that at any moment someone might discover her and call her out – I felt those fears, I lived those fears. In some ways, I still do.

But there are other parts of Sotomayor’s story I can only imagine through her telling – I did not grow up in the projects; I was never bullied, beaten up, or discriminated against on account of my race; I have never lived with or struggled through a childhood disease or serious health issue. And this is where I think this whole book can be an education in empathy for those who don’t relate to all or any of her struggles.

One final, final thing: as I’m sure you have heard by now, Justice Sonia Sotomayor will be joining us here on campus on October 22nd. I have been given the great honor, but also the very weighty job of facilitating the conversation; of crafting and asking questions of the Justice. And I want that conversation to be as interesting to and inclusive of as many voices as possible here at Pomona College. So I’m asking for your help. We have already established that each one of you in the Class of 2019 has diligently and carefully read, highlighted, underlined, blogged about, journal-ed about, and discussed My Beloved World with all your friends on social media, right? Right. So, the icing on the cake will be your break out discussion groups with your faculty leaders tonight. At the end of those sessions, your discussion leader will pass out notecards. On that notecard, I want you to write a question for the Justice. What would you ask Sotomayor if she were in front of you right now? You can add your name or submit it anonymously. There are a few ground rules, questions that are out of bounds – we can’t ask her about any past cases, any cases currently pending before the Court, or about any future cases or issues that might come before the Supreme Court. We also cannot ask her outright about affirmative action. So, given that, what else would you ask Sonia Sotomayor if she were in front of your right now? If you don’t feel inspired tonight or if you think of additional questions in the coming weeks, feel free to send them to me via email or Tweet them to me (in 140 characters or less) at @HollisBrusky.

Thanks and once again, welcome Class of 2019. I look forward to continuing the conversation with you tonight and throughout your four years here at Pomona College.