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What's Writing Got to Do with It?: Citizen Wisdom, Civil Rights Activism, and 21st Century Community Literacy

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What's Writing Got to Do with It?: Citizen Wisdom, Civil Rights Activism, and 21st Century Community Literacy

Michelle Hall Kells

This article examines what a pedagogy of public rhetoric and community literacy might look like based on an understanding of twentieth century Mexican American civil rights rhetoric. The inductive process of examining archival materials and conducting oral histories informs this discussion on the processes and challenges of gaining civic inclusion. I argue that writing can be both a healing process and an occasion for exercising agency in a world of contingency and uncertainty. To illustrate, I describe several key events shaping the evolution of the post-World War II Mexican American civil rights movement in New Mexico. Taking a case study approach, I begin this chapter by examining the civic discourses of one prominent New Mexico leader in the post-World War II civil rights movement: Vicente Ximenes. As a leader, Ximenes confronted critical civil rights issues about culture and belonging for over fifty years beginning in Albuquerque, New Mexico. It is a historical moment worth revisiting. First, I set the stage for this examination about writing, citizenship, and civic literacy by analyzing two critical rhetorical moments in the life of this post World War II civil rights activist. Secondly, I connect the Ximenes legacy to a growing movement at the University of New Mexico and the ways that we are making critical responses to current issues facing our local communities in New Mexico. By triangulating social acts of literacy, currently and historically, this article offers organizing principles for Composition teachers and advocates of community literacy serving vulnerable communities in their various spheres of practice.

Marking the ten year anniversary of 9/11, the Albuquerque Cultural Conference recently took as its theme: "Cultural Survival in Difficult Times" to signal the stark reality that our vulnerable communities (locally and nationally) are becoming increasingly fragile economically, culturally, and politically. This post 9/11 kairotic moment calls to mind the concept of *solastalgia* or what Glen Albrecht terms human ecosystem distress. Albrecht defines *solastalgia* as the embodied effects of isolation and the inability to exercise agency over place. *Solastalgia* can be mapped to such endemic social conditions as drug abuse, physical illness, mental illness, and suicide. I believe that we as a nation have been trying to resolve a kind of collective *solastalgia* or post-traumatic stress syndrome for the past decade. Moreover, the kind of border tensions that we are facing today, the current anti-immigration hysteria, and the omnipresent English Only movement are historically connected and politically relevant to the current work in public writing and community literacy education (Kells, Balester, and Villanueva; Kells "Mapping"). Writing can be both a

healing process and an occasion for exercising agency in a world of contingency and uncertainty.

Literacy and civic engagement figure prominently in issues of agency as do issues of higher education access and Composition Studies as a gateway to enfranchisement. If the past twenty-five years of scholarship in Rhetoric and Composition has taught us anything, it is that there is no panacea, no single prescription for teaching literacy practice. Composition Studies is not a science. And I don't say that disparagingly. I do not mean to negate the kind of work that calls for the use of scientific and quantitative methods. It just seems that research on literacy practice and communicative action resists absolute predictability and generalizability. Language leaks. My own earliest language attitude studies adopted empirical research methods and applied a quantitative interpretative frame to issues related to ethnolinguistic identity (Kells, "Leveling;" "Linguistic Contact Zones"). And much to my surprise, I have found those early fragments of discovery circulated and cited in our field. The key word here is surprise. The consequences of writing myself into and out of dissonance never cease to surprise me (Kells and Balester, "Voices of the Wild Horse Desert"). The hermeneutics of research can help position us as scholars and teachers to attend to phenomena otherwise invisible to us. Moreover, research and writing can take us by surprise. Cultivating literacy practice is not about prescription-writing but making discoveries, sometimes and often by accident.

It is with that same kind of inquisitive wonder and interrogative impulse that I have applied another set of questions and interpretive frames to issues related to ethnolinguistic identity and civic engagement. For the past ten years, I have been asking: what a pedagogy of public rhetoric and community literacy might look like based on an understanding of twentieth century Mexican American civil rights rhetoric. The inductive process of examining archival materials and conducting oral histories has helped me to pay attention to the processes and challenges of gaining civic inclusion. As a result, I have been imagining a program, a national consortium that examines different civic discourses and the premises of rhetorical agency embedded in them (Kells "Rhetorical Imagination"; Rose and Paine). Why don't we, why haven't we, why couldn't we cultivate think tanks for civic engagement and help students analyze and generate texts that represent their spheres of belonging? Language is how we transmit culture—the implicit codes and expectations that hold us together as families, as neighborhoods, as institutions. Recently Marilyn A. Martinez, a self-published writer in Albuquerque, New Mexico reminded me of the intrinsic, humanizing value of language and the role of literacy in communities beyond the university. Our meeting was nothing less than serendipitous; the lessons learned were far deeper than expected.

Disabling Fictions and Community Literacy

I have been troubled by disabling fictions within literacy education for a number of years. I am reminded in the most unlikely places why this particular intellectual pre-occupation, this predilection for confronting "disabling fictions," has a place in academe. The story begins on a Southwest Airlines flight from Austin, Texas to Albuquerque in late August 2010, the tail-end of a year-long sabbatical nibbled away

by the demands of my department and university. I was returning home from a trip to the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library to complete archival research on my current book project, *Vicente Ximenes & LBJ's Great Society: The Rhetoric of Mexican American Civil Rights Reform*. It was the proverbial eleventh hour. Packing in what I had hoped to do at the beginning of my sabbatical at the very end. It was what I wanted to do *before* New Mexico's State Secretary of Higher Education called me at home a year ago as I was just beginning to settle into the lovely calm of my sabbatical. The State Secretary of Higher Education wanted me to help him revamp the state's core curriculum because of the role I had played at the University of New Mexico mobilizing the Writing Across Communities initiative for the previous five years. It was a rare opportunity—a worthy risk.

The first six months of my sabbatical were spent scrambling as chair of the UNM Core Curriculum Task Force. We finally put a bow on the final task force report in May 2010; then I promptly jumped into writing the Ximenes book over the summer. When I left for Texas in August, I had five working chapters under construction and needed just one last sweep through the LBJ Presidential Library archives to wrap up the primary research. I was feeling pretty single-minded when I met the person who would unequivocally re-affirm my commitment to the nebulous notion of "Writing Across Communities."

I sat in the aisle seat on my return flight to Albuquerque, the middle seat between the woman at the window and me was empty. We both sat quietly for the duration of the flight, both of us writing in notebooks with pencils. I was reflecting on my findings at the LBJ Library. We both ordered ginger ales to drink. I passed her the glass from the flight attendant and noticed the fingers of my fellow passenger that made grasping the flimsy plastic cup awkward and difficult. Precarious.

The descent into Albuquerque was bumpy as it always is during the summer monsoon season. The turbulence flying over the Sandia Mountains was especially troubling this day. I closed up my things as the woman's notebook slipped off her table onto the floor between us. I reached down and handed it back to her. She thanked me graciously. It was then that I noticed that her speech was slightly halting which she corrected by repeating her sentences deliberately, slowly for my benefit. As the plane pitched over the mountains, we slipped into a casual conversation. "I like to write," she confided. "I write all the time." And it was at that point that I became very interested and wanted to hear her story. "I wrote a book," she told me. "My name is Marilyn Martinez." I thought I heard her say, "The title of my book is 'Battling Debasement.'"

I have to admit that I had difficulty hearing and understanding the words over the engine noise, and I struggled to string together the details. I did realize, however, that Marilyn was talking about battling the stigma of developmental disabilities. I also realized that Marilyn was managing multiple developmental challenges indexed by her speech as well as large and small motor skills. I wasn't sure which disabilities that Marilyn was living with but within some deep intuitive place of my consciousness, I knew they were serious. With the engine noise and the soft modulation of her voice, I couldn't catch everything. I remember this though. Marilyn invited me to attend her book signing during the following week. "We're going to have cantaloupe, and strawberries, and watermelon," she explained. "I love watermelon, do you like

watermelon? The director of the Disabilities Center says we can have watermelon because this will be my special day.” I had to make a snap decision at this moment. Accept or politely decline this invitation. I took my UNM business card from my purse and handed it to Marilyn. “Please email me and send me the details for your book signing.”

On Monday morning, an email message from Marilyn was waiting for me with the details of her book release celebration. In between meetings and classes of that first week of the semester, I attended the book signing for Marilyn Martinez’s, *Battling the Basement*, a chronicle of her journey with Cerebral Palsy. And I ate watermelon and strawberries with Marilyn and her friends at the UNM Center for Development and Disability. There was joy. And after nearly fifteen years in the field of Rhetoric & Composition, I learned a lot about writing and agency that day. I will let Marilyn speak for herself. In the preface of her book, she explains:

Basement Mentality is when people don’t want you to grow in the world. You want to get out of the Basement by going one step higher, but some people want to keep you there in the comfort zone. They don’t want you out of that box. You are only allowed to be on the one level where they can protect you—and no higher. But the Basement isn’t for me. I have always wanted to get out and go higher, to live my own independent life.¹

In a word, this is what education is all about: self-authorization. This is the key idea behind the Writing Across Communities initiative at the University of New Mexico: invigorating the public sphere, cultivating civic literacy on behalf of our most vulnerable communities—creating discursive spaces for historically excluded student populations.

And so it is language, community literacy, civil rights, citizenship, and belonging that will frame this article. Literacy can be a generative act of resistance to the indignities and despair of marginalization. In this post-9/11 America, Marilyn Martinez reminds us that there are many different groups assigned to many different kinds of civic “basements.” There are entire communities literally and metaphorically kept underground, under-served, and under-represented. So the thorny questions around which I hang all these ideas are: what role does the rhetoric of disputation play in resolving the persistent question of who belongs in America (Beasley)? How might we engage the dissonances of (intellectual, geographical, linguistic) border-crossing in the hermeneutics of citizenship?

To illustrate, I wish to describe several key events shaping the evolution of the post-World War II Mexican American civil rights movement in New Mexico. Taking a case study approach, I begin this article by examining the civic discourses of one prominent New Mexico leader in the post-war movement: Vicente Ximenes. As a leader, Ximenes confronted critical civil rights issues about culture and belonging over fifty years ago beginning in Albuquerque, New Mexico. It is a historical moment worth revisiting.

First, I begin setting the stage for this examination about writing, citizenship, and civic literacy by analyzing two critical rhetorical moments in the life of this post-World War II civil rights activist. Secondly, I connect the Ximenes legacy to a

growing movement at the University of New Mexico and the ways that we are making critical responses to current issues facing our local communities in New Mexico. By triangulating social acts of literacy, currently and historically, I offer some organizing principles for Composition teachers and advocates of community literacy serving vulnerable communities in their spheres of practice. The liminal spaces and geopolitical borders in and beyond the Composition classroom are the literacy sites that most concern me here in New Mexico where I teach.

Immigration and the National Imaginary

Border anxieties continue to ignite across the country. Perturbations in the national imaginary were dramatically illustrated in May 2010 when several California high school students wore American flag t-shirts to *cinco de mayo* celebrations. In a strange post-9/11 American patriotic reversal, the students were expelled from school for promoting incendiary rhetorical statements. Wearing the American flag was grounds for expulsion as their Latino classmates donned the colors of the Mexican flag. The rogue demonstrators violated not only good taste but the boundaries of political tolerance at Live Oak High School. Against the backdrop of the recent immigration law SB 1070 enacted by the state of Arizona, this act of public rhetoric takes on multiple layers of significance.

What is particularly rich about the Live Oak, California incident is that the young men wearing the offending American symbol were both Mexican American and Anglo American students. This is not too surprising, however. Ambivalence toward immigrants has been a litmus test of belonging among many social groups for centuries. But I have to agree with syndicated columnist Leonard Pitts that the decision by the Live Oak High School administration to take a disciplinary response rather than use the moment for collective deliberation was a grave mistake. Certainly, there is a teachable moment here—not only for the students of Live Oak High School but for us as nation as the immigration debate once again unravels us at our seams (Pitts). To help us understand the nuances of these current political statements, we need to revisit the 1950s Cold War Mexican American civil rights movement.

There are a few still with us reading the national sign posts, those who took the long view and offered a hand to draft the larger map of US civil rights reform. There are a few whose voices provide contour and dimension to the flat, linear surface of history-making. Vicente Ximenes is one of those rare historical figures. Ximenes’ style of leadership resonated with the post-war Mexican American generation and eventually bridged the World War II generation reformers of the 1950s with the Chicano activists of the 1960s. Ximenes’s political impulse and rhetorical imagination rested upon four dimensions of democratic practice. Dissent, deliberation, dissonance, and disputation—these framed the guideposts of Ximenes’s earliest activist work as a community organizer.

Vicente Ximenes and I met for the first time in November 2002 in Corpus Christi, Texas at the premiere release of the PBS film “Justice for My People,” documenting the life and work of Vicente’s friend and partner, Dr. Héctor P. García. Vicente told me his own story:

From the time I was a grade school student in the 1920s until today the subjects of discrimination, race, color, national origin, and human rights have been a part of my life. From the first grade in a Mexican American segregated school in Texas until I received a Master's degree at the University of New Mexico, I had a preponderant majority of teachers that did not value my culture, language, custom, national origin, music, or food. Even my mother's tasty bean burritos and tortillas were ridiculed in school. I never had a Mexican American or Hispanic teacher during my formal education.

After the past eight years examining archival materials, conducting oral histories, and listening to the stories of Vicente Ximenes, I discovered that this generation of civil rights activists acquired citizen wisdom and civic literacy through the everyday experiences of growing up on the borders of American citizenship, in the liminal spaces of literacy practice.

Civic action for Vicente Ximenes and the World War II generation of reformers reflects many of the qualities identified by Hannah Arendt in her work, *The Promise of Politics*. Political action, as such, represents: "venturing forth in speech and deed in the company of one's peers—beginning something new whose end cannot be known in advance; founding a public realm; promising and forgiving one another. None of these actions can be realized alone, but always and only by people in their plurality." What Hannah Arendt describes in the work of restorative justice in the aftermath of World War II, reflects the same principles advanced by Desmond Tutu in the wake of South Africa apartheid. The gift-giving economy of democracy is, first and foremost, a discursive process.² Civic literacy is our capacity to read and respond to the world through language, symbol, and art. It is our ability to construct our experience together and to reinvent the public sphere. Civic literacy is our collective need to fabricate the narratives of history, and to construct imaginative fictions for the future, and to reconcile ourselves with one another.³

Twentieth-century Mexican American civil rights history suggests that in order for social movements to affect enduring institutional change, they must get into the sinew of governing organizations. They must shape and exercise the muscle and connective tissue of policy and practice from the inside out. It is not enough to stir a movement for social change. Activists must mentor advocates to implement and administer institutional transformation. The influence of a social activist is enhanced, and is best measured, by the effective and strategic placement of representatives within the dominant social structure.

Ximenes and the post-war Mexican American activists advanced a social movement that did not passively wait for justice and an invitation into the national conversation. Rather, they operated on the assumption that change was possible and stirred their own exigences for rhetorical access. They cultivated the rhetorical resources and literacy practices necessary to engage the inevitable dissonance of resistance and promote the requisite disputation toward social reform. This approach informed Ximenes's leadership style for over seven decades, including his tenure as Commissioner for President Lyndon B. Johnson's Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, Chairman of the Inter Agency of Mexican American Affairs, and

coordinator of the landmark 1967 Presidential Cabinet Committee Hearings on Mexican American Affairs in El Paso, Texas.

It is important to note the anti-communist hysteria of the McCarthy age shaped the political situation of this twenty-year period of the postwar civil rights era from 1948-1968. The xenophobia and "redbaiting" discourses of the McCarthy age shaped the rhetorical situation of the twenty-year period of the postwar civil rights era. As Ellen Schrecker notes in *The Age of McCarthyism*, Cold War liberals of all ilk found themselves precariously aligned in the struggle against communism at home and overseas. Bobby Kennedy joined the ranks of anti-communist McCarthy democrats through the 1950s. He was in good company. Many Cold War liberals, like Minnesota Senator and future Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey, wanted to expand the welfare state and eliminate racial segregation to protect the world from the expansion of communism.⁴

Albert O. Hirschman in *The Rhetoric of Reaction: Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy* calls this tactic the "imminent-danger thesis" (153). Deployed throughout the Cold War era, social progressives argued for transferring resources from wealthier groups to poorer populations as a safeguard against the advances of communism. These advocates asserted that civil rights reform and welfare state programs were "imperatively needed to stave off some threatening disaster." The rhetorical resources available to Ximenes and his cadre of American GI Forum organizers were replete with the inconsistencies and fluencies of the Cold War rhetorical situation within which he exercised agency as a grassroots leader.

The peculiar problem facing Ximenes as new community organizer in Albuquerque sixty years ago was how to structure his arguments for Mexican American civil rights reform out of the hostile strands of rhetoric circulating within the Cold War cultural context. Ximenes responded to the local political climate by helping to organize Mexican American veterans in New Mexico around civil rights issues under the umbrella of the American GI Forum. This veterans' rights organization had been originally established in Corpus Christi, Texas by Dr. Hector P. Garcia just three years earlier (Kells, *Héctor P. García*). Ximenes adapted the vision and mission of the American GI Forum for the New Mexico situation. While the name "American GI Forum" hardly sounds radical to us today, it was sufficiently subversive enough to warrant persistent observation by the FBI. Vicente remembers:

The organizational meeting of the Albuquerque GI Forum was held in the basement of the Sacred Heart Church. Eight persons came together and I was elected chairman of the GI Forum in 1951. Two months after the first meeting I received a frantic call from Monsignor García. The FBI had been by to ask him questions that the Monsignor could not answer about the GI Forum. If word got out in public that the FBI had questioned the Monsignor, the GI Forum would be doomed. I was scared because I had brought together friends to join the GI Forum and I knew the McCarthy Communist scare tactics had ruined the lives of many people. My professor of government had been literally run out of his job by the adherents of Senator McCarthy and for a few hours after the Monsignor's call I was frozen with fear of what might happen. Then I

picked up the GI Forum constitution and by-laws and headed for the FBI office. I presented myself to FBI officials and told them I could answer any questions they had about the GI Forum. Our membership was open to anyone who would swear allegiance to the U.S. flag. The FBI person listened to all I had to say without any response to my statements. I then satisfied the Monsignor as to the legitimacy of the GI Forum.⁵

This is the backdrop that ultimately informed the choices Ximenes exercised on behalf of his constituencies.

Ximenes conceptualized his leadership style from a practical perspective rather than an abstract, theoretical model. He employed a pragmatic approach to civil rights reform, using grassroots community organizing strategies. Ximenes looked to the social realities of New Mexico and the Southwest to construct his understanding of civil rights reform and human rights activism. He believed that giving voice to the personal realities of citizens was the first step to promoting social change. The impetus for literacy practice for Ximenes and his contemporaries rested in the collective as well as the personal.

Civic Literacy and Mexican American Civil Rights Rhetoric

On December 20, 1951 Vicente Ximenes circulated one of his first acts of public rhetoric in the form of a letter to the editor of the *Albuquerque Journal*. The message embedded within this 300 word statement thoughtfully identifies the major issues and Cold War themes motivating the formation of the American GI Forum in Albuquerque that same year. Ximenes opens his letter with this declaration: “This is a letter about death.” He then constructs a contrast between “death in New Mexico” and “death in Korea.” The illustrative narrative that follows describes a recent event in Lovington, New Mexico. Ximenes delineates:

On November 16, the Hobbs Daily News-Sun reported the death of two Mexican children from starvation. I assume that they meant that the children were American citizens of Mexican extraction, since it was reported that their legal residence was Yoakum, Texas. It seems no welfare funds were available for these American citizens because the law prevented disposition of funds to non-state residents. Furthermore, it seems that a nurse could not help the children because the nurse could not speak Spanish. Since when does a nurse have to speak Spanish in order to detect malnutrition. I always thought malnutrition was a health condition, not a language.⁶

Ximenes charges the state welfare system and then Senator Clint Anderson for his neglect of local conditions and for the consequent deaths of these two children. Ximenes contrasts the deaths of the two children in New Mexico with the deaths of one hundred and eight US Hispanic soldiers in Korea who gave their lives as American citizens.

This alignment seeks to establish a moral distinction between the noble and honorable Mexican American soldiers killed fighting in battle overseas and the disgraceful and dishonorable deaths of two innocent Mexican American children starved to death in the U.S. homeland. Ximenes deals with the particular classes, not general categories. Ximenes closes his letter of protest with a critique of New Mexico lawmakers and candidates campaigning for election and promoting various economic programs in the state. Ximenes argues:

Not one single law-maker or would-be law-maker uttered a word about solving New Mexico’s situation with reference to the two children that starved in Lovington, New Mexico. Perhaps silence means consent.⁷

Significantly, Ximenes signs his letter as “chairman” of the newly founded American GI Forum in New Mexico. Representing this new civic advocacy organization, Ximenes declares a new public presence in the region. The claims delineated in his letter are far-reaching. Ximenes tackles Cold War liberal issues alongside Mexican American civil rights questions related to national citizenship, regional identity, economic disparities, heritage language, and political representation. He would take up these very same themes for public action six years later in 1957.

Phronesis, Resistance, and American Democratic Practice

Ximenes conceptualized his leadership style from the perspective of particular cases rather than theoretical models. He employed a pragmatic epistemic approach to the construction of knowledge, using inductive and deliberative processes. *Phronesis*, according to Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics*, inextricably connects the dimensions of ethos, deliberation, and praxis—or purposeful choice. Or as Mary Whitlock Blundell argues, “Phronesis guides the process of deliberation and hence plays an essential role in purposeful choice, which in turn is the moving cause of praxis (action).”⁸ Consistent with these characteristics of *phronesis*, Ximenes looked to the social realities of New Mexico and the Southwest to construct his understanding of civil rights reform and human rights activism.

Dramatically illustrating the contradictions of inclusion for Mexican American citizens, this second civil rights incident involved one of the institutions of Constitutional era US culture: the Daughters of the American Revolution. In February 1957, Art Tafoya, chairman of the Denver American GI Forum, along with José Ontiveros and Molly Galván of the Pueblo chapter, reported a racist incident in Colorado to Ximenes. Their reports indicated that the local chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution had refused to allow a Mexican-origin boy to carry the American flag at a President Lincoln Day ceremony for the Colorado Industrial School for Boys in Golden, Colorado scheduled for February 12, 1957. The correctional institution was populated largely by Mexican-origin boys, many of whom were born in the United States to parents who were immigrant Mexican nationals. Questions of race, national identity, and cultural belonging were at the center of the controversy.

As national chairman of the American GI Forum, Vicente took the lead on the issue and expressed outrage to the local and national press. He immediately fired off a telegram to DAR National President Frederic Graves and all chapters of the American GI Forum.⁹ Within twenty-four hours, thousands of responses poured out in protest. Senator Dennis Chávez of New Mexico sent a telegram in rebuke, reminding public officials in Colorado that Mexican Americans had carried the US flag at Bataan in World War II. Governor McNichols of Colorado, in response, suspended all pending DAR activities in the state.

The symbolic value of this incident was clear to Ximenes. The American flag was a powerful symbol for his civic group; the colors were woven into the official emblem for the American GI Forum. The denial by the DAR of a Mexican-origin child to carry the US flag was a civil rights violation in Ximenes's mind, potentially as incendiary as the catalyzing event that propelled Dr. Héctor García and the American GI Forum into the national limelight in 1949. The refusal of a funeral director in Three Rivers, Texas to bury Mexican American soldier, Private Félix Longoria, had successfully cemented the reputation of the American GI Forum as a civil rights organization nearly a decade before (Kells, *Héctor P. García* 72). Ximenes did not waste any time to act on the infraction. He stirred public debate and demanded immediate redress.

The *Denver Star* and *Amarillo Globe-Times* noted that the Lincoln Day flag-carrying pageant had been immediately cancelled following Ximenes's complaint. Charlotte C. Bush, chair of the Denver Chapter of the DAR Patriotic Education Committee, publically defended her position: "I wouldn't want a Mexican to carry 'Old Glory,' would you?"¹⁰ This offensive rhetorical question was advanced by Charlotte Bush in her capacity as a DAR official. Her statement not only revealed the character and attitudes of the speaker but the expressed goals of the organization. The premises of Charlotte Bush's assertion include: first, Mexican-origin people are not American citizens; second, only American citizens are entitled to carry the flag. The assertion was sufficiently damaging to DAR that it called for immediate action from the national headquarters.

DAR National President Frederic Graves responded immediately by pulling the charter from the local Denver DAR chapter. She contacted Ximenes and offered to travel to Albuquerque to exchange flags with the American GI Forum as an act of reconciliation. Ximenes had to decide how much more negative press he wanted to promote, heaping political coals on the head of the DAR. However, Ximenes chose to take a restorative justice approach to the conflict, engaging in negotiations with DAR President Frederic Graves. The flag exchange ceremony was promptly staged in front of the American GI Forum building in Albuquerque. The U.S. flag was carried by Roberto Durán, son of New Mexico American GI Forum organizer, Zeke Durán. President Graves delivered a statement regretting the incident and delineating the action she took to punish the Colorado DAR chapter and person who had refused to allow a Mexican American boy to carry the American flag. Ximenes formally accepted the apology and the National DAR's presentation of the American flag.

Symbolically, the American GI Forum raised the gift of the American flag in front of the newly constructed building that would become the permanent national headquarters of the American GI Forum in Albuquerque.¹¹ Equally important, the

event signaled the authority of Ximenes as an emerging national leader, demonstrated his prudent exercise of citizen wisdom, and publically resisted the second class status of Mexican Americans in Cold War America. In effect, Ximenes asserted a new trajectory for Mexican American civil rights activism.

Ximenes exploited the flag-raising occasion toward a productive and peaceful outcome. He promoted an act of resolution through which both parties could recover honor and esteem. The flag exchange ceremony in Albuquerque provided a public occasion within which the American GI Forum, representative of Mexican American citizens, and the DAR, representative of Constitutional era America, could regain honor. Reverence and ceremony transformed drama and discord. Most importantly, the public event restored the dignity of the community.

Community Literacy and Cultivating Citizen Wisdom

Why are these stories important today? The current historical moment of healing national division and international polarization calls for models of democratic practice that promote dissent, engage difference, cultivate debate, and negotiate the noise of dissonance. As Hannah Arendt reminds, the promise of human freedom is realized through community—by plural human beings, "when and only when we act politically."

In brief, this is what democratized education is all about: cultivating conditions for self-governance and citizen wisdom (Woodruff). And this is the key idea behind the Writing Across Communities initiative at the University of New Mexico. My students and I have envisioned Writing Across Communities as a platform for invigorating the public sphere and cultivating civic literacy among our most vulnerable communities—creating spaces for historically excluded peoples.

Who constitutes our historically-excluded student populations? At the University of New Mexico, our vulnerable communities include a broad range of student groups: First generation college students, economically-vulnerable citizens, linguistically-diverse students, international students, Native American, Mexican American, African American student groups, non-traditional (re-entry) student populations, the unemployed, economically-disadvantaged students, physically and mentally disabled students, returning veterans and their families, political refugees, former prisoners (most of whom are disproportionately male students of color), LGBT students and survivors of hate crimes, sexual abuse, and domestic violence. In other words, I mean nearly the entire student population of the University of New Mexico constitute the intended beneficiaries of the Writing Across Communities initiative.

The impetus for Writing Across Communities at UNM began with some nagging questions about language and diversity. The most significant outcome of these past seven years is that Writing Across Communities continues to complicate the culture of writing at UNM with questions centering on issues of language, literacy, identity, and social justice. In a nutshell: the vision of the UNM Writing Across Communities initiative is to help students cultivate authority and alacrity across multiple contexts in order to develop the knowledge, understanding, and

ethical habits of mind for citizenship in intellectually and culturally diverse academic, professional, and civic communities.

Let me code shift here for a moment. The Spanish term *bien estar* or wellbeing sums it nicely, I think. There are two different verbs of “being” in the Spanish linguistic system: *ser* (a stable, intrinsic state of being) and *estar* (a process of being). Writing Across Communities calls attention to the processes of being, of becoming literate members and citizens of our multiple diverse communities.

What I offer is a set of principles. I need to be honest about the organic and evolutionary nature of Writing Across Communities. There is no “blueprint” for Writing Across Communities. I have invited a number of my colleagues locally and nationally to help create this story. *Mi compadre* Juan Guerra from the University of Washington likens the UNM Writing Across Communities to “rhizomes:” he says that we are growing a forest of social activists from a single root. In reality, we are a work-in-progress. This provisional nature of Writing Across Communities is not only appropriate; it is intentional (Kells, “Writing Across Communities”). Literacy is a fluid, organic process. In other words, literacy is a human process. The notion that mastering any single literacy practice or writing genre is sufficient to becoming an educated and engaged citizen in the 21st century is a flawed notion.

The intellectual engine and the political operating space of Writing Across Communities begin and end with our students—not faculty, not administrators, not curriculum, *per se*). Our graduate and undergraduate students are the mobilizing force keeping the conversation going. When folks ask me where I find inspiration for this embattled initiative I respond that without a doubt, the story of the post-war Mexican American civil right movement and Vicente Ximenes provides me with the necessary “invisible means of support.”

I would like to report, at the end of these past seven years of persistent mobilization, that the UNM administration recognizes, supports, and promotes Writing Across Communities university-wide. This is not the case. Infrastructure support remains limited and largely symbolic with annual small grants. We have no budget, no director, no staff, no office, no formal support whatsoever. We do have a WAC logo though, a website, and letterhead. Nonetheless, Writing Across Communities programs and events have served thousands of undergraduate students, included numerous community groups, supported graduate students from across the disciplines, and engaged hundreds of faculty members across the curriculum.

On the one hand, we have been called “an annoying insurgent movement” by administrators. Some would like the messy work of Writing Across Communities to just go away. A few would like a more traditional WAC program in its place “without all the political stuff.” On the other hand, we have generated close to ninety-thousand dollars in cross-departmental grant support over the past seven years of mobilization, keeping our programs and events open and free to the public. We have our allies and beneficiaries.

My role as program chair, has been largely as a behind-the-scenes organizer. In practice, I am more of a network operator than an administrator. This protean role has required finding new ways to mobilize diverse constituencies toward a collective re-evaluation of how we teach writing across the university. In this ever changing game of role-shifting, I have also served as chair for the UNM Civil

Rights Symposia series for over five years. We have foregrounded African American, Mexican American, and Native American civil rights issues as well as sexual justice issues. Our 2011 Civil Rights Symposium was focused on Mental Health and Social Justice. My graduate students and I have coordinated these university-wide events to mark significant moments in U.S. civil rights reform as well as to call attention to current social justice issues. The response for 2007, 2008, 2009, and 2011 events exceeded our imagination. Hundreds have filled our sessions. We have practiced the deliberative ethics of peaceful social engagement. I have seen meeting rooms flowing over with students from high school to graduate school. Building on this history, our Spring 2012 Writing the World Symposium featured invited speakers, Paul Matsuda (Arizona State University) on second language writing issues and Michelle Eodice (University of Oklahoma) on writing center pedagogies. One young undergraduate student commented to me at the close of our 2012 Writing the World Symposium, “This is even better than a TED Talk.”

Writing Across Communities: Changing the Culture of Writing

I have faith in deliberative processes and the possibilities of community engagement that promote healing, justice, and social connection. Our experience through Writing Across Communities suggests that it is possible to influence cultures of writing within and beyond the university, if we more fully represent and respond to the range of literacy practices associated with the civic, cultural, professional, and academic experiences of our students. Equally important, I have faith in the legacy of civil rights activists like Vicente Ximenes who resist the notion that civil rights reform is a once-done-always-done exercise. I am inspired by leaders like Marilyn Martinez who continue to call attention to the injustices and inconsistencies in our national terms of belonging. And I am especially concerned about the implicit racism embedded in literacy education programs nation-wide. As Leonard Pitts argues in his editorial essay following the Live Oak High School t-shirt ban, “The challenge for schools is to balance kids’ impetuosity against their right of free speech” (A8). Pitts’s recommendations for alternative responses to the Live Oak High School controversy that promote deliberative action and democratic practice reflects the kind of discursive public sphere that educational institutions (K-16) need to be cultivating. Pitt suggests:

Imagine if [the principal of Live Oak High School] had corralled the most articulate of the T-shirt boys and the *cinco de mayo* celebrators and required them to research and represent their points of view in a formal debate before the entire school. The T-shirt kid could have challenged his classmates to explain why he felt the need, if he is an American, to celebrate a foreign holiday. The classmate could have pressed the T-shirt kid on why he felt threatened by a simple acknowledgment of heritage and cultural origin” (Pitts A8).

Regretfully, punitive action and silencing the ruptures in the democratic public imaginary continue to obscure and truncate these kinds of deliberative processes necessary for political inclusion and national transformation. Civic literacy must be as central to public education (K-16) as alphabetic and numerical literacy are to the national core curriculum (Guerra, “Nomadic Consciousness;” “Transcultural Citizenship”). Multiculturalism or “diversity” courses as isolated add-on requirements rather than embedded across-the-curriculum obfuscate the intrinsic value of pluralism woven into the national fabric of democracy.

Our nation has subscribed to racial and linguistic purity myths since the Constitutional era when the first naturalization laws were drafted (Kells, “Questions of Race;” López). The legalistic discourse of racial difference continues to inform our social institutions, our attitudes, our uneven distribution of resources and justice. In a country where people of color are disproportionately represented on the front lines of our military operations and in the jail cells of our prisons, we need to admit that our nation is seriously out of whack. When one of the greatest human rights tragedies in our history is being played out on our southernmost borders we need to acknowledge that racism is alive and well. When we fail to consider the impact of our economic, political, and immigration policies on the vulnerable communities whose transnational ties and connective tissue endure beyond the geopolitical divisions that separate them from their families—whose economic conditions leave them subsisting at our nation’s edges, I need to say, in spite of the landmark moment when this nation elected a black man to the White House, we are not living in a post-racial world.

There is a subtext to my title here: “What’s writing got to do with it?: Citizen Wisdom, Civil Rights Activism and Community Literacy.” I have to admit, I keep hearing Tina Turner belting out the words: “What’s love got to do with it?” Honestly, I think love and writing have a lot to do with it. Certainly, that is a thematic thread weaving throughout *Battling the Basement: The Trials and Triumphs of Marilyn A. Martinez*. Similarly, Juan Guerra in his book, *Close to Home: Oral and Literate Practices in a Transnational Mexican Community*, examines the connective tissue of literacy (and writing) and its importance in sustaining and supporting families and their communities on both sides of the US border. What is so profound about Guerra’s work is that his ethnographic study illustrates that writing is not only a personal skill, it is a social good, a community resource. Both Marilyn Martinez and Juan Guerra illustrate a common insight: giving voice to the personal realities of marginalized citizens represents the first step to promoting social change.

Writing Programs and Pedagogies of Leadership

So how can we respond? I believe that we each need to exercise the power of public rhetoric—moving between our spheres of concern and exercising authority (citizen wisdom, if you will) within our spheres of influence. Events like those offered through the Writing Across Communities initiative help us as a community protect the public sphere and promote dissent, deliberation, dissonance, and disputation. We need more opportunities and conduits for the cultural arts of resistance, disputation, difference, and debate. Our educational system (K-16) needs to move beyond passive models of literacy education that fail to critique and engage citizens as active “authors” of

democracy. The enduring problem of public education is not rankings and test scores but intellectual and political passivity. Well-intentioned literacy programs stop short of cultivating active citizens when they stop short of promoting the full range of literacy practices—writing as well as reading. Teaching reading without cultivating writing (productive responsiveness) is like inviting guests to a party and not letting them speak. Those of us teaching undergraduate and graduate students in university settings have tremendous access to cultivating new leaders in community literacy.

My Spring 2012 graduate seminar, ENGL 640: Ideologies of Literacy, recently served as a deliberative space to examine the embedded assumptions and beliefs informing writing program administration at the University of New Mexico.¹³ The exigence for this course was the growing momentum toward institutionalizing Writing Across Communities at UNM and the establishment of the new ABQ Community Writing Center by our graduate students. Additionally, we needed a reflective space for designing the new proposed ENGL 102 (WAC) Writing Intensive Course and cultivating our cross-institutional partnerships through the ABQ Community Writing Center. The messy work of democratizing literacy education is here to stay at UNM as long as we have engaged graduate students troubling the system. The issues of disparity and inequitable distribution of wealth and resources in New Mexico are historical and are not just going to go away. Literacy and social justice are inextricably connected in our local and national Constitutional-based system of governance.

The problem of the transparency of literacy is illustrated across academic, professional, and civic contexts. The value of literacy is so embedded in our social system we cannot see it even as educators. We simply take it for granted. That transparency is not a problem, so to speak, for educators and strategic planners in elite, exclusive institutions that mystify access and the practices of intellectual authority. In fact, the invisibility of literacy actually serves to maintain limited access and retain authority and exclusivity to an elite group of intellectuals. However, the invisibility of literacy is a real problem for diverse, open access institutions like the University of New Mexico and other two-year and four-year colleges across the nation where we are seeking to distribute knowledge and authority to historically-excluded social groups. Transparency of literacy is a problem for our students who do not have the culturally-prescribed literacies of elite, privileged social groups (see Appendix).

The new ABQ Community Writing Center is the heart and soul of the Writing Across Communities initiative. The pilot project is now located in the Albuquerque Public Main Library downtown as a drop-in center to assist local citizens with whatever writing task they want: a work-in-progress poem, a job application, a letter to the editor, a campaign flyer. Writing is and has always been a community endeavor. Admittedly, Plato was very suspicious about the lethal potential of writing. But the architects of the US Constitution were less reticent to wed writing to self-governance, more optimistic about the potential dimensions of literacy and democracy through the written codification of democratic principles. For the American democratic experiment civic literacy and democracy are inextricably intertwined. As the emerging community literacy scholarship suggests, the scope of writing education cannot be limited to the classroom and cannot be approached in a one-size-fits-all

model. In *Writing and Community Engagement: A Critical Sourcebook*, Thomas Deans, Barbara Roswell, and Adrian J. Wurr observe, “One key insight proffered by nearly every community-engaged scholar is that each university/community partnership is shaped by local opportunities and limitations, local people and priorities” (5). We need to attend to difference.

Thanks to a dedicated team of graduate student social activists what once was a vague vision is now a reality for the citizens of Albuquerque.¹⁴ Expanding on the community writing center model instituted by Tiffany Rousculp with the Salt Lake Community Writing Center in 2001, the ABQ Community Writing Center is extending the vision and principles of Writing Across Communities to the larger New Mexico community (Rousculp). While we commemorate the losses and travesty of 9/11 as a nation, we also need to recognize the generative responses and healing endeavors like the work of Rousculp in Salt Lake City launched a decade ago. We at the University of New Mexico are building this vision on the belief that writing can be a healing balm as well as a catalyst for change. Writing can help us cultivate mindfulness as well as collective deliberation at local, national, and global levels. In closing, writing has everything to do with it. Democracy is a living text that we must re-vision and re-invigorate with each generation of citizens.

The goal at this point in the journey is not constructing a monolithic discourse or grand narrative, but sustaining and extending the conversations seeded by the Writing Across Communities initiative over the past seven years beyond the boundaries of the University of New Mexico. This is the purpose of the newly established National Consortium of Writing Across Communities (NCWAC) which my colleagues and I launched in April 2011 in Atlanta during the 2011 Conference of College Composition and Communication (Kells “National Consortium”). Recognizing the tenth anniversary year of 9/11, our hope was to offer educators across the nation a generative vision for literacy education and civic engagement that transgresses the traditional boundaries of our discipline as well as the limits of institutional constraints. The NCWAC stakeholders affirm educational principles and cultural practices that promote the maintenance and wellbeing of human communities through literacy and writing. Moreover, NCWAC seeks to guide curriculum development, stimulate resource-sharing, cultivate networking, and promote research in language practices and literacy education throughout the nation, and to support local colleges and universities working to serve vulnerable communities within their spheres of influence.

The 2012 NCWAC Summer Summit in Santa Fe included three days of discussions about how we as scholars, teachers, writers, and leaders across institutional and regional sites can more effectively align the multi-faceted dimensions of our field in Rhetoric and Composition (and our multiple subfields such as Writing Program Administration, WAC, Writing Centers, ESL, Basic Writing, Second Language Writing, and Community Literacy) to better support future leaders (graduate students and new faculty) seeking to serve the vulnerable communities via sponsored literacy projects within their spheres of influence. Rather than a single book or a static product, the members of NCWAC plan to establish a dynamic online resource site to serve educators nationwide (especially junior faculty and graduate students) who are sponsoring literacy projects and working in and beyond the

college classroom. The list of thirty affiliated institutions reads like a litany of hope. The hermeneutic space of the 2012 NCWAC Santa Fe Summit, marking the one-hundredth anniversary of New Mexico statehood—the only state in the nation whose Constitution is written in both English and Spanish—offered each participant an imaginative site for considering new approaches to writing program that reaches beyond the borders of their institutions.

Writing can be both a *pharmakon*: both healing balm and an occasion for exercising agency (stirring aggravation) in a world of contingency and uncertainty. Through rhetorical listening and the act of exegesis of the text, the common thread that weaves through the stories of members of vulnerable communities, the current narratives of survivors like Marilyn Martinez and historical narratives of leaders like Vicente Ximenes, is the generative possibilities of exercising authority through diverse literacy practices. Community literacy as an advocacy movement offers an imaginative space that resists the debasement of exclusion and marginalization. In a socio-economic climate of scarcity, in a political environment conditioned by fear and shame, the capacity to read and respond to the world through the act of writing represents not only an occasion of agency but an affirmation of our humanity. Physically and mentally disabled peoples, linguistically-diverse students, transnational refugees, homeless veterans, the unemployed—the many groups we serve in our classrooms and beyond—all share a common condition of isolation and the inability to exercise agency over place. The invitation to write represents an opportunity to realize the rhetorical possibilities of turning transgressive power into transformative potential. Whatever challenge writers find themselves battling, the dignity and efficacy of self-representation through semiotics of the text are gifts we must keep in circulation.

Endnotes

1. I wish to extend my debt of appreciation to the insightful reflections on the agency of literacy offered in: Marilyn A. Martinez. *Battling the Basement: The Trials and Triumphs of Marilyn A. Martinez*. Santa Fe: MG Publishing, 2010: n.p.
2. The role of *nomos* and the concept of discursive democracy as a gift-giving economy are developed further in my presentation for the 2012 Watson Conference, “The Rhetorical Imagination of Writing Across Communities: *Nomos* and Literacy Education as a Gift-Giving Economy.”
3. Segments of this article have been presented at the Writing Democracy Conference (March 2011), the Albuquerque Cultural Conference (September 2011), and the Watson Conference (October 2012).
4. Ellen Schrecker, *The Age of McCarthyism: A Brief History with Documents*. 2nd ed (New York: Bedford/St. Martins, 2002), 99.
5. Vicente Ximenes interview by author, October 9, 2006.
6. Vicente Ximenes letter to editor, December 20, 1951, Box 141, Folder 2, Héctor P. García (HPG) Papers. Mary and Jeff Bell Library. Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi.
7. Vicente Ximenes letter to editor, December 20, 1951, Box 141, Folder 2. HPG Papers.

8. For further discussion on *phronesis*, see: Mary Whitlock Blundell "Ethos and Dianoia Reconsidered" in Amélie Oksenberg Rorty, ed. *Essays on Aristotle's Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 156.
9. Vicente Ximenes interview by author, March 4, 2008.
10. "Racial Issue Halts Lincoln Day Affair" *Amarillo Globe Times* n.d.; n.p. Box 146, Folder 20. HPG Papers.
11. Vicente Ximenes interview by author, March 9, 2008.
12. I remain indebted to the support and leadership of our Graduate Assistant Writing Across Communities Alliance leaders who have worked so diligently and generously over the past seven years organizing Writing Across Communities events and programs: Beverly Army Gillen, Leah Sneider, Bernadine Hernandez, Dan Cryer, Greg Evans Haley, Erin Penner Gallegos, Brian Hendrickson, and Genevieve García de Mueller.
13. I wish to acknowledge the graduate student Writing Fellows in my ENGL 640 Ideologies of Literacy Seminar who helped to envision the ENGL 102 Writing Intensive Learning Communities Pilot Project during the Spring 2012: Dan Cryer, Christine Beagle García, Genevieve García de Mueller, Brian Hendrickson, Mellisa Huffman, and Lindsey Ives.
14. A special word of acknowledgment is due to the co-founders and leaders of the ABQ Community Writing Center: Brian Hendrickson, Erin Penner Gallegos, Genevieve García de Mueller, Anna Knutson, and Deb Paczynski.

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Appendix

ENGL 640: Ideologies of Literacy

Dr. Michelle Hall Kells

This seminar will examine the historical, cultural, economic, political, and educational dimensions of “literacy.” The conceptualization, mythology, and practice of “literacy” (reading and writing) has become integral to social access in our 21st century cosmopolitan universe (full civic, economic, and cultural participation—locally, nationally, and globally). As teachers (of English Studies and Education), we need to apply a critical lens to the metaphors and models of literacy we adopt and promote.

We will examine the question of literacy as a key social value in the national imaginary. Literacy is not only a practice (and outcome of public K-16 education) but a core value of both American Constitutional culture and the Western tradition of higher learning.

Literacy is: how we reason from the data;
 how we gain authority and authorship in and across diverse
 intellectual spheres;
 how we engage (and organize) our social worlds.

We can define literacy as the processes and products related to generating, interpreting, and circulating symbolic systems of meaning (e.g. alphabetic, mathematical, digital, visual, scientific symbol systems). These are all culturally conditioned processes and products for which we need to become socialized (educated) to interpret (read) and write (produce).

The problem of the transparency of literacy is illustrated across academic, professional, and civic contexts. The value of literacy is so embedded in our social system we can't see it (even as educators). We simply take it for granted. That transparency is not a problem, so to speak, for educators and strategic planners in elite, exclusive institutions (e.g. Harvard, Stanford, etc.) that mystify access and the practices of intellectual authority. In fact, the invisibility of literacy actually serves to maintain limited access and retain authority and exclusivity to an elite group of intellectuals. However, the invisibility of literacy is a real problem for diverse, open access institutions like the University of New Mexico (and other two-year and four-year colleges across the nation) where we are seeking to distribute knowledge and authority to historically-excluded social groups. Transparency of literacy is a problem for our students who do not have the culturally-prescribed literacies of elite, privileged social groups.

The literacy skills (informational, digital, numerical, alphabetic, environmental, scientific, etc) of our professoriate and our student body affect every facet of our enterprise as an institution of higher education:

- Recruitment
- Retention
- Graduation Rates
- National Ranking & Distinction
- Placement (job and graduate school)
- Classroom success.

Literacy is not only the principal practice of what we do every day in our work and personal lives; it is a deeply held core value of American citizenship and belonging, so integral to who we are—our national identity—it is the concept around which we fashion our system of self-governance through the drafting and continuous revision (and reinterpretation) of the U.S. Constitution. Deliberative literacy (as exemplified in U.S. constitutional rhetoric) is the only core value around which we in our explosive and exponential national diversity can concur. Perhaps we could call literacy one of those “venerable” American ideals.

NOTE: This course has been designed for graduate students of Rhetoric & Writing as well as in Education. We will focus on a broad range of arguments (across genres and discourse communities in public/popular cultures). Final course projects will be adapted to the specific needs, interests, and genre-practices of the graduate students in my course with respect to their different sub-areas of Rhetorical Studies and Education.

Learning Outcomes:

Course readings, assignments, and class discussions are designed to promote the following learning outcomes:

- Apply and integrate concepts of literacy studies;
- Guide and participate in class discussions of course readings;
- Historicize the intellectual traditions of Western literacy education;
- Critically analyze notions of literacy across academic and public cultures;
- Use the writing process as recursive stages (from invention to editing) for writing tasks;
- Engage in purposeful and productive peer review;
- Connect classroom learning to teaching writing;
- Generate intellectual project (seminar paper) productive to future professional development (conference paper, MA portfolio or dissertation chapter, journal article, etc.);
- Cultivate alliances with peers and work collaboratively toward common goals.

Required Texts:

Ellen Cushman, Eugene R. Kintgen, Barry M. Kroll, and Mike Rose eds. *Literacy: A Critical Sourcebook*

Paolo Freire *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

James Paul Gee *Social Linguistics and Literacies: Ideology in Discourses*.

Keith Gilyard. *Composition and Cornel West: Notes Toward a Deep Democracy*.

Antonio Gramsci. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*.

Jacqueline Jones Royster. *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African American Women*.

Raymond Williams *Key Words: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*

Victor Villanueva. *Bootstraps: From an American Academic of Color*.

A Clear Channel: Circulating Resistance in a Rural University Town

Shannon Carter

Texas A&M-Commerce

This article offers an extended treatment of two social justice efforts in a rural university town as historical examples of civic engagement with contemporary implications for Writing Democracy and similar projects. The article begins with an analysis of local activism initiated by John Carlos in 1967 while he was still a student at our university and the year before his heroic, silent protest against racism with Tommie Smith at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. The author then turns to a linked effort five years later by local activist MacArthur Evans, a university student from Chicago. In 1973, Evans and other university students established the Norris Community Club (NCC) in partnership with residents of Norris, the historically segregated neighborhood, to provide what they called “a clear channel of communication” between Norris and city officials. Both were successful, albeit in very different ways. The author uses “a clear channel” as both the object of study and interpretive lens to examine these local efforts and their many implications for today.

In 1973, university students and local citizens created the Norris Community Club (NCC), a university-community partnership designed to challenge racial inequities persisting long after civil rights legislation had mandated otherwise. To accomplish the desired reform, NCC provided what they called “a clear channel of communication” between the city and residents of Norris, the town’s historically segregated neighborhood (Reed, Interview). That channel mobilized the community as never before, leading to significant changes like the election of a city official who “understood the needs of the people in the Norris Community and [was] willing to do something about it” (Carter et al.)¹ and the extensive funding needed to improve neighborhood streets, sewage, and telephone services.

There is much that compels me about the Norris Community Club, a group of ordinary, local citizens—*strangers*, in fact—drawn together through “texts”² largely local in circulation and often ephemeral in form (see Warner). What interests me most about NCC is the ordinary, everyday quality of their work, and not their extraordinary contributions. However significant—and they *were* significant—NCC’s accomplishments in terms of sustainable community changes are far less important to the current study than the ways in which NCC enabled *participation* among local publics. For nearly a century, Norris residents had felt largely excluded from such conversations, leading to significant inequities not unlike those felt across America in areas housing the greatest concentration of any city’s poorest citizens. And though the transformations NCC fostered locally were always partial and mainly temporary, they