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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*.

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## A Clear Channel: Circulating Resistance in a Rural University Town

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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.

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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.)<sup>1</sup> 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”<sup>2</sup> 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

were nonetheless as vital as they would be in any open and free society.

My research on NCC is situated in a growing body of scholarship that has revitalized our understanding of rhetorical agency among historically underrepresented groups, including working class and labor movements (Welch; George),

Mexican-American civil rights leaders (Kells), and progressive educators (Enoch). Urban and northern markers typically signify our field's in-depth investigations of university-community relations (Coogan, Parks, Goldblatt; Cushman). Yet we still know far too little about rural literacies (Hogg; Donehower, Hogg, and Schnell), especially the activist rhetorics (Kate) enacted across rural spaces largely characterized by a rhetoric of sustainability (Owens; Donehower, Hogg, and Schnell). We know even less about university-community partnerships in communities like mine.

My primary goal in the following essay is not to analyze the specific factors contributing to NCC's successes nor its ultimate unsustainability.<sup>3</sup> Rather I hope to articulate through this and one other local, historical example the ways in which such student-initiated efforts got started and gained local momentum. In other words, how have university students gone about creating the alternative publics necessary for desired change? What role might "mundane texts" play in these efforts—i.e., the "multiple, mundane documents, interpersonal networks, historical influences, and rhetorical moves and countermoves" that Nathaniel A. Rivers and Ryan P. Weber have argued are crucial elements of all public rhetoric? What implications might these earlier efforts have for more contemporary contexts?

Throughout, NCC's notion of a "clear channel" will serve as both the object of study and an interpretive lens through which I investigate civic engagement. On AM radio in North America, "clear-channel stations" are those most protected from interference from other stations. Theoretically then a message broadcast on a clear-channel station has the greatest likelihood of reaching its target audience with the sender's original meaning still intact. Realistically, of course, such a direct correlation between the message sent and the one received is impossible, but as long as we understand true clarity to be an impossible standard, a "clear channel" remains a useful metaphor.

I begin with NCC, especially the ways in which the circulation of everyday, mostly ephemeral "mundane texts" (Rivers and Weber) provided a local channel



Figure 1. Norris Community Club, circa 1974

for democratic deliberation (Mouffe; Warner). Other local channels preceded NCC, though most were characterized by weak signal strength and overlapping radio frequencies that eventually drowned out the intended broadcast and drew listeners elsewhere. With this in mind, I turn next to a local channel initiated five years earlier by John Carlos, the sprinter from Harlem best known for his part in the Silent Protest at the 1968 Olympics. After joining ET's track team in 1966, Carlos soon found existing race relations intolerable and thus attempted to link our local community to a global "channel" circulating the rhetoric of black resistance. I describe this attempt, again drawing attention to the role played by mundane texts but this time as they strengthened overlapping radio frequencies that eventually silenced Carlos locally and drove him away altogether.

Yet perhaps even more significant than the above discussion is the renewal of local activism this rhetorical recovery has enabled. My involvement in such projects has helped bring unprecedented local attention to Dr. Carlos and his significant links to our institution, including numerous area and campus presentations in November 2011 as part of his recent book tour and, in May 2012, an honorary doctorate from this institution (see Carter, "Letter"; Hobdy). In partnership with NCC's founding members, we have also been able, once again, to turn campus and community attention toward Norris with a range of public programming and preservation efforts, including a documentary and, most recently, a multimedia exhibit funded in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (Carter, "Remixing"). I explore how these local channels originally came into being, disappeared, and then ultimately emerged again through the very act of rhetorical recovery and rhetorical use of public programming. As I will explain in the final section, the Writing Democracy conference from which these proceedings emerged brought together NCC members for the first time in 35 years (see Carter, et al.), an event of great significance for everyone involved.

The local remains a primary factor in my analysis, though I am always mindful of what Deborah Brandt and Kate Clinton call the "Limits of the Local." As they insist, literacy practices are not "self-generating, the product of unique cultural characteristics," but rather "an outcome of historical and often violent contrasts between people of unequal power" (339). Far from a neutral canvas against which humans interact with one another, however, the local is the very space and time in which we experience our world. All history is local. All politics are local. As linguist Alistair Pennycook insists, all language use is local as "space is a central interactive part of the social" (55). Indeed, "[e]verything happens locally. However global a practice may be, it still always happens locally ..." (128, emphasis added).<sup>4</sup> The local spaces in which university-community partnerships form are necessarily a "central interactive part" of our social justice work.

It is thus fitting that this special issue include a study of historical examples from the local site that hosted the Writing Democracy conference from which these proceedings emerged: a mid-sized (10,000 students), PhD-granting university in a small town (9,100 population) 60 miles East of Dallas. The fluidity of the particular historical, cultural, political, and ideological forces that gave rise to the local experienced by participants in this March 2011 event are at once unique and universal. Even as participants engaged one another at a particular place (the Sam

Rayburn Student Center) and time (March 9-11, 2011), broadcasts from other local channels around the world traveled across the flat empty spaces of Northeast Texas and entered our conference rooms through conversations and smart phones, in the lived experiences of the bodies populating these spaces, in the news feeding into these rooms through iPads, laptops, and the hallway's television monitors: protests in Wisconsin follow decisions to strip the collective bargaining rights of public workers; the disaster then unfolding in Japan moves all of us to tears.

Writing democracy, then, may be understood as the vehicle through which we ensure meaningful, purposeful links across our various local contexts. A project like this requires not only *recovering* the local but also "*theorizing* the local," as David Gold has argued we must (Gold, "Beyond"). With "a clear channel" as interpretive lens, I am attempting to "theorize the local" by drawing attention to historical examples of civic engagement with theoretical and practical implications for today's efforts. Throughout I focus on the role played by the circulation of local texts in establishing viable publics necessary "to support people standing *with* others *for* something" as a "powerful alternative to ... speaking *up* or speaking *against*" (Flower 130). *This* is the clear channel NCC established locally and I hope Writing Democracy can provide, one that links local publics together through a global channel designed to, once again, "[re]introduce America to Americans," as FWP's *American Guide Series* did more than 75 years ago. America's local publics deserve a closer look.

## Circulation

*[A] public enables a reflexivity in the circulation of texts among strangers who become, by virtue of their reflexively circulating discourse, a social entity.*

—Michael Warner

The history of Norris is quite similar to that of other historically segregated neighborhoods. Norris formed at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as former slaves and their children began moving to the recently incorporated town of Commerce from area farms for work made available by the university, established in 1889, and the railroad industry. Not unlike other segregated communities across the Jim Crow South, Norris soon established churches, schools, restaurants, stores, and other businesses designed to provide for citizens who were denied access to these services in every other section of town. Over the next century, even as the city established and improved infrastructure and services everywhere else in town, streets in Norris would remain largely unpaved, its residents left without access to the city's sewage systems, police protection, or adequate telephone and postal service. Desegregation reached the local university in 1964 and the city's schools the following year, but neither change improved much about everyday living conditions for the town's local citizens remaining in Norris.

In 1973 a handful of university students met with residents of Norris to learn their key concerns and devise a plan for community change, leading to the formation of NCC. In a few short years, this neighborhood and, indeed, the entire town seemed altogether transformed: a historically unprecedented voter turnout elected the first African American city officials, civil service positions were filled with minority

applicants long denied such opportunities, issues of key concern to Norris residents long absent from local and campus news began receiving unprecedented attention, and millions of dollars of grants and other support began pouring in to right past injustices.

NCC's ability to accomplish these goals cannot be attributed to any direct, official effort by the university. Any of the ways in which networks of reciprocity were established between the university and the community were largely ad hoc and student-led, as would be the case for most any such partnership in this era before service learning programs and similar university-driven efforts. A handful of interested faculty later learned of NCC and supported its efforts with informal training in public speaking, minor financial contributions, or similar means. The university president allowed the group to book university space in his name for their annual banquets designed "to improve relations between the Norris Community and the rest of the city" ("NCC Reception"). Such support was meaningful, albeit limited.

The texts NCC produced and circulated were "action-oriented" (Wells), driven by a tactical (temporal and spatial) logic rather than a strategic one (see Mathieu), and rhetorical in orientation. In this, NCC mirrors the "rhetorically-oriented model" Lorraine Higgins, Elenore Long, and Linda Flower advocate—one that "calls up local publics around the aims of democratic deliberation" (10). It also characterizes NCC's clear channel as one designed for the express purpose of mobilizing local publics to act on behalf of Norris.

How does a local channel created for local participation on behalf of local citizens get started? Indeed how does *any* public writing get started (see George 60)? In theorizing the local, we must pay close attention to the rhetorical ecologies (Edbauer) shaping any communicative event. The channel NCC created is, like all publics as Michael Warner defines the term, "essentially *intertextual*" (15, emphasis mine). Thus NCC's origins cannot be located in any single document, individual, or event, and it is simply not possible to trace every local or global element that made this local channel possible. We can, however, find convincing links among local activists—many direct and personal, most revealing the links among networks of texts generated to establish earlier channels and those that followed. Most notable in this respect is a series of texts generated by members of the Afro-American Society of East Texas (ASSET), especially their "Declaration of Rights" and associated materials, which they delivered to campus administrators in 1968. The action they took in this public demonstration was a concrete list of demands that included rights to African American faculty and administrators, fair and equal housing and access to campus employment, and courses in African American studies. In a few short years, all of their demands would be met, setting in motion a series of key hires and other changes that made NCC possible and productive. Just as NCC established a clear channel between Norris residents and city officials, ASSET established a channel between African American students and campus administrators.

NCC did not, of course, come out of nowhere, but most accounts date the group's unofficial start to a meeting held at a Baptist church in Norris. Soon after arriving on campus in 1973, McArthur Evans (see Figure 1, far left), a criminal justice major and campus police officer born in Selma, Alabama, and raised in Chicago, asked Douglas Stephens<sup>5</sup> (Figure 1, second from the left), a local citizen and fellow

officer, where the city's African American citizens lived. Many of the students lived on campus, of course. But where were the local minorities who were not students? "They live off over there in 'The Hole,'" he recalls Douglas telling him. "He called it that ... He said that's where they are, 'Across the track, down in 'The Hole.'" From this co-worker and lifetime resident of Norris, Evans learned

the conditions that were down in 'The Hole': sewer problems, outhouses...[sigh]. And being born in the South, I remember the outhouses. I *used* outhouses—*Hello!* [laughs]—when I was a little boy in Selma, Alabama. And so I knew about outhouses. But I couldn't believe in 1973 that people still were using outhouses and unpaved streets and communities being neglected, way off from the university down in 'The Hole'? I just couldn't see that. (emphasis in original)

He asked for a tour of Norris, then help calling together a meeting to hear the community's key concerns and help devising a plan to get them addressed. "Anyway," Mr. Evans continues, "that's where I met Mr. Reed. And through that process, the community became active, involved, and elected its first president of the NCC" (Carter et al.).

"Actually," recalls Billy Reed, "how I got started was I was a little late at a meeting I heard they were going to have down at the old church, which was an old wooden building at the time. So I decided to go down and see what the meeting was about" (Carter et al.). A veteran of the Korean War, Reed worked as a conductor for the railroad that ran through town establishing the line between Norris and the rest of the city. He was well known throughout the community, outspoken, and, unlike the majority of Norris residents, drew a salary from outside the city, making him an ideal candidate to serve as NCC's first president. With this meeting, a counterpublic came into being and, through the work of this university student-community partnership, grew and remained in circulation.

The process began by *naming* this local public. "They called it 'The Hole,'" Opal Pannell explained in an oral history interview three years ago, right before going to her file cabinet to retrieve NCC's charter and a stack of yellowed minutes and newsletters that brought this public into being originally and kept it in circulation.<sup>6</sup> "They," in this case, referred to both the locals outside the neighborhood and the vast majority of the neighborhood's residents. "I didn't like that. That name change [from 'The Hole' to the 'Norris Community'] was our first order of business." Also one of NCC's founding members and a lifetime resident of the area who, like Mr. Reed, is a child of the Great Depression, Mrs. Pannell fought hard for Norris: "We kept telling everybody, 'We don't live in a *hole*. We *live* in the Norris Community'" (Pannell, Interview, emphasis in original; see also Carter and Conrad).

Before NCC called Norris together as a public, the absent presence of the living, breathing humans who populate this neighborhood were rendered not a public, not a community, but, in fact, a *hole*—*The Hole*, a void, a space emptied of its people and their long histories. "The Hole" may be similarly characterized as the static we hear on the radio dial—those spaces in between stations. We leave our radios tuned to *established* channels with a steady stream of clear programming we find relevant

to our lives. We need a reason to do otherwise. Instead of relying upon established channels, students like Evans placed the AM dial on a relatively unknown channel and began to listen. Eventually he heard it, faint and distant at first but increasingly present and forceful: the people of Norris, long silenced by the far stronger overlapping frequencies of dominant publics, were speaking up and it was time for the rest of town to listen. By naming Norris, NCC helped establish a channel then, through the regular circulation of relevant texts, began giving the city a reason to tune in to Norris. By linking this local channel to global channels broadcasting black resistance elsewhere, NCC helped *compel* the city to listen and respond. "It is not our desire to scare city officials," NCC president Billy Reed explains in a 1974 editorial, "but *we demand justice at any price*" (emphasis added).

"They called it 'The Hole' because it was dark all the time there," Mr. Reed explains. "They maybe had three streetlights for the whole community." It was "'The Hole' because many residents were forced to use 'outhouses rather than regular, indoor toilets ... Just a hole dug in the ground with a building sitting up over it'" (Reed, Interview). To establish an organization that would represent this community, the students and citizens involved had to come up with a name. Reed, describing the first meeting of what became the Norris Community Club, recalls saying, "Well, if we are going to have an organization, we might as well have a name that coincided with the community ... [T]he Norris School was in the neighborhood where blacks attended, so I suggested that we name it the Norris *Community* ... and, of course, they agreed upon it, so that's what we did, named it that" (Carter et al.). That naming and the narrative sequencing that followed through a series of texts coordinated with great care by NCC members filled this "hole" with a collective body of "strangers united through circulation of discourse" (Warner 59). Through this process, "The Hole" became "the Norris Community." NCC essentially placed Norris on the radio dial, broadcasting this neighborhood across town. Suddenly locals were tuning in and connecting with Norris families as neighbors with a shared interest in improving the entire community, as NCC press always insisted was their goal. To establish a clear channel and remain on air, NCC had to compose and circulate a series of mundane texts not just in written form but spoken as well, including the charter establishing NCC and the bylaws that gave the organization its official shape, the phone calls exchanged with area and State officials, the agenda items NCC developed together at the local Pizza Hut during their weekly writing sessions in preparation for their appearance at the meetings of the city council, the presentations they delivered following these writing sessions, the minutes Opal Pannell took at NCC's regular meetings that later contributed to articles appearing in local press, and a host of other such texts.

Perhaps a key contributor to this circulation was NCC member Allen Hallmark, then a graduate student in journalism and NCC's only white member. A Vietnam Vet against the war, Hallmark had been deeply involved with a variety of causes associated with what he called "The Movement"—"Civil Rights, Women's Rights, Environmental Preservation ... I wanted to find out if there was some kind of movement in Commerce."

I began exploring the town on my bicycle and when I crossed the railroad tracks into the black part of town, ... [Eventually], I found a tiny little building on a residential street that was too small to be a home. Perhaps it had a “Norris Community Club” sign on it or a notice of when the meetings were held, or else I asked around and was told about the club and when it met.

I just showed up at a meeting and my entrance pretty much put a stop to all conversation for a couple of minutes. As I recall, they tried to ignore me as much as possible for the first couple of meetings, but I kept attending and gradually the ice melted and trust began to be built. (email)

Billy Reed describes Hallmark’s role in NCC as “the *writer*”: ... He would be with us all the time—would write about it ... Whenever we would meet,” whether that be in public conversations with the city or behind closed doors, “he would be there and he would write about it” (Interview).

In charge of NCC’s PR, Hallmark was a significant contributor to NCC’s core programming. The articles he produced broadcast news that Norris residents helped co-create. This was news written *with* the community—not merely *about* a community or *for* a community (Deans et al.). “I thought my role was to listen to these folks who knew their community and knew ... what the community needed,” Hallmark explains. “I had some skill as, you know, a budding journalist, so I thought ... my role was to take ... the message these folks came up with, take it to the local newspaper and ... get some action going.” As often as possible, he told “the story of the Norris Community” on campus too. “A lot of people didn’t realize what was going on,” he continued, “... maybe they just shut their eyes to it, but we needed to open those eyes and get them to do the right thing” (Carter et al.)

So Hallmark wrote. When he couldn’t get the local or campus newspapers to print it, he would type it up on his personal typewriter, mimeograph it at the campus, and distribute it around town himself. He knew instinctively, just as the other NCC members seemed to know, as Michael Warner argues, that “no single text can create a public ... In order for a text to be public, we must recognize it ... as a temporality of circulation” (90; 94). In order to keep that channel open, the texts had to keep circulating, and everyone involved had to participate in that circulation.

## Participation

“Someone has to put down the cotton sack,” Mr. Evans told my first-year students in a presentation last February, part of our Black History Month Speaker Series which he and other founding NCC members helped launch. “Someone has to drink from the white fountain” (Evans, “Black History”). His point here and in our many previous conversations and joint presentations around campus was a familiar one, though nonetheless significant. The metaphors “put down the cotton sack” and “drink from the white fountain” offer a particularly useful way to illustrate writing democracy in action, especially with respect to the crucial role played by ordinary citizens with

a deep respect for the entire community and its history and a desire to listen, often *rhetorically* (Ratcliffe).

On the surface, these metaphors embody a deeply problematic logic of autonomy that guides our master narratives concerning social change—i.e., someone extraordinary (agent) does something extraordinary (action) that changes the world. Such narratives set an impossible standard for civic engagement, of course, but our human desire to celebrate and find inspiration in the extraordinary accomplishments of extraordinary people keeps such myths in circulation (see also Royster and Cochran; Hesford). Such stories can be far more attractive than more realistic ones concerning civic engagement. Few find immediately attractive an opportunity to participate in activities designed for social change yet very unlikely to produce obvious, sustainable results.

Yet these metaphors also signify autonomy’s limits, as well as the historical, political and ideological forces at play in any human activity resisting the status quo. Of course, slavery didn’t end because “someone put down the cotton sack.” Segregation didn’t end because “someone drank from the white fountain.” Indeed no single individual starts a movement. Rosa Parks didn’t refuse to give up her seat one day because she was “tired” (Kohl; Loab, *Soul*). This demonstration was a significant rhetorical event, but it was also one for which she and countless others had prepared for years (see also Welch). Challenges to the logic of autonomy in civic engagement do not diminish the contributions of iconic figures like Rosa Parks or any other individual involved. Instead we remember “that her initial step of getting involved was just as courageous and critical as the fabled moment when she refused to move to the back of the bus” (Loab, “The Real”).

Our focus here is not on what such acts *accomplished* but rather on the ways they signify the participation of ordinary people. An agent (“someone”) acting (“put down the sack,” “drank from the white fountain,” “refused to give up a seat”) for a desired result, which is important regardless of whether or not this result comes to pass. Also crucial to these actions as rhetorical events symbolizing common goals (equality) and/or policy change (abolition of slavery, desegregation) are the rhetorical ecologies that give them meaning—not as an individual actor who is too tired or thirsty to adhere to behaviors scripted by society but as a rhetor involved in a rhetorical event enabled by a counterpublic and shaped by a particular series of historical, political, ideological, temporal, and spatial concerns (see Warner; Crowley; Ratcliffe). Rhetorical events like these rely upon a vast array of far more mundane texts, aural and written, as Rivers and Weber reveal in their “ecological read” of the Montgomery bus boycott. Mundane texts were similarly complicit in bringing local activist efforts like NCC into being.

Urging us to separate ideology from activism, William Exum argues, “ideological beliefs are a necessary basis for action, but” challenging the status quo “does not necessarily produce activism” (14). Indeed, Evans insists upon action—as a young college student in the early 1970s and today, as a retired pastor meeting again with local citizens and college students to learn what the community needs. He urges those who can, as he puts it, to “get busy” in responding to those needs. Thus perhaps the formula for activism suggested by NCC’s history may be best described thus: An agent (“someone”) acting (“put down the sack,” “drank from the white

fountain,” “refused to give up a seat”) only after (1) extensive research and meetings with others likewise passionate about changing the systems that forced that sack into their hands (slavery, then sharecropping systems), their bodies to the back of the bus and their thirsts quenched from the usually warm, frequently filthy “colored fountain” and (2) further study and additional work both within and beyond existing channels to determine the role to be played by particular demonstration (the sack/the fountain/the seat) and its potential contribution to the movement’s overall goals. Such a narrative lacks the punch of the actor-action-results formula, but it certainly leaves significant room for wide scale participation. In this way, an individual action—putting down the sack/drinking from the white fountain/refusing to give up one’s seat—can help establish a channel for communication across and about difference, not to reify racism’s existence but to remedy its effects.

Also crucial to our understanding of civic engagement, particularly on behalf of local, little known causes, is close attention to the location in which these actions take place and the rhetorical function of identification (Burke) against that local landscape and its particular history. In other words, someone (agent) acts (puts down the sack, drinks from the white fountain) in some identifiable place and at some identifiable time. Local channels are deeply reliant upon such factors. In the current analysis, both agents (NCC and John Carlos) act in Commerce, Texas, right before and soon after 1970, the point at which the Great Migration that dominated the 20<sup>th</sup> century began to return the nation’s African American citizens to the southern states (Wilkerson; “The New”; Frey).<sup>7</sup>

*Put down the sack.* Texas, especially rural Texas, is itself a disorienting mashup of competing narratives. Published in 1940, the Texas volume of the Works Progress Administrator’s *American Guide Series* captures the unique dualities of this large State thus: “More Southern than Western is the State’s approach to most political and social questions; more Western than Southern are the manners of most of its people” (Writers’ Program 5). East Texas was peculiarly southern with the State’s greatest concentration of cotton and related crops and, therefore, slaves. Texas’s harsh terrain and extreme temperatures, however, coupled with its unique history—as part of Spain until 1821 and then Mexico until 1836—meant it was also later to begin agricultural industry than much of the rest of the South. It was ranching, not farming, that captured the imagination and foregrounded the State’s identification as more Western than Southern. The significant population of Mexican-Americans drew Texas still farther West than South.

Perhaps it is this very duality (South/West) that dislodges Texas from our larger understanding of the civil rights movement. Perhaps it is its position as part of the “New South.” Whatever the reason, as historian Neil Foley insists,

... [T]he fact remains that most Anglo Texans were descended from transplanted Southerners who had fought hard to maintain the “color line” in Texas and to extend its barriers to Mexicans. Many Anglo Texas thus often wore two hats: the ten-gallon variety as well as the white hood of the Invisible Empire. (2)

The white community of Commerce no doubt resisted identification with its slaveholding past and were likewise reluctant to accept arguments challenging the equity of the sharecropping systems that followed. Texas wealth—largely absent from this region of the state—was built not on farming but on oil, and those who did raise crops were likely to do so on small farms not infrequently owned by someone else. Poverty dominated Northeast Texas when William L. Mayo, a pioneering educator from the mountains of Kentucky, arrived in 1889 to establish the white teacher’s college that Evans and Carlos would later attend. The institution Mayo built was designed to serve the area’s white farmers and their children, “regardless of their ability to pay” (see Gold), and the vast majority of area residents couldn’t afford to pay college tuition. Thus, to “put down the cotton sack” in this region meant challenging not only white owners but perhaps threatening the poor white locals who may have owned little more than the region’s recently freed slaves (see Philips; Foley; Bell). For the dominant publics living in and around Commerce during Reconstruction and the first few decades of Jim Crow, a clear channel for communication about slavery/sharecropping and its injustice would require far more than an individual act of resistance (“put down the cotton sack”), regardless of how representative it might be of resistance elsewhere.

*Drink from the White Fountain.* Segregation was, of course, a deeply divisive issue in Commerce. However, the events that most characterize local struggles here and, indeed, throughout much of the rest of the southern states, were fought not in the streets among local publics but in mundane documents ranging from interoffice memoranda among campus administrators, letters exchanged between campus leaders and area, state, and federal officials, legal documents, and petitions (Shabazz; Sokel; Dittmer).

A particularly useful example of this can be found in the circulation of documents surrounding two local segregationists and bitter enemies: US Senator Sam Rayburn, this university’s most famous alumnus, and James G. Gee, ETSU president from 1947-1966. From 1913 until 1961, Sam Rayburn represented this rural district dominated by voters loyal to Jim Crow and remained himself equally loyal to his constituents and, especially, ETSU, the institution that had given this poor farmer without a high school diploma a chance at a college education. Despite his stance on the issue (which some argue had softened considerably after decades in Washington DC) and the likely threat to his voting base it posed, he was an even more loyal Democrat and, as Speaker of the House, helped sign into law the most significant civil rights legislation since Reconstruction: the Civil Rights Act of 1954. His public connections to Lyndon B. Johnson, combined with this piece of legislation, made him a bitter enemy to a number of powerful local leaders.

His harshest local critic by far was President Gee. However, like Rayburn, Gee would find himself overseeing public transformations that effectively ended de jure segregation. Though a loyal segregationist, he did not challenge what he called the “inevitability of racial integration” (Gee). Instead he formed “a secret committee” whom he charged with studying desegregation elsewhere and offering recommendations. The primary and stated goal for our campus was what Gee and the committee called “a dignified integration,” arguing demonstrations against desegregation would threaten the local community’s sustainability far more than

any new admission policy ever could (Carter and Conrad; Wilkinson; Shabazz). In June 1964, Gee followed the committee's recommendations to the letter when he announced the lifting of "racial barriers" to admissions. By most available accounts, desegregation at ETSU occurred largely without incident, at least in terms of violent demonstrations. In this sense, perhaps it was, indeed, a "dignified integration," a characterization that remains a significant point of pride for local citizens.

By the time African American students like Carlos and Evans enrolled, local whites largely accepted racial integration's inevitability. Increasingly, however, the material changes that accompany that process—especially in this era of student revolt and black power/women's rights rhetoric—began to be characterized by many locals as "the racial problem." "In regard to the increasingly troublesome 'racial problem' in Commerce," says a local sophomore in a 1970 letter appearing in the campus paper, "... things may be getting worse" (Helmsly). For him and many other whites, evidence of this was the increasingly common presence of "incidents" like the one he describes in his letter. Not only had an African American box office worker recently challenged a white patron who had treated her unfairly, but the local press had printed letters from others praising black resistance. He appears as outraged as he was eloquent:

It is really sad to me that these people are still fighting a battle that was over years ago. I hope that one day they will get enough White money from the White taxpayers to pay for the education they will receive from White institutions with White professors so they can learn just exactly what it is they are fighting against. (Helmsley)

The fight "over long ago" included abolition of both slavery and segregation, of course. The fight that remains, according to critical race studies, is the systemic racism that persists across an America that allowed the sale of humans and laws built on a logic of white supremacy. In our color-blind society, race had been rendered invisible while racism's effects remain firmly entrenched in everyday life. While racism as a national problem, even at the height of the civil rights movement, may appear abstract, distant, and symbolic, the local, the everyday, is rarely abstract. When that local is sparsely populated (rural), when resources are scarce, as is the case here, major changes at local levels are hard to enact. In fact, "... racial segregation is more than a series of quaint customs that can be remedied effectively without altering the status of whites" (Bell 19b). Thus, perhaps, we can understand the town's slow uptake on social justice issues like these, as I will explain. In similar ways, as Catherine Prendergrast has argued, race has become what she calls "an absent presence" in our discipline—the ever present element we learn to look past or look around, forgetting the important ways race remains in our classrooms and our scholarship just as it remains a defining element in the rest of our everyday lives.

For NCC, the remedy for racism's current challenges was inherently *rhetorical*—establishing a clear channel of communication that essentially rhetoricized race in many of the same ways Nancy Welch has urged us to "rhetorize class" (11). To rhetoricize race is to approach it not as a cultural identity but instead the available means for persuasion and decision making power within and against the limits embedded in the systemic racism that shapes everyday life—especially in

the Jim Crow South in the decades immediately following desegregation.<sup>8</sup> For John Carlos, the remedy was largely *ideological*, drawing together a counterpublic based on a shared identity which, in Nancy Fraser and Michael Warner's articulation of the term, act in direct opposition to cultural norms. The counterpublic Dr. Carlos hoped to establish at ET five years before had many similarities with the one NCC brought into being in the early 1970s. Both attempted to disrupt injustices by transforming public discourse surrounding everyday racism. Yet while Carlos worked to link this discourse to global discourse surrounding a shared identity, NCC was fundamentally concerned with rhetorical agency and issues of local concern. NCC's channel was, after all, a local station in ways Carlos's channel simply *could* not, perhaps *would* not be.

## Resistance

*We declare our right on this earth to be a man, to be a human being, to be respected as a human being, to be given the rights of a human being in this society, on this earth, in this day, which we intend to bring into existence by any means necessary.*

—Malcolm X

In 1968, at the Mexico City Olympics, sprinters John Carlos and Tommie Smith rhetoricized race, calling global attention to the persistence of racism by taking full advantage of the means of persuasion available to them as black athletes representing the nation to the world (see Figure 2). That single iconic image of two African Americans, black-gloved fists raised and heads bowed as the national anthem played and millions booed, remains indelibly etched in our collective memory. Until recently, however, the message they intended, like the meaning behind much of the rhetoric of black power (see Stewart, Burgess, Scott and Brockriede), was rewritten and then altogether silenced by the racist politics the movement opposed.<sup>9</sup>

ET recruited John Carlos from Harlem in 1966, just two years before this global demonstration of what Edward P.J. Corbett would call "The Rhetoric of the Closed Fist."<sup>10</sup> In Harlem, Dr. Carlos had walked with Malcolm X—literally,

catching as many of Malcolm X's frequent presentations at the mosque on 116th street as he could, then following him around the neighborhood "like a scampering puppy dog" (Carlos and Zirin 26), peppering him with questions along the way. As part of the counterpublic called up in the discourse surrounding collective resistance "by any means necessary" (Malcolm X), Carlos was highly attuned to racism's complexity and ubiquity.

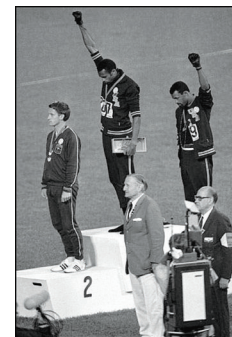


Figure 2. Carlos, 1968 Olympics (far right)



Figure 3. Carlos, ETSU Track Team (1966-67)

He knew racism's key challenges were just as present in the North as they were everywhere else. Yet he had never before experienced the covert forms of racism segregation presented—not personally, at least. Along with his young wife and their two-year old daughter, “We agreed to make a home for ourselves in Commerce,” Dr. Carlos recalls decades later. “But every last shred of dignity that we took with us to Texas was challenged” (Carlos and Zirin 64).

His direct link to an action designed to bring about necessary change can be traced to a rather unlikely place: his mailbox at the Commerce Post Office. There, he picked up the latest issue of *Track and Field* and found in it a renewed opportunity for active update in a counterpublic designed to challenge the systemic injustices he was experiencing firsthand. In that issue, he read about the Olympic Project for Human Rights (OPHR) that was just beginning to take hold in the fall of 1967 at San Jose State. “I was reading that at the same time I was ... actually living these same issues at East Texas State University,” Carlos explains in a recent interview (Kojo). NCC offered African American citizens a local channel through which they could communicate issues of local concern; OPHR, on the other hand, offered African Americans another *global* channel through which they could communicate issues of *global* concern. Through the global channel OPHR provided, Carlos could help challenge injustice world-wide, joining other African Americans in a boycott that, if successful, could largely cripple America's chances of success in the 1968 Olympics. “Why should we run in Mexico,” OPHR insisted, “only to crawl at home?”

In constituting the counterpublic thus named (“OPHR”), black athletes around the nation began to come together as agents of social change prepared to act (boycott), demonstrating (a) racism exists, (b) America needs African American citizens to achieve greatness, and therefore, (c) America must treat her African American citizens equitably. The local channel NCC provided, by comparison, drew local citizens together as agents of social change prepared to act (vote, share unflattering news about city beyond the local), demonstrating (a) inequalities exist in Norris, (b) Norris is part of the local community and the concerns of Norris affect the entire town, and therefore (c) Commerce must address persistent inequities. Both channels grew larger audiences as the frequency and number of “texts” both spoken and written about Norris increased in circulation. Listeners alone don't result in community transformation, however; access to a channel for communication does not necessarily give activists control over the messages received by the dominant power structure.

Across the nation, black athletes likely to be en route to the Olympics found themselves surrounded by reporters asking them about their position on the boycott. Within weeks of reading that *Track and Field* article in the Commerce Post Office, a series of local and campus interviews with Carlos “set this little campus on its ear” (Carlos and Zirin 72). “The social climate here for the Negro is discriminating and terrible,” Carlos told a campus reporter in 1967 (Anderson, “Carlos”). In a *Dallas News* article appearing a few days earlier, Carlos describes his key concerns this way: “You go out of state to a track meet and you are representing not only your school but the entire state. Yet you come back and find restaurants that say they don't serve Negroes ... [Y]ou go into a place to shoot a game of pool and they tell you Negroes aren't allowed” (Stowers). “If conditions don't change,” Carlos is quoted as saying to a

student reporter, “*something is going to happen at ET*” (Anderson, “Carlos,” emphasis mine).

The other African American athletes at ET during the time did not publicly challenge the validity of Carlos's statements to the press concerning discrimination, and many may have even supported his proposed, albeit vague, response (“something is going to happen at ET”). A number of white students were particularly vocal in their support of Carlos and his statements. No one denied the ongoing challenges of desegregation. Yet any collective resistance that began to mobilize locally in response to OPHR and the challenges it represented was quickly silenced in a surprisingly effective preemptive strike by campus administration.

Immediately after the campus paper published its interview with Carlos, the Athletic Director called all the black athletes together to discuss “all this boycott nonsense” (Carlos and Zirin). Following a two-hour meeting, the athletes involved issued a jointly authored “resolution” to the press: “besides the normal prejudices that are encountered in everyday life,” they explained, “there is no dissension or static between the two groups” (qtd. in Anderson 1). Carlos insisted that static was necessary, as those “normal prejudices ... encountered in everyday life” must not be allowed to continue. He was willing to sacrifice everything he had worked for his entire life to stand out against the persistence of racism in everyday life, and he would do exactly that the very next year atop the Olympic podium in Mexico City.

The resolution—perhaps coerced by campus administration, perhaps not—nonetheless silenced any potential of a local channel established through a shared identity with the now globally recognized OPHR. “We didn't appoint [Carlos] as a spokesperson,” the resolution insisted. “[I]n fact, it is the general opinion among negro [sic] athletes that we are not behind Carlos” (qtd. in Anderson 8). The local channel that had begun broadcasting global programming about black resistance went immediately silent. Carlos gathered up his family and left, returning to campus decades later as part of a book tour that includes a chapter about his time here called “Trouble in Texas,” a community now welcoming him with open arms.

## A Clear Channel

*Public discourse postulates a circulatory field of estrangement which it must then struggle to capture as an addressable entity. [...] [I]n order for this to happen, all discourse ... must characterize the world in which it attempts to circulate, and it must attempt to realize that world through address.*

–Michael Warner

In Harlem, through the discourse surrounding Malcolm X and other vocal elements of this counterpublic, Carlos found direct access to a channel through which he and other local African Americans might communicate their ongoing frustrations and concerns with the oppressive social and political structures. “His power,” Dr. Carlos explains of Malcolm X's appeal across Harlem “and the response of the audience, grew out of the fact that he was articulating ideas we were all thinking about all the time but didn't really have a language or vocabulary to express. For me, it was like

he grabbed onto my frustrations and turned them into logic” (Carlos and Zirin 29). Yet it would not be enough to turn “frustrations into logic” if no one was listening. Without a clear channel through which to broadcast these perspectives, without listeners, the reach is limited. At that moment, however, the movement’s strength held that channel open, circulating its discourse around the nation through newsstands, television screens, public speeches, and personal conversations.<sup>11</sup>

In 1965, the year before Carlos left Harlem for our university, his role model was assassinated. The channel established and maintained by the rhetoric of black power remained on air nonetheless, gaining new listeners all the time. While in Commerce, Dr. Carlos remained tuned in, of course, and students and citizens across Commerce were indeed listening. To some extent, they were even beginning to mobilize around such issues. Yet the local reception for this channel was weak and loyal listeners too few in number. Thus we see the limits of such broadcasts in this local instantiation of the global channel for collective resistance represented by leaders of the black power movement and OPHR in particular. Perhaps the urban, northern, and “outsider” identity markers Carlos brought with him to an area that largely identifies as rural and southern challenged his efforts to link local concerns with this globally recognized channel. Perhaps Carlos’s very status as an outsider may have threatened local sustainability. Regardless of the reasons, local reception for his form of protest was largely unavailable.

The channel NCC provided, on the other hand, relied upon local issues of shared concern. It is also not insignificant that Carlos had previously attempted to link Commerce to other channels nor that in the five years since multiple local and campus movements combined with national and international events had begun to produce significant local transformations. Indeed numerous local and global factors impacted the local reception of both the channel Carlos attempted to establish and the one NCC was able to provide. The circulation of largely mundane texts played a significant role in local broadcasts across these channels, limiting and expanding their reach.

The clear channel of communication NCC provided depended upon the frequent circulation of Norris Community news, especially that generated with Norris residents like the items Allen Hallmark wrote to shine “a spotlight ... on Norris” (Carter et al.). Equally important, however, were the letters exchanged between local residents and elected officials at both local and state levels, documents NCC members created and circulated to establish a local chapter of the NAACP, grant materials created to bring to Norris the millions of dollars it required but the city found itself unable to provide, tickets for the annual banquet designed to “improve relations between the Norris Community and the rest of the city” (“NCC Reception”) and raise funding for Norris improvement projects, as well as the records kept to ensure finances remained in order. NCC conducted surveys across Norris, kept strict records of their regular meetings, and maintained a newsletter. Even the sign on the door of NCC’s meeting space helped circulate Norris, bringing in new members like Hallmark. All of these factors and more contributed to the ongoing maintenance of the clear channel NCC provided.

In similar ways, a wide array of mundane texts surrounded Carlos’s local efforts, just as they do civic engagement anywhere. The discourse that effectively

shut down Carlos’s campus attempts were likewise shaped by a variety of mundane texts and exchanges, including the various letters, phone conversations, and other documents that called together the black athletes for the two-hour meeting that resulted in the resolution that “we didn’t appoint [Carlos] as our spokesman,” as well as the documents that led to this statement and its subsequent publication in campus news. Communication channels like these won’t open by sheer will, nor will any channel remain open after the discourse that brought it into being in the first place stops circulating.

Student populations are temporary populations and racism is not a “curable aberration” but institutionalized, systemic, persistent (Bell; Williams, Delgado). Civil rights secured by NCC thus began to lose ground as the student leadership graduated, representation among city leaders shifted to become dominated by those far less sympathetic to Norris’s remaining concerns, and the era of student activism gave way to the 1980s. By the time I began my current study of civic engagement in this local context, the forward march evident in that feverous period of reform seemed stalled, indeed rolling ever backward. The naming NCC provided gave way to “The Hole” and race was rendered, once again, “invisible,” even as racism seemed increasingly present—though certainly no more present in this local context than elsewhere across the nation (see especially Alexander’s *The New Jim Crow* and Conley’s *Being Black*). Yet in the very act of naming NCC again in my research, local public programming, and digital storytelling, we have begun circulating discourse about NCC that again calls it into being.

## A New Channel

Jacqueline Jones Royster reminds researchers “whatever the knowledge accrued ... it must be both presented and represented with this community.” Indeed, the community is not the object of our study but in fact “co-knowledge creators” (Royster). In the years since I first learned of NCC’s existence, I have been regularly moved by the generosity of these individuals and their desire to help recover NCC’s story and renew its key work. They’ve joined me on countless panel presentations throughout the area, contributed to various multimedia projects, emailed, called, or mailed artifacts and other details they thought might be of interest to me or otherwise useful in reconstructing NCC’s history and sharing it with others. Each conversation I have with these individuals leads to other individuals no less enthusiastic about sharing their memories and no less generous with their time. Each conversation leads to new archival materials for our library collections, which these individuals eagerly donate, and new research and outreach opportunities for my students, which they eagerly embrace.

Throughout, it remains absolutely clear such work is necessarily composed *with* the community not *about* the community (Royster; Deans). I am an outsider to the civic engagement efforts I describe in this article and my other work. I am not from Commerce, though I have spent much of my life in Texas. I am white, raised in middle class neighborhoods of Southern California and then South Texas. Before moving to Commerce in 2001, I had never lived in a rural area, and for most of the project under discussion, I have lived not in Commerce but in a large Dallas

suburb about an hour's drive away, and I am part of a generation widely regarded as apolitical, apathetic, and uninvolved (Generation X). I bring to these efforts not a controlling interest but rather my disciplinary expertise, the existing university resources I am able to leverage on behalf of such locally driven projects, and the ongoing support of colleagues across campus.<sup>12</sup>

I bring to this community partnership the support of internal research grants, external grants from NEH and Humanities Texas, and significant contributions from our university president (Dan Jones), provost (Larry Lemanski), and dean (Salvatore Attardo), which helped fund the Writing Democracy conference and, in recent years, the Converging Literacies Center (CLiC), a research initiative designed to "promote a better understanding of how texts and related literacy practices may develop, sustain, or even erode civic engagement across local publics, especially among historically underrepresented groups" (Carter, "Writing"). With this support and CLiC's mission to "develop educational and outreach initiatives designed to address relevant civic issues," I can bring to the community graduate student support that helps coordinate local presentations, research and writing toward important preservation projects, and ongoing attempts to capture these local stories through digital media. I bring contributions from my department and others toward cookies and coffee for our various campus presentations and the increasingly significant audiences these activities draw from both the campus and the community.

I regularly introduce undergraduate and graduate students to the many action research options available in local contexts like ours, which frequently leads to research and outreach that far surpasses my expectations or imagination. My students launched a voter registration drive in Norris (2012), began working with an area African American museum to secure funding for the restoration of an adjacent Rosenwald School (ongoing), and collaborated with long-time Norris resident and church historian Harry Turner to apply to have installed a Texas Historical Marker at the church hosting the original NCC meetings (installed 2011). In early 2010, after giving my graduate students a tour of Norris, Turner invited several of the international students back to speak to church members about their experiences growing up in Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, Thailand, Italy, and elsewhere. Each time, the presentations drew more than forty local citizens, the vast majority of whom have never spent any time outside Texas. My first-year students have conducted research on the various aspects of Norris history; my graduate students have presented research on Norris at regional and national conferences. Norris residents regularly attend my student's campus presentations of their work, and these individuals and countless others have presented alongside me on campus and in the community. Indeed, it seems altogether impossible that we can exhaust this local context and its history of activism, and every local context is likely to be similarly rich with opportunities. The "co-knowledge creators" throughout our local communities are important for dozens of reasons, not the least of which being, as Eli Goldblatt reminds us, "*because we live here.*"

## Endnotes

1. Ivory Moore, the first African American campus administrator and member of the city council, would go on to serve another 18 years on the city council, eventually becoming the first African American mayor of Commerce, Texas. Mr. Moore wrote his first successful grant while still a teenager in rural Oklahoma for the Works Progress Administration. He would go on to write millions of dollars in grants to serve Norris and campus minorities. Moore and other important local activists I cannot address for lack of space play a substantial role in my current book project on how local people excluded from public spaces garnered rhetorical agency in the decade after desegregation reached this area. In 2012, we were fortunate enough to begin the process of establishing an Ivory and Lennie Moore Collection in our university archives. The Moores tell us they are honored and continue to thank me for the opportunity. I am humbled by their humility. The honor, of course, is ours.

2. Throughout, my use of the term "texts" refers to both oral and written "texts," echoing Michael Warner's use of "texts" in his "text-based publics."

3. Unsustainable, at least in terms of the "strategic logics" employed by the university side of the partnership (see especially Jessica Restaino and Laurie Cella's forthcoming collection *Unsustainable: Owning Our Best, Short-Lived Efforts at Community Writing Work*)

4. I recognize that new media's participatory nature significantly expands our reach beyond "the local," at least in the abstract. However I also realize that, whatever mechanism I use to interact with the world, my physical body must always be located locally and thus must experience the world locally.

5. Not his real name, though the image in Figure 1 is his own.

6. Before this point, the vast majority of local citizens had either forgotten about or had never heard of NCC. Please see Carter and Conrad "In Possession" for additional details. Digital copies of these items and others from NCC's early history are now available in our university archives, generously donated from the personal files of Billy Reed and Opal Pannell.

7. According to this study, "college-educated individuals lead the new migration into the South. The 'brain gain' states of Georgia, Texas, and Maryland attracted the most black college graduates from 1995 to 2000, while New York suffered the largest net loss" (Frey 4).

8. In this use of race, I borrow directly from Nancy Welch's articulation of class. To disrupt injustices, Welch suggests, we "rhetorize social class," and, in doing so, "shift our definition of class from a focus on cultural identity to a focus on one's available means for executing decision-making power within and against privatization's strict limits on public rights and voice" (Living Room).

9. Time's coverage dripped with the same dismissive rhetoric that characterized much of the press surrounding the event: "'Faster, Higher, Stronger' is the motto of the Olympic Games. 'Angrier, nastier, uglier' better describes the scene in Mexico city last week" (62). "It was not a gesture of hate," explains Tommie Smith in a 1991 interview for *Sports Illustrated*. "It was a gesture of frustration" (Moore 7).

10. Given such characterizations and the historical and spatial context surrounding these efforts, it may be tempting to distinguish Carlos's efforts as

representative of Edward P.J. Corbett's "Closed Fist" and NCC's rhetoric as "Open Hand" (Carlos). That would be a mistake.

11. Though Corbett found rhetoric's Closed Fist problematic, many have pointed to its necessity. Indeed, in such circumstances the "Open Hand" may do little more than reify norms, silencing difference and perpetuating inequities (see Brown; Murdock). As Nancy Welch argues in this issue, "civility functions to hold in check agitation against a social order that is undemocratic in access to decision-making voice and unequal in distribution of wealth" (page). NCC's rhetoric cannot be exclusively characterized as "open hand" any more than Carlos's rhetoric was exclusively "closed fist." In their public rhetoric, NCC made it clear they would remain civil in their approach only as long as doing so proved fruitful. When those options were closed to them, however, they were prepared to "close that hand" (ibid, 291). The entire nation was tuning in to hear Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, Angela Davis, and others likewise circulating discourse that members of this counterpublic recognize and participate in themselves.

12. Especially important in this respect are library director Greg Mitchell, archivist Andrea Weddle, and athletic director Carlton Cooper. I am grateful for our ongoing collaborations and their many contributions.

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