
Looking Through the Semiotic Lens: Rhetorical Sponsors of Civic Engagement in Cyberpublics

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On January 19, 2015, an image of 13-year-old Vidal Chastanet appeared on Instagram, posted by an account belonging to the popular online photography project *Humans of New York*. Vidal is pictured with a slight grin on his face, standing on a sidewalk in his Brooklyn neighborhood of Brownsville, referred to by one resident as “one square mile of public housing, basically” (Sun). Vidal's own words appear in the photo's caption: “When you live here, you don't have too many fears. You've seen pretty much everything that life can throw at you. When I was nine, I saw a guy get pushed off the roof of that building right there” (Stanton).

Humans of New York (*HONY*) launched in 2010 on the blog site Tumblr. It began as photographer Brandon Stanton's ambitious creative vision to compile a gallery of New Yorkers, displaying portraits of 10,000 different residents of the five boroughs. He published the photos online, alongside a quote or personal anecdote from each subject. Stanton managed to capture the soul of a city, defined by its diversity as much as it is by its pizza, through the effective combination of visual and textual rhetorics. Today, *HONY* reaches over 8 million followers across its various social media platforms—2.7 million of which are on Instagram alone (Systrom).

Vidal was featured in the next post made to *HONY's* account, this time looking stoic in a pursed-lip close-up, accompanied by a quote in which he credited his principal, Ms. Lopez, as being



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the most influential figure in his life: “When we get in trouble, she doesn't suspend us. She calls us to her office and explains to us how society was built down around us. And she tells us that each time somebody fails out of school, a new jail cell gets built. And one time she made every student stand up, one at a time, and she told each one of us that we matter” (Stanton).

The power of Vidal's words influenced Stanton to visit the Mott Hall Bridges Academy himself. After this encounter and others that followed, he made a series of posts highlighting the triumphs and struggles faced by Ms. Lopez and

her staff in their efforts to provide quality education to their deserving students. “It can be very difficult for them to dream beyond what they know,” said Lopez (Stanton). Through social media, Stanton communicated to *HONY* followers the school's funding needs for a class trip to Harvard University. The purpose of the trip was to introduce students to opportunities they'd never before considered, and, in doing so, send a strong message: if Harvard is a tangible reality, then so are your dreams.

On January 22, 2015, Stanton created an Indiegogo crowdfunding campaign with an initial goal of raising \$100,000 to be awarded directly to school administrators. Contributions quickly surpassed this threshold, and *HONY* continued to profile the academy. As of the February 10, 2015 deadline, a total sum of \$1,417,884.00 was raised in online donations (“Let’s Send Kids to Harvard”). Mott Hall Bridges Academy can now afford to make visiting Harvard an annual tradition, in addition to establishing summer school programs and a student scholarship fund named in Vidal's honor. The student responsible for inciting such powerful change in his community made it all the way to the Oval Office to attend a personal meeting with President Barack Obama, at the behest of the president himself (Grinberg).



Models of Civic Engagement

Observing this narrative unfold spurred a desire to better understand the factors that led to such an impactful, unanticipated outcome of events for Mott Hall Bridges Academy. It serves as a valuable case study for understanding how civic engagement manifests from meanings cultivated in online spaces, or *cyberpublics* (Palczewski et al. 251).¹ Many Americans believe that modes of online civic engagement serve as nothing more than exercises in shallow, self-congratulatory behavior, only benefiting the *slacktivists'* self-esteem, rather than the social causes they champion (Milbank).

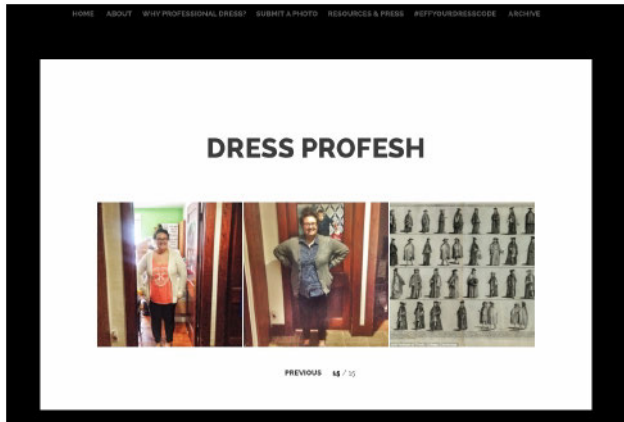
This is a simplistic, overgeneralized interpretation of a nuanced topic. Instead of drawing quick conclusions, we should be asking: How does the Internet serve as a sponsor for civic engagement outside the scope of its boundaries? How does the multimodal², narrative nature embodied by Instagram influence civic behavior? Which theoretical frameworks could be used to identify effective applications of rhetorical citizenship in cyberpublics? How do these applications translate to offline space?

Younger generations have not rejected activism, as others might expect. Rather, they have made an ideological shift from *dutiful* models of activism, a traditional approach to engagement rooted in a sense of social obligation, to an actualizing model of activism (Gil de Zúñiga and Valenzuela). Studies found ties linking online and offline discourses support the argument for cyberpublic sponsorship of civic engagement (Gil de Zúñiga and Valenzuela), citing trends in “looser personal engagement with peer networks that pool (crowd source) information and organize civic action using social technologies that maximize individual expression” (Bennett 839). As society continues to adopt more actualizing methods of engagement, it is important to understand how these motivations can be utilized within the public sphere to promote civic consciousness.

Vidal's story on *HONY* and the positive social action it initiated embody the evolving nature of how citizens engage with, and interpret meaning from, online rhetorics (e-rhetorics) to promote activism inside Internet ecologies (e-ecologies). It is important to challenge the notion that social impact is always quantifiable, so alternative case studies are required. For the purpose of clarifying my primary research (and usage of the term “activism”),³ *civic engagement* refers to the recognition of

having personal membership to a larger social fabric; “such an individual is willing to see the moral and civic dimensions of issues, to make and justify informed moral and civic judgments, and to take action when appropriate” (Elrich xxvi).

The next site I examined was Katie Manthey's *Dress Profesh*. The *Dress Profesh* Tumblr site began



as a self-serving documentation tool, intended to promote personal accountability for productivity, while working from home on her PhD fellowship (Manthey and Turner). Manthey forced herself to adopt a routine, including an expectation of appropriate dress, as if she worked in a setting outside the home. Maintaining a visual and textual log of her daily outfits empowered Manthey through objective observation: the quality and frequency of her scholarly output increased when she held herself to the same appearance standards as those expected of employers in formal

workplaces. The project evolved into a shared space for people of all career fields to submit photos and descriptions of their daily outfits as a way to challenge engrained social constructs of professional appearance—the byproduct of “inherently unequal” hierarchal power structures (Rios).

The gallery forces the audience to unpack the privilege inside of their invisible backpacks (McIntosh) by using visual rhetorics to convey the “inherently racist, sexist, abelist, sizeist” nature of society's expectations for a professional's appearance (Manthey and Turner). *Dress Profesh* forces individuals to confront important questions: Who is allowed to define the meaning of professionalism? Who is served by adherence to socially sanctioned interpretations of professional dress? How are certain groups unfairly disadvantaged by this system? And how can these systems be challenged by expressing bodily autonomy and personal agency through our conceptions of professionalism?

The final site I will look at is *Blue Velvet: Re-dressing New Orleans in Katrina's Wake*. In a piece published by *Creative Nonfiction* magazine titled, “Binary Truths: Creative Nonfiction in Our *Electronic Age*,” writer Eric LeMay dubs this online multimedia project as required reading. LeMay describes the website, curated by David Theo Goldberg, Stefka Hristova, Erik Loyer, and Liu Sola, as “an exploration of the city after the hurricane [that] uses audio, text, photography, video, and maps to chart and question the official and unofficial narratives that envelop New Orleans and the city's contested history.”



This final case study differs from the others in that it is not hosted on a social media platform. Its relevance as a form of social media (by the most literal translation) justifies its inclusion as primary research. *Blue Velvet's* website design uses visual and aural rhetorics to encapsulate audiences in a sensory experience of New Orleans life before and after Hurricane Katrina. Users decide the theme of their visit based on feedback from their personal engagement with the page's multimedia. The decision made by audience members to interact with specific elements on the site determines which subsequent elements will be made available to them, resulting in a unique experience for each visitor. *Blue Velvet* uses media as a way to challenge social truths by fostering social connections between citizens of the cyberpublic and the people of New Orleans.

This research project seeks to gain a broad understanding of how civic engagement is sponsored through alternative conceptions of online rhetoric and interpreted meaning. A solid theoretical framework for understanding rhetoric must be constructed in order to accomplish this. Established rhetorical theories and concepts will serve as a contextual lens for analysis, by which sorts of civic sponsorship can be identified within each case study, fostering deeper insight into how rhetorical citizenship is developed by different cyberpublics.

Defining Rhetorical Citizenship

The necessity of establishing a working definition for *citizenship* became apparent early on in the research process. Citizenship is the foundation of all civic engagement. The term has come to represent such a broad spectrum of traits, rights, and actions that it proved necessary to define its meaning in the context of my research. By its most basic interpretation, citizenship is defined “legally as membership in a particular nation-state” (Wan 33). Cultural theorists expand on the legal perspective to acknowledge the cultural facets of citizenship, including: “cultural identity, standing and status, civic virtue, everyday habits and participatory action” (Wan 33). These principles, when combined with rhetorical devices to advance personal agency, constitute rhetorical citizenship.

It is important to note that literacy is considered intertwined with the practice of rhetorical citizenship (Wan 37). Takayoshi and Self identify a key goal for U.S. institutions of secondary education as the preparation of “literate graduates—intelligent citizens who can both *create meaning in texts* and *interpret meaning from texts* within a dynamic and increasingly technological world” (8). Limitations are placed upon the concept of citizenship when it is defined as status-dependent.⁴ For the purpose of primary research, the term *citizenship* references a cultural perspective—“basic habits of interaction in public spheres” (Wan 45)—distinguished by one’s place in society.

In this way, citizenship is a manifestation of *ethos*, “which encompasses the individual agent as well as the location or position from which that person speaks or writes” (Reynolds 326). *Ethos* is recognized as integral to analyzing the function of rhetorical citizenship, as it is “cultivated through a number of civil, political, and social rights and obligations” (Wan 37). The subtle nuances in how one chooses to define *citizenship* influences the perception of how meaning is created, and interpreted, within multimodal rhetorics.

Five pillars of rhetorical theory constitute a framework by which primary research can be structured, providing an objective standard for analysis that allows for a synthesis between models based on various tools of rhetoric. *Kairotic spaces*, as defined by Price, are discursive settings in which “knowledge is produced and power is exchanged” (60). Kairotic spaces take into consideration the contextual influence of power dynamics, limited infrastructure access, participant attitude, and physical space in sites used for transmitting information. When determining the value of rhetorical exchanges, a key element involves “the pairing of spontaneity with high levels of... impact” (Price 61).

Ratcliffe’s theory of *rhetorical listening* emphasizes the importance of listening as an exercise in civic engagement, a mode often overlooked in favor of writing, reading, and speaking (197). It serves as a trope for *interpretive invention*⁵ (Ratcliffe 204), allowing for more productive discursive exchanges, by taking into account the personal agency of both speaker and listener when employed as a “code of cross-cultural conduct” (Ratcliffe 220). It is necessary to *stand under discourses*⁶ taking time to digest their intended meaning, for civic engagement to occur.

Bitzer proposes in his theory of the *rhetorical situation* that “every situation prescribes its fitting response” (11). Meaning is interpreted, and thus defined, by how audiences—“persons who are capable of being influenced by discourse and of being mediators of change” (Bitzer 8)—respond to the demands and constraints of *exigence*—“an imperfection marked by urgency... an obstacle” (Bitzer 6).

Vatz’s theories challenge Bitzer’s notions that meaning is intrinsic to situations and that it is publicly observable (156). Instead, meaning results from the communication surrounding rhetorical situations; it is not based on the principle of their existence alone. Rhetoric is not the cause of

meaning, but rather the effect (Vatz 160).

Edbauer's theory of *rhetorical ecologies* explores how meaning is interpreted from rhetoric's "material effects and processes" (23) beyond the limitations imposed by paradoxical *sender, receiver, text* models,⁷ which tend to view rhetorics as *elemental conglomerations* (7), rather than the result of particular encounters with rhetoric (23). Rhetorical ecologies "operate within a network of lived practical consciousness or structures of feeling" (Edbauer 5) that are in perpetual flux. Edbauer posits that rhetorics are meaningful because of the metaphorical, and literal, places we encounter them.

This perspective is a lens through which *HONY's* Instagram, *Dress Profesh*, and *Blue Velvet* can be explored as affective sponsors of civic literacy and engagement. The selected models serve as examples of how meaning is cultivated within e-ecologies and how semiotic interpretation incites social engagement. With the evolution, and increasing influence, of online rhetorics comes the emergence of new sponsors of rhetorical citizenship. These spaces must be considered, and evaluated, as valid modes of sponsorship. Existing theories of rhetoric can guide us in analyzing how cyberpublics operate as sites for critical civic engagement through pragmatic⁸ relationships with users.

Rhetoric and Civic Engagement in Cyperpublics

HONY relies heavily on a combination of narrative and visual rhetorics, through its Instagram and otherwise. The two rhetorical devices used simultaneously create an effect wherein the impact of one device is enhanced by the impact of the other. As Palczewski, Ice, and Fritch point out: "the power of the visual proof enhances the power of the words"; they have the power to form opinions and create meaning (62). Were one element absent, it is unlikely that Vidal's story would have held the same weight with the audience. What is it about the specific visual and textual rhetorics employed that influenced their overall effectiveness?

The original post featuring Vidal set a somber tone to his narrative. Both his expression and the attached *representative anecdote* convey a sense of helplessness. The representative anecdote "must have scope... yet it must also possess simplicity" (Palczewski et al. 137) in order to summarize Vidal's ethos. The audience is then empowered to "understand the appropriateness of the narrative" (Burke). Perhaps viewers felt sympathetic to his living situation, or perhaps they began to form judgments about his character rooted in their own personal prejudices. The power behind this rhetoric lies in the audience's preconceived notions being challenged. The two back-to-back posts about Vidal created a dynamic juxtaposition that engaged the audience in a way the original post would not have done on its own. Together they created an impactful narrative of a boy who, thanks to the support from his principle, strived to overcome the limitations imposed by his place in the world.

The exigence of Vidal's narrative capitalized on the idea that the unexpectedness of events "calls for particular messages at particular times" (Gronbeck 91). When Stanton took the photograph

and uploaded it the *HONY* Instagram, he had no reason to anticipate the events that would transpire. But when it mattered most, he was capable of recognizing an imperative need to issue a response to said unexpected events (Palczewski, Ice, and Fritch 205), feeling "invited" or "called" upon to respond to his audience's rapidly growing interest in knowing more about Vidal and his principle Ms. Lopez. The progress of the narrative surrounding Mott Hall Bridges Academy was accessible to a wide audience because rhetorical listeners find them



"easier to follow than detailed observations or complex reasoning patterns" (Palczewski, Ice, and Fritch

126). People who were engaged by this event might not have encountered it had Vidal's story been expressed exclusively through text, such as in a long-form article published in a periodical about the experience of growing up in Brownsville. As Vidal's photos began to take on an iconic quality, Stanton committed to an extensive series profiling students and teachers at the Academy. This allowed for the school's culture to be captured and conveyed in an authentic manner to outsiders. Fostering a sense of connectedness between Instagram users and the Mott Hall Bridges Academy community is what made raising over a million dollars in online donations to the school possible. A promise of opportunity, resulting from *HONY's* effective use of multimodal rhetorics on social media, became tangible to the school's students and teachers alike.

The main purpose of *Dress Profesh*, in its present state, is to challenge the systemic oppression that manifests from mainstream interpretations of professionalism. This is an implied message of *HONY*, but in this case, it is an explicit mission. When people try to imagine what constitutes a professional appearance, a few things come typically to mind: suits, ties, styled hair, subtle makeup, not-too-high heeled shoes, unblemished skin, and an overall conservative aesthetic. Depending on the context, these boundaries can be pushed to accommodate maybe one or two “zany” exceptions— as if these minute deviations from the norm will somehow convey a sense of one's unique identity.

The blog format of *Dress Profesh* allows it to function as a dynamic space for the transmission of information that challenges the status quo. What most do not realize is that there are specific sociological markers, such as race, ethnicity, gender identity, or able-bodiedness, present in our mental image of professionalism. Gallery submissions and the hashtag *#effyourdresscode* encourage members of the professional community to self-identity as such, forcing audiences to reconsider the definition of professional. Some may question their qualifications for this group, which is an intentional consequence of *Dress Profesh*. Alternative discursive spaces offer alternative meanings to exclusive concepts.

If we consider the dictionary definition for “professional”—“done or given by a person who works in a particular profession”—we are left with a lot of room for translation. How can such a vague concept have such rigid implications? Its meaning, as it is widely understood by society, is the byproduct of an intentional system of exclusion, designed to the benefit of a small, privileged portion of the population. While this lack of concrete understanding empowers those at the top to maintain the status quo, it also proves to be advantageous to everyone else who is in pursuit of defining their own professional personas.⁹ Through a combination of visual rhetorics (photo gallery) and textual rhetorics (articles, quotes, blog posts), an online professional ecology emerges that manages to legitimize citizens' memberships to a community they might have felt alienated by prior to their encounter with *Dress Profesh*.



Blue Velvet merges multimodal rhetorics and an innovative, interactive database design to engage audiences by “encouraging connections, transversals, and relationalities” (Goldberg) in the context of Hurricane Katrina's aftermath in New Orleans. Visitors are met by a nondescript homepage with only the word “begin” prompting their journey further, as the hypnotic sound of rushing winds and surf plays in the background. On the next page, text appears: “1. NEW ORLEANS” races across a banner at the top of the site, while a link titled “sociality” bounces from side-to-side in the middle of the screen. A series of terms appear to rain down the page, only to disappear and reappear again; they include *social boundaries*, *ecology of enigma*, *racial “purity,”*

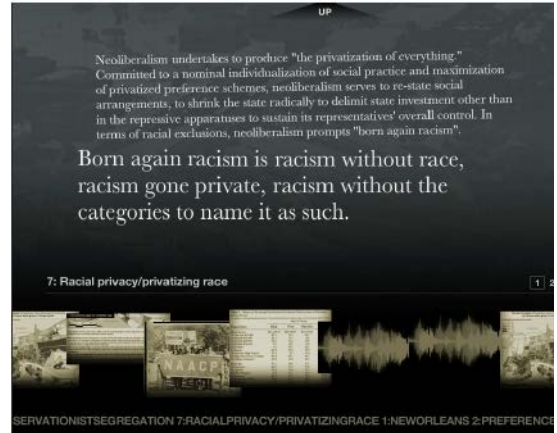
ecological drainage system, perennial anxiety, city on edge, subtropical swampland, gumbo ingredients, and deadly detritus.

When users click on the word “sociality,” a content shift occurs. The design aesthetic is intended to make the audience feel as if they are being transported underground, a symbolic action¹⁰ representative of “going deeper” to unearth the reasons underlying Katrina's destruction. The soundtrack changes to an anxious compilation of percussion and hushed whispers. This change in mood influences the viewer's perception of meaning. Each subsection of content features a combination of visual and text-based elements.

Selected bits of impactful text explain the relevance of each contributing factor to the subsection's theme, reinforced by the inclusion of maps, photographs, video clips, and data graphics. The result is a medium that has the same quality and abundance of information as a research paper might. The difference is found in its presentation and delivery. Audiences are not mere observers, separated by the comfortable distance a traditional essay creates; rather, they are immersed in the culture and history of New Orleans' socio-economic-political dynamics.

There are a total of 24 defined, overarching themes that scroll across the top of the page, each bringing up a correlated subsection when clicked.¹¹ As users continue to engage with the multimodal elements, the title of each new section is added to the list based on the order in which they were accessed. An intentional path is designed for the information to emerge in a specified order, but once a section has been added to the scrolling index, users are free to move between them as they please. The content inside each subsection can be explored in accordance with the will of the user.

Blue Velvet's innovative, creative use of online space enhances the audiences' experience as members of a cultural ecology, defined by a “system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms” (Geertz 89). Audiences are empowered to grasp New Orleans' rhetorical situation as being resultant from a conglomeration of factors, all-encompassed by *the Event*—“the tear in the social fabric that turns natural occurrences into social disasters, into catastrophes” (*Blue Velvet*). By functioning as a kairotic space for the transmission of culture through material effects and processes (Edbauer 23), *Blue Velvet* pushes audiences towards meaningful encounters by mode of rhetorical listening to understand the exigence of Hurricane Katrina.



Finding Meaning in Cyperpublics

There is an evolution between case studies in the explicitness of their meaning, as conveyed by authors to their audiences; each highlights varying strengths in their different applications of rhetoric. It is up to the viewer to determine the effectiveness of each mode. In an abstract sense, most people claim to support the concepts of equality, opportunity, and service that uphold rhetorical citizenship. While each case sponsors civic engagement, they differ in their methods of using rhetoric to do so. It is necessary for the audience's loyalty to social truths—“those beliefs about what is right that people have arrived at together” (Palczewski, Ice, and Fritch 133)—to be challenged in order for them to see the reality of a society that fails to uphold the ideals it espouses. *HONY*, *Dress Profesh*, and *Blue Velvet* each represent a valid sponsor of civic engagement due to their uses of rhetorical conventions (defined by Price, Ratcliffe, Bitzer, Vatz, and Edbauer) as means for confronting citizens with objections to entrenched, social truths.

It is important to note that access to cyperpublics is stratified by offline socio-economic status

("After the Protest"). Given that 64% of Americans now own smartphones (Smith), it would seem this division will only continue to shrink in the near future. Other research has pointed to a *participation divide* across socioeconomic lines that impacts which online spaces users seek out, pointing to a sort of confirmation bias (Blank; Hoffmann et al.; van Deursen et al.). However, this notion is disputed by some, such as communication scholar Lincoln Dahlber, who finds that "the Internet is being used by many people to encounter difference that they would not normally encounter" (830).

Identifying offline applications for the methods of sponsoring civic engagement observed in each case study falls beyond the realistic scope of this project, an issue I was only able to resolve upon deciding to substitute an original case study—civics classes at Hope Community Center¹²—with two alternatives (*Dress Profesh* and *Blue Velvet*) discovered during the research process. Identifying strategies for online outreach in nonprofit communities proved overambitious, so focus was instead centered on the impact of rhetorical strategies used in cyberpublics for producing meaning through multimodal literacies. This research project will hopefully benefit future pursuits toward understanding the role of semiotics in fostering relationships with civic engagement that are transferable between online and offline spaces.

Notes

1. Palczewski, Ice, and Fritch define *cyberpublics* as: "publics formed or strengthened through the use of the Internet and social media" (257).
2. Dale Jacobs provides a thorough explanation of the concept of *multimodality* in "Marveling at 'The Man Called Nova': Comics as Sponsors of Multimodal Literacy."
3. Merriam-Webster defines *activism* as "a doctrine or practice that emphasizes direct vigorous action especially in support of or opposition to one side of a controversial issue." For the purpose of my primary research, activism is considered an ideological action rather than physical.
4. Wan's commentary on status-dependent brands of citizenship: "The United States has cultivated the idea that citizenship is not just a birthright but an achievable status, which residually has resulted in a citizenship based on individual actions and behavior" (27).
5. Ratcliffe believes that through rhetorical listening, or interpretation, new meanings can be created.
6. Ratcliffe's definition of *standing under discourses*: "consciously standing under discourses that surround and others, while consciously acknowledging all our particular and fluid standpoints. Standing under discourses means letting discourses wash over, through, and around us, and then letting them lie in there to inform our politics and ethics" (205).
7. Bitzer's model of the rhetorical situation is considered by Edbauer to be an example of a *sender, receiver, text* model.
8. For the purpose of this research, *pragmatic* is referred to in the context of semiotics, meaning: a relation between signs and sign-using agents or interpreters.
9. Palczewski, Ice, and Fritch define *persona* as "the character, role, identify, authority, and image a rhetor constructs and performs during a rhetorical act" (150).
10. Palczewski, Ice, and Fritch define *symbolic action* as "expressive human action, the rhetorical mobilization of symbols to act in the world" (7).
11. The 23 other sections and subsections include: PREFERENCES: neo-conservatism; LIBERTY: homogeneity; ACTIVIST SEGREGATION: segregation; REDLINING: redistrict; CONSERVATIONIST: race neutrality; RACIAL PRIVATIZING/PRIVATIZING RACE: born again racism; CATASTROPHE: disaster relief; APPARITIONS: signs; POLITICS OF FEAR: fear; CRISIS MANAGEMENT: vulnerability; EMERGENCY: immobility; CARCERALITY: structural racism; EXPOSURE: civility; VIOLENCE: special treatment; SKIN: condomization; MISRECOGNITION: immigration; SURIVING: live free or die; MILITARIZATION: redistribute; IN-SECURITY: security; IN-VISIBILITY: pollution; DISENCHANTMENT: privatization; SINGING THE BLUES: surgical; RE-DRESS: homogenized apartness.

12. Hope CommUnity Center is a nonprofit out of Apopka, FL that seeks to address the needs of Central Florida's immigrant and farmworker communities.

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