Abstract: In this teacher practitioner article, we share our experience presenting a humanities lesson in which students created a remix, or mashup, by combining contemporary fiction with historical documents. Theoretical underpinnings of this project included the work of linguists Kress and Van Leeuwen, who noted that texts are shaped by multiple recontextualizations or remediations by different creators and users in different places at different times. Kellner’s work exploring how readers use history to read texts and texts to read history also informed our practice, as did Bakhtin’s conceptualization of the intertextual linkages and nesting of ideas. Our context was a private school in the southwest U.S., which began as an institution for assimilating indigenous youth. We presented this lesson to a racially, ethnically, and economically diverse 12th grade class of ten students. The remix activity encouraged students to engage with the documents and to explore the tense relation between the ideals of our country and current realities. The lesson resulted in students grappling with current examples of racism in their lives and in society at large and producing works that showed understanding of the how the past is woven into the fabric of the present. Keywords: anti-racist teaching, multimodality, remix, social justice, young adult literature
Introduction

Living in a country where instances of racism and extrajudicial responses from officials of so-called public safety are commonplace, classrooms should be spaces where students are supported in thinking critically about texts and across texts. With critical understandings, students can then question their social worlds (Freire & Macedo, 1987). That questioning comes as students participate in complex activities. As educators, we want to help students learn criticality—to ask the questions that will help students consider their social realities—as well as develop the empathy to identify with how others are thinking and feeling (Varghese, 2018). Above all, we want students to know that we understand the perilousness of these times. Our hearts are with those who have been harmed by injustice, even as we work for stronger communities.

As a classroom teacher and a teacher educator, we designed and implemented a text remixing project that inquired into racism, specifically anti-Blackness from Dear Martin by Nic Stone (2018) and alongside Martin Luther King’s I have a Dream speech (1963) and the Declaration of Independence (1776), for high school students in a humanities class. The purpose of this Voices from the Field article is to reflect on our thinking behind designing the remix activity as it was grounded in multimodal intertextual composition. We also share the steps we followed in conducting the remix activity centered on social justice as two white educators, along with examples of student remixes and our commentary related to our instructional goals. We hope our descriptions are useful for other teachers who are interested in making connections, pairing historical documents with novels, and promoting reading for the purpose of social critique.

Our Context

The high school graduation rate in our state is among the lowest in the nation, and so are our national test scores. We experience tension between calls for basic, easy-to-deliver curriculum that will make the state look better on national rankings, and our desire to create curriculum that liberates minds and addresses inequity.

Brigid is an experienced teacher of a two-year humanities course at an urban independent school in the Southwest. The purpose of her class is to merge English language arts and history topics. In this school, 85 percent of the entire student body identifies as non-white; about 40 percent of students are international students who speak languages other than English as a primary language. Many students are registered members of at least one of the 23 Native

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1 We acknowledge that there is a gender spectrum and that myriad pronouns exist that we can use when referring to individuals in our writing. Throughout this article we use pronouns to refer to individuals that correspond with the pronouns they use to refer to themselves.

2 In this article we chose to capitalize all racial and ethnic groups except for “white.” We made this choice because we felt that we were writing about the lives, experiences, expressions, and ideas of groups of people who do not identify as white, and we wanted the locus of power to be with those identities rather than our own.
American tribes located in the state. In addition, about 20 percent of the student body has a diagnosed disability that affects learning.

Brigid teaches in buildings originally constructed in the 1880s for the assimilation of Pueblo Indigenous peoples and later, for the English language training of Spanish-speaking boys. Many of the buildings have classic Adobe coverings, typical of the Southwest, but the overall architecture is reminiscent of the stark, institutional, assimilation boarding schools with small rows of windows, cramped hallways, plain walls with drab colors, and dark empty corners (Robbins et. al., 2006). The design of the edifices highlights schooling as a form of violence (Coles, 2016; Watkins, 2018). This violence occurs as students are forced to learn in spaces deliberately constructed both physically and ideologically to oppress them. Currently, the school administration mandates college preparatory curriculum for all students. Although they do not have to take standardized tests, there is still pressure to provide a curriculum emphasizing content, values, traditions, and modes of discourse that reflect and preserve the status quo of white power (Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013). Although the school grants teachers considerable latitude in what they teach, there is no call for strong critical framing on social issues such as race, and there is no particular acknowledgement of the history of the space.

The specific class where we conducted the remix activity was comprised of ten students total. Five of these were international students: one of Egyptian descent who had also lived in Saudi Arabia, three from Viet Nam, one from Hong Kong, and one from China. One student identified as Puerto Rican, one identified as Black, one identified as Indigenous Navajo (or Diné), one identified as Asian American, and one was a registered member of a Pueblo Indigenous community in our state. All students in this class had been identified by their previous English and history teachers as disengaged from and struggling with the demands of their courses. Although the students’ placement into the class positioned them in deficit, we wanted to offer students challenging and interesting experiences that drew on their strengths as racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse youth.

Mary is a teacher educator and university instructor who studies online and multimodal literacy. She had visited the class three to five times per month during the school year and had done so for several years. In accordance with Brigid’s interest in learning to use a wider range of strategies for writing and using digital resources, we plan some activities and lessons together during the school year. When Mary visits, she offers mini-lessons, conducts small group conversations, and directs the students and Brigid to additional resources online and offline about class topics.

“We wanted students to see the bravery in their own lives and experiences—particularly the intellectual bravery of . . . calling out incivility . . . in text and in their communities.”

Moving from Dear Martin to the Founding Documents

Dear Martin is a contemporary young adult novel by Nic Stone that was published in 2018. The protagonist is Justyce, a young Black man of modest means attending a predominantly white school in Atlanta, Georgia. Justyce’s socioeconomic situation reflected the experiences of many of the students. Some of the students had also previously attended schools that were mostly populated by white peers.

Justyce’s experiences in the novel provided multiple opportunities for critical analysis of instances of injustice perpetrated against Justyce and people in his
community. Besides our goal to understand Justyce as a brave and interesting character, we wanted students to see the bravery in their own lives and experiences in text and in their communities. —We particularly emphasized the intellectual bravery of tackling difficult issues in texts, comparing canonical texts to their own experiences, making interpretations and defending them, and calling out incivility, particularly anti-Blackness where they found it. Finally, we wanted to build a bridge between the course’s English language arts and history content. We feel these primary sources are critical to democratic civic dialogue about how to move forward in the face of all-too-frequent terrible racialized incidents.

In the novel, Justyce kept a journal in which he conducted an ongoing epistolary dialogue with Martin Luther King, Jr. By keeping the diary, Justyce worked to make sense of racial profiling, laughing at racist jokes, affirmative action, and many other issues related to race in American life. The format of the book as plot alongside the diary entries opens space for making connections between texts. One text we chose was the I Have a Dream speech by King (1963). What we noticed as we prepared to teach King’s speech was that often he referenced other founding documents, such as Declaration of Independence by Thomas Jefferson (1776). King’s references were embedded in arguments that those documents were hypocrisy until all Americans had political, social, and economic opportunities. In fact, the Declaration embodied tensions and hypocrisies, similar to what Justyce grappled with in the novel. In planning, we realized that we could create the opportunity for an aesthetic experience with students through making meaning using the novel, the speech, and the Declaration as the source material (Rosenblatt, 1994).

Remix as a Multimodal Literacy Process

A remix—sometimes called a mashup—is the blending together of two or more texts. Remixing happens often out of school, but less often in it. For example, the television series Glee (Fox) that ran from 2009 to 2015 featured a high school choir where two or more songs were often combined to great effect in exploring plot events and character development. Remixes are powerful because they expose intertextual linkages and demonstrate how ideas are nested together (Bakhtin, 1981; Fairclough, 1992). It was these linkages that caught our attention because all knowledge is an intertextual remix (Bakhtin, 1981; Jocson, 2013). Further, because remixing can be used to illustrate both harmony and disharmony, it seemed a strong strategy to explore the tensions inherent in Justyce’s life as he came to terms with anti-blackness while coming of age.

In their remixing of these documents the students created spaces for themselves within these iconic documents as they used them to express their understandings of racism and anti-Black sentiment.”

Linguists Kress and Van Leeuwen (2001) noted that texts are shaped by multiple recontextualizations or remediations by different creators and users in different places at different times. In our case, we wanted students to realize that these three texts had multiple meanings and that interpretations of those meanings could be reshaped to represent or highlight important ideas. However, drawing out those multiple meanings would require students to develop deep familiarity with all of the texts. It also would require them to become sensitive to their responses to the texts. Furthermore, remixing these particular texts required students to decompose and recreate texts that have become part of the canon of the U.S.’s
structure and self-image. In their remixing of these documents, the students created spaces for themselves within these iconic documents as they used them to express their understandings of racism and anti-Black sentiment.

Although historically, compositions that borrow heavily from multiple texts have sometimes been misunderstood by teachers as plagiarism, we accepted the argument that remixes appropriate, borrow, and blend texts to create new(er) legitimate texts by leveraging cultural meanings (Lessig, 2008). Often original texts used in remixes represent different modalities or semiotic domains, such as oral or written language, images, symbols, sounds, gestures, and artifacts. The speech was written and then read and recorded in writing as a series of transmediational acts (Suhor, 1984). Similarly, the declaration is a document that is both read and heard (Miller & Shepard, 2004). Moreover, Kress (2010) argued that even linguistic text is visual in how it is arranged on the page, including the white spaces and the font. In this project, students were invited to participate in text creation that also spanned multiple modes to engage with the surrounding social discourses about ideas common to all three texts (speech, declaration, novel), such as freedom and equity.

Once we understood how multiperspectival lenses operated, we looked at Kellner’s work about understanding layers of meaning in text in critical media literacy (Kellner & Kim, 2010). According to Kellner (2003), whose major scholarly interest is in how media can contribute to hegemony and counter-hegemony, readers use history to read texts and texts to read history. In our case, we were asking students to use the I have a Dream speech (1963) and the Declaration (1776) to read each other and then, use them both to read Dear Martin (2018). In turn, Dear Martin could be used to read both texts as well, alongside other reading students have done about social inequality and their own experiences. In this scenario, there were multiple possible relations between texts and contexts and media culture and history, and among the social worlds of the students composing in our classroom. Therefore, students could produce an infinite number of remixed responses situated within the context of the original texts and their own experiences. In so doing, students could be positioned to mix multiple levels and periods of history—their own histories, the 1960s through King’s commentary, and the eighteenth century through political document. This mix also would inform and be informed by Justyce’s experiences and Stone’s writing in Dear Martin.

Finally, we considered identity positionings in the process of composing (Hull & Katz, 2006). For example, we understood that some students might be uncomfortable talking about race and racism with us because of our status as white women and our position of power as teachers. Instead, the remix allowed students to grapple with ideas in the abstract and then share them through an embedded, personal artifact. This activity prompted critical thinking, but it did not ask students to directly lay bare traumas they may have experienced (although students were certainly free to share if they wished). By engaging with remix as an interpretive act with multiple possible responses, we were providing a space for capturing students’ impressions and understanding on their own terms.

**Remixing Activities**

We initiated the remix project when students were about a third of the way through Dear Martin. At this point in the novel, Justyce was arrested as a result of racial profiling and encountered the casual racism of Justyce’s classmates and the institutional racism of his school. Students continued a habit of journal writing that was already a routine in the classroom, but for this project, the journaling added an
additional layer of interest because *Dear Martin* is also written as letters that are more for introspection than to actually send to a person. Thus, the journals functioned as an important multi-genre, multi-purpose space for looking inward and moving outward while responding to text (King, 2020).

To complete the project, the class reviewed previously discussed issues of legal segregation that were under scrutiny in the 1960s. These topics included separated public spaces by race, diminished economic and educational opportunities, increased surveillance in Black communities, and the general lack of justice for crimes against Black people, including murder. In addition, students were presented with the *I Have a Dream* speech in digital and hard copy form. Students listened to the speech in King’s voice and annotated an online or digital text. Their annotations included highlighting key ideas. After listening to and reading the speech, students completed a quick write where they did journaling to respond to the question, “Why do you think Martin Luther King Jr. is an appropriate and powerful correspondent for Justyce?” To address the question, students discussed their responses in pairs or small groups. The sharing focused on ideas from the book centered on activism and hypocrisy. Students also homed in on notions of equity: who is included and excluded, and possible responses and responsibilities to witnessing injustice.

After working with the speech, students were provided digital and hard copies of the *Declaration of Independence*. Students had engaged with this document in a previous unit, but they were encouraged to read between this document and the *I Have a Dream* to look for connections. Most students compared hard copies, since those contained their notes. Some students highlighted digital copies and compared their screens to a partner’s.

With this preparation, students were ready to craft their own remixes. Mary asked the students what they knew about mashups and allowed them to share examples they knew of from music and art. One of the examples came from Art Wars (2020), which featured storm trooper helmets from the movie *Star Wars*, decorated and arranged in four quadrants similar to Andy Warhol’s famous painting of soup cans.

When students seemed to understand the basic concept from Art Wars, Mary and the students co-developed a model where she used think-aloud techniques to share what she wanted her message to be, and then the students helped begin to selecting lines. As they worked, students gave her feedback. Mary chose the first line of the model remix, then prompted students to find a line from a different text that would “go with” the first line. One student suggested a line, and Mary wrote it underneath the first line she had chosen. Students continued calling out lines they thought would fit, and Mary continued adding them to the model. Mary and Brigid took turns pausing to ask students questions, such as: “Why did you choose this line? What makes it a good fit to follow the previous line? What do these lines mean when you read them individually and how does that change or stay the same when they are juxtaposed?” When the students decided that the remix was “finished,” Mary read the work as a whole, and the class discussed what it meant, how it affected them, and how the meaning made responded to the original documents. The co-created model functioned as demonstration of what students could produce; it was also a pattern for the process of remix as the organic interlocking of perspectives and voices.

As we provided modeling, the class experimented with repeating elements in the lines, such as the repetition of “I have a dream.” They considered what the repetition did for rhetorical effect and what other lines would bear repeating in a similar manner.
During the demonstration, the students also experimented with mashing two lines into one, starting with the beginning of one line and ending with the other. They considered whether it sounded better in some instances to make the connection smooth or to have the new line shift focus abruptly. Finally, the students searched for lines that matched because of larger issues of theme that they had already identified. As they worked, the students began to see how lines could be stitched together for thematic flow, but also to deliberately contradict or disrupt one another. Examples of these strategies provided are in Table 1. During the activity, the students were able to see how combining lines had an aesthetic quality (Kress, 2010) as well. That quality was visual in how the lines looked on a page as well as sonorous, and in how they sounded when being read aloud.

After the demonstration, students began creating remixes using the words and phrases from

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Examples of remix strategies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategy</strong></td>
<td><strong>Explanation</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repeating elements</td>
<td>In speeches, orators often use a line over and over for effect. For example, the “I have a dream” line from King’s speech is repeated several times.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spliced lines</td>
<td>One could combine “I have a dream today” from King with “that they should declare the causes which compel them to separation” from the Declaration to make a complete sentence with a new meaning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thematic sequences</td>
<td>Lines can be brought together easily when they match ideas, even if the words are different. For example, there are many references to injustice from the King of England that can be merged with Martin Luther King, Jr.’s claims against the American government.</td>
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</table>
the Declaration of Independence and I Have a Dream, keeping in mind Justyce’s experiences in Dear Martin and their own experiences with (in)equality and (in)justice in the United States. Students chose excerpts from the documents and arranged them on large sheets. Students were able to choose their group and sizes. Some worked in pairs or small groups. Others worked individually.

As they worked, students quoted bits of each document to each other, trying out both how the excerpts they chose sounded next to each other and how they acquired different meanings by being juxtaposed. We were most pleased to hear conversations about Dear Martin interspersed with students’ decisions regarding where and how to remix the documents. They were not assigned to make explicit poetry, but every group focused to some degree on creating a poetic or versed form. At the end of class students affixed their remixes to the whiteboard, read them through, and explained what they had accomplished through their arrangement of the texts.

Students shared their remixes and engaged in guided group discussion about their choices. During this sharing, they revealed their reasoning and also made references to events and ideas in Dear Martin. For example, the students discussed the connections they had made between the injustices of King George and the over-policing in Justyce’s community. They also realized that Martin Luther King, Jr. was not as peaceful in his approach to change as they had supposed from previous educational experiences. One student noted, “You can really see how Justyce is calling out the violence in the same way that [Martin Luther King, Jr.] was. Justyce wasn’t sitting there, like ‘well, I’ll go pray for folks to be nicer. He wanted action.” The power balance issues also came forward in comments such as “The King [of England] thinks he can do what he wants because he is the King. When you have power that comes from tradition, of course it is hard to question. The same goes for racism.”

Students also noticed that the historical documents left out other groups, particularly with reference to gender, disability, and language. For example, one student commented, “These documents leave out women; how could they speak about equality and leave so many people out?” Such important noticing was the goal of the activity—to promote deeper reading across multiple sources.

Moreover, students drew conclusions about why Martin Luther King, Jr. called out the promises of such documents in his speech. For example, the “check” that Martin refers to is a metaphor for the promises in the Declaration and other founding documents. Such metaphors were clearer to students as they moved through the remix activity. In the third example shared in Table 1, the student remixed the line about “the lonely island of poverty” to address oppression as a kind of social poverty simultaneous to the literal poverty that results from racism.

**Remixing for Meaning**

Here, we share three examples of the remixes students made in small groups. Each of these was chosen because it offers insight into the possibilities of multi-modal remixing and captures salient insights that emerged from the unit as a whole. Table 1 also contains examples of how students used the strategies we showed them in their compositions.

**Repeating Elements in Free at Last by Kevin, Chris, and Joe**

The first example highlights how Martin Luther King, Jr. referred to the Declaration of Independence in his speech. The students took concepts from the Declaration about equality, as well as life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The third line they borrowed is not as common. It refers to the right and
duty of a people, in this case, Americans, to dissolve political ties when they are under oppression. In this remix, the line suggests that it is a right and duty to join hands and let freedom ring.

*Free at Last*

I have a dream today

*That all men are created equal*
When we allow freedom to ring

*Life, Liberty, and pursuit of Happiness*
Will be able to Speed up that day

When all of God’s children
Will be able to join hands between them

Let freedom ring

*It is their right; it is their duty*
“Free at last, free at last, Great God a-mighty, we are free at last.”

Since the texts were remixed into poetry, the lines were shorted and indented in ways students thought were aesthetically pleasing or important to the flow. The repetitive elements, even of certain letters (such as W and L) in this poem, enhance the remix as an aesthetic artifact and as a product for a new audience, since the lines are now more removed from their original placement in a speech.

During class discussion after sharing this remix, students talked about abstract ideals of freedom regarding race, but they also realized that other groups such as women were left out when they realized how many references there were to men in both the speech and the *Declaration*. In fact, in *Dear Martin*, there were also places where the boys were disparaging to girls. The students used this oppression as an opportunity to discuss injustices that occurred alongside lines other than race.

*Spliced Lines from Happy to Join? by Andrea, Scott, and Huimin*

In this second example, the lines from King and Jefferson are alternated more regularly, in a turn-taking fashion at the beginning. However, the list of injustices from the *Declaration*, when placed against King’s claim of racial injustice, suggests that the sufferings of the colonists historically were not far removed from what some people of color were experiencing in 1964 and today. What appears here is not the full list from the *Declaration*. What is here was selected by the students for its resonance with either *Dear Martin* or with their own experiences. Splicing the lines in this remix also suggests that the speech is a call for independence from the ideologies that support racial injustice.

*Happy to Join?*

I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history
as the greatest demonstration in the history of our nation,

*When in the course of human events, it becomes necessary—*

*for one people to dissolve the political bonds which connect them to another*

We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline

*A decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which compel them to separation*

*He has plundered our seas, ravaged our coasts, burnt out our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people*

*For imposing taxes on us without our consent*

*For depriving us in many cases of the benefits of trial by jury.*

*For Quartering large bodies of armed troops among u*

We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now
It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of this moment—

*Repeated injuries ... patient sufferance.*
The last line about repeated injuries and patient sufferance are from Jefferson, but it pairs well with King’s argument about the urgency of the moment in history in 1963 when King was calling for equality. Students had an extended conversation where they looked for instances from the list that happened in Dear Martin, but they also made connections with the experiences they had. Finally, the students were able to read Jefferson’s list of injustices so many times that many students noticed the negative terms he used to refer to Native Americans (e.g., savage). In their class journals, some students wrote about the tension between the lovely statements in Jefferson’s declaration versus the ugly ones and even the ugly circumstances of slavery and mistreatment that King called out in his writings.

Thematic Sequences in Awakening by Trent and DeShawn

The final remix example takes three phrases from Jefferson, and the rest is from King. Although it might be tempting for a teacher to think that because there seems to be so little borrowing, this remix from the students is not as well done, that is not the case. For example, consider the position of life, liberty, and happiness as important themes above the line about bitterness and hatred. It creates a poetic contrast in meaning. Consider how the word secure also disrupts the first line about unspeakable horrors and brutality. Also, in lines about the police specifically, the students refer back to the novel Dear Martin and its theme of injustice at the hands of the police, which is ironic because the police are touted as being responsible to carry out justice.

The last line has also been taken from Jefferson. The reference to We in that line follows earlier lines about walking alone. The word pledge is repeated, one from Jefferson’s document and one from King’s speech. The sacred honor bookends the first line about awakening. Both have religious undertones, proposing social solidarity as a holy aspiration. During discussion students asked questions of each other about the underlying Christian themes and how those references both supported and constrained meaningful dialogue about equality.

Reflecting on Remixing

The remix activity created the space for reading, thinking, and learning about both events of the past and the social context of the present (Kellner, 2003). The students made important decisions about how to design text and to borrow from multiple texts to make a representation of theme (Jocson, 2013; Kress, 2010). The general conclusion of the class was that

Awakening

A rude awakening.
The Negro is the victim of unspeakable horrors of police brutality.
Secure life, liberty, happiness
Drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred
Promises of democracy
A smaller ghetto for our children
We cannot walk alone
On a lonely island of poverty
We must make the pledge of civil rights
It is obvious
As our hope
Into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood
We mutually pledge
A sacred honor.

“As white educators working with mostly non-white students, we are obligated to provide spaces for students to notice this tension.”
certain ideals were embodied in framing documents such as the *Declaration of Independence* around equality and justice. However, those ideals were unmet for Martin Luther King, Jr., and they remain unmet when seen through experiences like Justyce’s in *Dear Martin*. As white educators working with mostly non-white students, we are obligated to provide spaces for students to notice this tension. We do not want to be educators who behave like the pernicious “white moderates” King wrote about in his *Letter from Birmingham Jail* (1964). Those who are polite and silent are greater enemies to racial justice.

Another important understanding for students and for us was that Nic Stone did not just write a story about racial injustice. She intentionally drew on events, documents, and ideas, making her novel a dialogical response situated within a context. The fact that students were also able to notice other injustices, such as the use of “men” in the *Declaration* and the persistence of misogynic representations in *Dear Martin*, as well demonstrated their interest in responding to more aspects of their worlds (Freire & Macedo, 1987). This noticing makes space for additional classroom work and discussion moving forward. We look forward to trying out remix with more texts now that students are more familiar with the concept. Additional novels and documents this strategy can be used with appear in the appendix. We invite teachers to try remixing as a way to support students in reflecting upon, analyzing, and creating complex texts. As educators, we all must commit to supporting students’ critical reflection of historical texts. To do so is vital for all of our futures.
References

Art Wars. (2020). Famous stars. https://i.pinimg.com/originals/12/db/e3/12dbe3e1396cc1a84ba80ec28e333b8e.jpg


## Appendix

### More Novels and Documents to Remix

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<td>“Annexation,” John O’Sullivan (1845)</td>
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<td>Letter</td>
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<td>The March of the Flag, Albert Beveridge (1898)</td>
<td>Editorial</td>
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