

Transcription for Episode 8: “‘The Silent Protest’ with John Carlos”

Run Time: 1:02:33

AH: Allison Hitt (co-executive producer)
BK: Ben Kuebrich (co-executive producer, host)
SC: Shannon Carter (introduction)
JC: John Carlos (guest speaker)

AH: You’re listening to This Rhetorical Life, a podcast dedicated to the practice, pedagogy, and public circulation of rhetoric in our lives.

Cue music: “One Word Extinguisher” by Prefuse 73

BK: Hi everyone, I’m Ben Kuebrich, co-executive producer for the program and today’s host. In this episode, you will hear from John Carlos, a lifetime advocate for human rights best known for his part in the Silent Protest at the Mexico City Olympics in 1968.

Joining the program today is Shannon Carter, Associate Professor of English from Texas A&M-Commerce. I invited Shannon to introduce our recording of Carlos's Featured Session, which he delivered a CCCC in Las Vegas last March. You can find a link to the description of this session on our website, as well as the ten-minute video that accompanied Carter’s introduction to Dr. Carlos in Vegas. The video provides details referenced in Carlos's remarks over the next hour, the conditions of racism that John Carlos’s actions responded to, his childhood in Harlem, how he got involved with the Olympic Project for Human Rights, and other details about how the silent protest was developed and interpreted in its time. It is an important video and we hope listeners take a look. To give a bit of that context and to also set up Dr. Carlos’s keynote address, Shannon Carter, who has been working with Dr. Carlos and other activists with links to her university, will set the scene:

Background music: “Gobstopper” by J Dilla

SC: We all know the image, even those listeners born long after the event took place. Three sprinters on the victory stand in Mexico City in 1968 demonstrating their solidarity with those suffering injustices around the globe. Each wear a button for the Olympic Project for Human Rights. Australian Peter Norman faces straight ahead. Americans Tommie Smith and John Carlos each raise a black-gloved fist, heads bowed. Carlos’s jacket is open, beads around his neck, Smith wears a black scarf, neither wears shoes. At the first Games to be televised in color, this controversial statement was broadcast around the world into the living rooms of millions of viewers.

That image alone is enough to keep rhetoricians busy for some time. In his remarks, Carlos describes the intended meaning behind these symbols. We’ll get to that soon. But before we do, I’d like to identify three themes that seem particularly relevant to our field. After hearing from Carlos, I’ll return with some concluding remarks, including potential

implications for rhetoric in everyday life.

Transition Music “Where I’m From” by Digable Planets

Background music: “Gobstopper” by J Dilla

SC: Time plays a significant role in this rhetorical event. It took about 20 minutes to pull together and ended moments after it began. Almost as quickly, Olympic officials and mainstream media had effectively dismissed, distorted, and, ultimately silenced that message. The demonstration may have happened quickly, but—like all such efforts—its roots are very long and impact far-reaching. It was fast but not spontaneous. Their intended message took years of careful, deliberate planning. That long fight against racism is perhaps most clearly represented by the OPHR button on each demonstrator’s chest. In his remarks over the next hour, Carlos indicates a lifetime of preparation for this moment—one deeply informed by the civil rights movement and related efforts spanning centuries.

A second theme is collective action and its contrast to individual action. The silent protest took two people to pull together, three to execute, and dozens more to plan. Even the movement that gave rise to their demonstration was fueled by scores of others. We often remember the civil rights movement as a series of dramatic actions by heroic individuals. But that’s just not how change works. Rosa Parks may have helped launch the civil rights movement by refusing to give up her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. However, that decision was not spontaneous, either.

Like the silent protest in Mexico City more than a decade later, that bus demonstration took multiple community organizers and years of careful planning. Parks and Carlos are indeed heroes. However, the myth of individualism often forces us to ignore some of the most heroic aspects of their work. These are studied, intellectual, deliberately rhetorical projects as much as they are acts of courage. Others have said this, but more of our students need to know this. From this perspective, change seems more complex, yet somehow more accessible. But we must never forget the price paid by such figures. Carlos, Smith, and their loved ones paid dearly for their public demonstrations. MLK and Malcolm X gave their lives. We have to insist on the role played by collective action, but it seems that we must also continue to honor the extreme sacrifices made by those on the front lines.

The final theme concerns *reciprocity*, which I approach as a key component in collective action. From the very beginning, Carlos and the activists informing our project have been what Jacqueline Jones Royster calls “co-knowledge makers.” In his opening remarks, Carlos introduces two other “co-knowledge makers”—Joe Tave and Belford Page, both of whom, like Carlos, attended my university in the late 1960’s, which had then only recently desegregated. Carlos, Tave, Page, and countless others have worked closely with us on a range of projects about area race relations. In Vegas for CCCC, we were co-panelists on two panels on East Texas activism. This summer, Carlos and I are co-authoring a scholarly article that frames these experiences for our field in many of the

same ways that I have here. Other related projects with area activists will follow, including another planned article with Tave.

- BK:** The title for Dr. Carlos's presentation is “The Silent Protest: Open Hands, Closed Fists, and Composition's Political Turn.” This title, of course, refers to Edward Corbett's “The Rhetoric of the Open Hand and the Rhetoric of the Closed Fist,” which appeared in *CCC* in 1969. Carter goes on to explain how the life and actions of John Carlos relate to our work in the field.
- SC:** The “silent protest and its aftermath,” as we explain in the program description for this session, “graphically illustrates both the power of Corbett's ‘Closed Fist’ and the excruciating limits of his ‘Open Hand.’ It also calls upon us to consider our organization shifting position on the relationship between the classroom and the rest of society.” Carlos addresses those tensions at some length in his presentation, demonstrating throughout the importance of what Nancy Welch has called “Uncivil Rhetoric,” and as opposed to civil rhetoric, the open hand. As she explains in a recent article, “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.” Carlos's life story is filled with examples of this uncivil rhetoric that Welch identifies as vital to our ongoing quest for social justice. Throughout his talk, he continues to remind us that such battles are necessary, and yet they are also far from over—that much work remains to be done. 45 years later, the Closed Fist of the Silent Protest resonates as never before. It is time for us to return to this iconic moment and take stock.

Ladies and gentleman, Dr. John Carlos.

Applause.

- JC:** I always have to start off by saying I really appreciate the applause—the love that you guys are expressing. But from this point on, if anyone applauds, we're going to have you removed from the auditorium. [*laughter*] I'm not here for applause; I'm here just to try to convey a message.

First, before I do anything, let me introduce my wife because without my wife, I wouldn't be here. She's saved me too many times—my wife Charlene Carlos. [*applause*] Now, you know to have books and not have bookends, there wouldn't be no purpose to have books. So, I have guys who have been with me and my career before and after. I see one of them here, and I would hope the other one is here, too—Mr. Joe Tave. Will you stand up Mr. Tave and let them see who you are? [*applause*] We have another fellow here who's supposed to be after Mexico by the name of Belfred Page. I don't know whether Mr. Page is in the house—should be. In any case, these two individuals were like my bookends. These the individuals that were with me in trying times at Texas State—Joe was there like, solid as a rock. And when I say solid as a rock, I'm talking about in regards to the fact that when I left East Texas State, he didn't lay down. He picked the ball up and decided, *I'm going to run this touchdown*. And he organized and did a tremendous amount of work on that campus to resurrect the campus and have them have

different views about how individuals should treat their fellow man. Mr. Page was somewhat like I was as a youngster; he was kind of radical. So when he came in, he came in with the attitude that *I love all people, but at the same time I have a message for those who don't want to give the love back*. So I respect both of them.

Now I can get into a little bit about myself. Activism—when I started out, I didn't start out to be no activist. I was a wide-eyed kid looking to find out what my niche was in life. I looked at the ladies—I always liked the girls. I used to love to play spin that bottle. [laughter] And then, I began to realize that it was more things other than the girls. There was many questions I had. Well my compadres, as I might say, they couldn't answer the questions. I started going to the adults to ask them about why society the way it is. They couldn't answer. So I had to look for a higher power. That's how I got involved in my Lord, Jesus Christ. He had the answers. But how do you find him? I found a church: Abyssinia Baptist Church. I didn't know the great individuals that was heading up this church, but I felt I could get the answers that I needed there. Got my family together, we organized ourselves, and on Sundays we would be in the first pew there in Abyssinia Baptist Church. And I began to realize at that particular time that we had a few standards of life. I remember sitting in the church one day, and I asked my father because [the preacher] came out, and he was coughing like me. He said, "I'm not feeling well today; I'm not going to preach the sermon, but I'm gon' let my son preach." And I recall when he referred to his son, and there was a group of men standing over there, and I said to my father, say, "Pop, who is his son?" And he pointed out this fellow over here. He said, "The one putting on the robe."

Aside: C'mon down Mr. Page, sit down. We got a seat for you. [laughter] I just mentioned you man; I told them you was a late runner.

JC: But in any case, he pointed him out and said, "The fellow putting the robe on." And I said, "Oh no, Pop, that can't be his son. That's a white man." My father said, "Nah son, that's his son." I looked back at my dad and said, "Pop, it can't be his son." He said, "He is." And he said to me something that stuck in my mind. He said, "You know, he's not overzealous like the rest." And he said that because I asked him, I said, "What do you mean by overzealous?" He said, "Well son, some of them, you know, they try to pass." And that's the first time that I heard that expression: pass. Pass for what? What is he passing from?

So while he moves into the white world—he looks like a white person, although he's black—and he wants to live in that world. So I said to my father right away, "Pop are you telling me that these people are ashamed of being black? They're ashamed of who they are?" And that's when he came and said, "Nah, they're not ashamed, but some of them are a little overzealous." [laughter] And when you sit back and you think about that time and you put it in present day, you think about people that leave from Haiti—they call immigrants. Or people that leave from Mexico—they call immigrants. Or people that leave from Cuba. And you think that maybe they don't like their nationality, [that] they trying to get away. It's not that they trying to get away. It's not that those individuals who were passing were trying to get away. What they were trying to do was have a better

standard of life. I think that's something that God guaranteed all of us through birth. But man had a strange way of changing things around.

Like for instance, you know, you fighting about whether individuals should be allowed to smoke marijuana. God put marijuana on earth for the indigenous people. [laughter] Man took God's law and put it to the curb and put up some Johnny Walker Red, some Schlitz malt liquor, E&J. [laughter] Now, for all you white folks out there, you didn't see it like I saw it because I would see those signs 24/7. In my neighborhood, on one street you'd find four bars and two liquor stores—on one block! So it began to make me realize that something was broke, and I'm looking for the adults, the leaders to fix it.

I remember one night going to bed and waking up, and then there was a thing called white flight. All the white folks seemed like they had a meeting that we wasn't involved in, and they decided, *We gon' leave Harlem*. The next day they was loading up. [laughter] I asked my father, I said, "Pop, why they leaving? Where they going?" He said, "Well, I don't know why they leaving son, but I'm gon' find out." He came back a few days later, he told me, he said, "Son, word is they're leaving because they have so many domesticated workers that work for them, and it's very difficult for them to have a domesticated worker work for them and be they next door neighbor as well. So they decided they gon' get out of dodge."

So, I looked at that, I looked at the fact that we had situations like the agencies—the fire department or the police department—we wasn't recognized. We didn't have any black firemen back in the '50s back in New York. Not in Harlem, for sure. But I noticed at the same time, by being *absent* from the fire department, if we had a woman burn a pot of beans or some rice on the stove and it created a little smoke, they would walk through—and if anyone's here from New York, they can attest to the fact that in New York, you could have an apartment have five bedrooms back there. They would walk through and chop up every piece of furniture, water down everything in the house, throw it out the front window on Lenox Avenue, throw it out the back window in the alley. And as soon as you walked through that front door, to the right or the left, the kitchen was right there. They could see it was no fire. But they would go back and chop up five bedrooms of furniture and throw it out. I remember asking my father, I said, "Pop, why'd they do that?" My father looked at me like, "Son are you crazy? It was a fire!" [I said,] "Nah daddy, I need you to come outside. Daddy, I need you to come outside." So he stopped, he came out. I said, "Show me something burnt, Daddy." I'm a little boy. He said, "Wait a minute." He went over to the chief. I didn't need to go to the chief; I'm standing back, and I'm looking. I don't see one fireman that represent me. And I began to realize this is something that happens in the corporate world; this is something that happens in education. And a lot of agencies—if we're not represented, if we're not in meeting—they just pass over us. I don't think it's right for *any* ethnic group to be passed over.

So as a young kid, whether I wanted to be this activist or not, that's the plan that God had for me. He had this plan so much to the point when I came into this world, my mother had problems with me before I was born. [laughter] My procedure, they had to move me around in my mom's womb three times—well actually two times. The third time, he told

my momma said, “Mrs. Collins, it looks like this baby has a mind of its own. Leave it alone.” [*laughter*] I came into this world brief, baby, feet first. So that was an indication that obviously I was going to be doing something with this big feet I have. [*laughter*]

I began to run through the neighborhood. I began to become more acquainted to the point that I heard a guy like Malcolm X come on the radio—Malcolm X was the next man outside my father that made sense to me. And he was so sure of himself in terms of his delivery on the radio that I *had* to get there to see who this guy Malcolm X was. Well, when Malcolm X came into the place, I thought he was just someone coming to listen. Because I knew Malcolm X was blacker than black, *blue-black*, because he was blowing so much black. [*laughter*] And they told me, “That’s Malcolm X over there!” I said, “Man, it can’t be.” [They said,] “That’s him.” But once he went to the podium and he began to speak, I knew right away it was him because it just set off all the chemicals in my body, just made me rise up because here’s a man that was swimming up stream. I’ve always swum up stream and seems like I’m always butting heads because everybody else is swimming down stream. This was the first time in my young life I see someone swimming the direction I’m swimming.

So my thought was to listen to him as much as I could and then to build the courage up to approach him and ask him, “Is it possible I can go with you from one location to the next?” He just looked at me the first couple of times I said it. Third time he said, “Well why would you like to go with me?” I said, “To learn, to ask questions.” And he smiled and showed me his dimple then. And I said to him, I said, “I want to ask questions because I want to learn to try and help people in my neighborhood.” He said, “All right son, you can come if you can keep up.” So right there, aside from me coming feet first, this was the first indication that I know I’m going to be a runner, too. Because I didn’t know what he meant “if you can keep up.” He was a very fast walker, so I had to actually run—*job*—to actually stay up with him to ask the questions.

As time went on, I began to realize there was many people in my neighborhood starting to suffer. And when I say suffer, just like we have these tables here—back in the ’50s, we used to go to dinner every evening. We had a family unit that was concerned about, “Hey Mom, how did it go at the hospital last night? Hey Pop, do you need me to do anything Saturday? Forget about Saturday, son, what did you do in school this week?” We always had that family discussion, and then one night, boom. Went to sleep, came back [and] they had this thing called King Kong was a bootleg liquor. It was like modern-day PCP. They’d drink this King Kong shit got fly off the roof to their death. Then King Kong left one night, and the next day it was heroine came into the neighborhood. Well heroine depleted families, fragmented families, and just altogether dissolved families. Even to this day, we still have many broken families. Mothers could only raise their kids to a certain age, particularly boys. They need a man figure in the house. Many black men are missing in action, due to the drugs.

But when I looked at that, and I looked at the fact that I was blessed because I had a mother and father that were strong in my household. And all of my friends, they didn’t have that same situation. I’d go to their house and look at their cabinet; there was no food

in the cabinet. Wasn't no clothes in the closet. But fortunately for me, along my travels I looked at TV, and I saw this guy used to wear this green suit and funny looking hat with a feather sticking out called Robin Hood. And I think Robin Hood impressed any minority kid, any poor kid. And I liked his character. So when I saw these individuals that didn't *have*, I began to analyze Robin Hood a little more. And I realized that Robin Hood realized the pea was split down the middle. There was two laws: there was man's laws, and there was God's laws. Just like there was man's liquor and God's marijuana. [laughter] Understand? [applause] Two laws! So I realized right then that Robin Hood wasn't concerned about the Sheriff of Nottingham. Robin Hood was concerned about making sure the people would stop being pillaged, the same way Jesus Christ went to the market place.

So my job right then was to go right across the street, a bridge—150th Street Bridge—to the freight trains. Now Mr. Steinberg would probably not be too happy with me because they were his trains. But he had to pay taxes, which he wasn't paying. So my tax for him was to break those seals, go in there, and I had three partners of mine. I remember they used to tell me, said, “Johnny, we gon’ have fat pockets.” And I said, “Nah, this is not for us. We gon’ give this to the people of the neighborhood that don't have.”

Now, mind you, I was never taught to be a thief. My mother and father never played that role; they wouldn't allow it. They taught me to be obedient, they taught me to be intelligent, and they taught me to be honest and faithful. But when it came to honest and faithful, I had to recognize who I'm being honest and faithful to—to man or to God? God wouldn't let people go hungry—like the churches today. You sit back and you look at churches today. Churches supposed to be the one that shelter people, that feed people, that clothe people. The churches don't do that today. So I took it upon myself and my partners to go in there and get this food and these clothes and take it and give it to the people in the community.

It's just like right now in your neighborhood, you'll find a tree on the bottom of the hill. The tree did grown: it got so much foliage on it, it's growing, and right behind the foliage is a stop sign. People coming down that hill, they can't see the stop sign because the tree growing so much. But 95% of the people in the community don't know who to pick the phone up and call and say “Come cut this tree.” They was in a quandary they didn't know how to get out of. I've been taught to believe in God, I've been taught to do the right thing, but I have *not* been taught how to survive in this society when everyone is trying to block me from having a faithful life.

I took it upon myself to realize. One day, God sent the police to me—actually sent the police to my dad. [laughter] Well, my dad used to have a little poker game—crap game—on the weekend in the fall for the baseball players and police. And they went to my father and said, “Earl! There's been some break-ins over at the Yankee Stadium [and] the freight yards, and we think Johnny's doing so-and-so. And you need to talk to him.” My old man put his hand up and said, “No, that's your job. He's right now at Macombs Park, right across from Yankee Stadium. Go over there and have a talk with him.” Sure enough they came over. They blocked the whole park and walked up on me, said, “We

need to talk to you.” Now Mr. Lester is about 6 feet. Mr. Bryant was about 6’7” [with] hands like this.” [gestures] Mr. Lester said, “John, there’s been some break-ins. We think we know who’s doing it. We haven’t been able to catch him, but we gon’ catch him.” He leaned into my face. “We gon’ catch him.” [laughter] Mr. Bryant said, “Tell him the other thing!” And he said, “Well, we want to let you know you have a talent.” [I said,] “A talent? What talent do I have?” And Mr. Lester said, “You’re a runner.” [laughter] When he said I was a runner, just like you laughed, well I kind of smirked. Mr. Bryant smacked me on this side of my face and his fingers landed over here. [Gestures to other side of face] [laughter] I see stars every time I think about that man. Anyway, he told me, he said, “John,” he said, “You’re a runner, and you’re special.” And I said, “No, I’m not no more special.” I smirked because he said that I was runner; my mom was a runner.

My mom used to work at Bellevue Hospital at night. Someone snatched her purse one night, drug her down, cut up her legs, tore up her stockings. She came home. We was all concerned—was all young men and my father—we was concerned about my mother’s wellbeing. But my mom held up her purse and she said, “Yeah, they got my purse, but I got it back.” [laughter] She ran him down and got her purse back. [applause] So for me to tell Mr. Lester that everyone is a runner in the neighborhood, I’m telling the truth. He told me, he said “No, but you’re special.” And then he gave me a number, which started my career. He gave a number to the New York Pioneer Club. Now mind you, when I was in school, I was probably the dumb of the dumbest. Okay? A lot of people say, “Oh, you shouldn’t say that,” but it’s the truth. It wasn’t that I was dumb in terms of my intelligence. I had learning disabilities. I had dyslexia, but they was calling it just dummy at that particular time. [laughter] And they would put the dummy hat on you, write dummy down the center, and tell you to sit on that stool. That was me.

But yet and still, as I began to work my way in this track program, I realized two things. I realized that God blessed me and gave me these talents as an athlete, but I realized even greater than that is how many smiles I brought on people’s faces, and that’s what I like to see—people smiling and happy. So I said, “Wow, this running track thing could be all right!” And then I began to realize the better I got, the more I got to be a voice. The more you elevate yourself whatever your profession is, the more you can become a voice. You can perfect it to the point where people are dying to hear what you have to say—or write.

Quite naturally, as I’m coming through it, I remembered coming up in Harlem. I remember going to East Texas State when my name changed from John Carlos to Boy. He calling me Boy, and I got a wife and kid just like he had a wife and a kid, but he going to call me Boy in an instance. All the time he was recruiting me, “Ah, Mr. Carlos. John Carlos, come on down.” The minute I got off the plane and he turned the corner, my name changed to Boy. The minute I looked over his shoulder, I saw a sign talking about “white’s only, coloreds.” I go over to the white water fountain: “You can’t drink out that water fountain.” And I’m saying, “Where am I?” I heard about the South, but I never thought Texas was part of the South. I thought that was just cowboys and Indians. [laughter]

So I go on, I get into Texas, and I realized to myself then that they'd never seen anyone like me in terms of my athletic ability, nor did they see anyone like me in terms of the audacity that I had to *be* me. They wanted to turn me around and tell me this is the way it's supposed to go: "You can't talk to this person. You can't go to this association. Don't hang with those guys in that fraternity." And I remember going, one time we was going to Arkansas to a track meet. Now it rained from Texas straight into Arkansas, and when I say rain—if you been to Texas, they got like torrential rain. There was no track meeting take place. But as we was leaving, we found this patch of sun.

We in the back of the station wagon, and I saw this old man out there. And he had a harness around his neck, he had a white shirt on, some black trousers, his sleeves rolled up, and he had a mule. This whole field out there, he looked like he had plowed this whole field. And before anybody could say anything, I had jumped out the back of the station wagon and rolled out there in the middle of the field, and I'm looking at this man. I said, "What are you doing?" He's telling me, he said, "I'm doing my job." I said, "Man, they have tractors that do this. You don't have to do this!" He said, "I don't know nothing else to do." He's telling me, referring to whoever the man was who owned the farm, he said, "Mr. Charlie or whatever let me do this all my life. I don't know nothing else to do. This is *all* I do." And I see I couldn't make no sense to him, but it made a lot of sense myself because I was filled with tears.

When I got back, and all my partners that was there, one of my real good friends no longer here—Terry Barnette, a white fellow—I was mad at him. I had no right to be mad at Terry because Terry didn't do anything, but I was mad for the *system*—the way the system pees on people. You ever say rain on my parade? There was a man telling me long after slavery that this was all he knew to do. And then when we got all the way down to Arkansas just to find out that there was no track meet. The coach risked everyone's life because he hadn't seen his twin brother—knew wasn't going to be no track meet. So I decided from that point on, now there's no more shuckin' and jivin'. Now it's about getting serious in terms of dealing with issues in society, in terms of how committed you are.

You guys are writers here. I wrote two books. The first book I wrote was called *Why* because everyone used to always asks me, "Why you do this? Why you do that?" But I self-published a book, so you couldn't really get it out to the people, so I decided I'd leave it alone. But my God came to me, and he said, "Nah man, you need to get ahold of this guy David Zirin. Talk to David." I talked to David one time. David said, "Oh, I don't have time, I'm busy, I'm doing so-and-so. Wait a year, come back." God said, "Talk to David again." [I said,] "David! God come back to me, told me to talk to you again." [He said,] "Well John, if I do the book, I want to do the book with you and Tommie Smith together." I said, "David, that's great, but Tommie wrote a book, and he wasn't too nice in the book with the things that he said, and I just want to set the record straight." [He said,] "Nah, but John I'm writing a couple books now, but I *need* to have you and Tommie agree to do this book together." Okay. [He said,] "See me next year." God said, "Well, we going to step it up." The next year when I went to him, he said, "John, I'd still like to do the book," but just by the grace of God here come Tommie Smith and his wife

about 20 yards in back. I said, “Man, here’s your lucky day. Here’s Mr. Smith and his wife. Go on back there and have a talk with them.” He went back there, stayed 15 minutes. He came back and said, “Okay, John, we can get started on your book tomorrow.” [laughter]

And that’s just what I’m trying to tell you is if you want to write a story about the ills of society, you have to write that story just about like that book right there: *The John Carlos Story*. Because we wanted to write this book, but we didn’t want to write the book where people could read the book and then put it down. We wanted them to read this book and actually feel like they walking down the street with John Carlos. When I hurt, I wanted them to hurt. When I laughed, I wanted them to laugh. When I shed tears, I wanted them to shed tears. I have so many people tell me, say, “Man, I wasn’t born in that era, but I feel like I lived through the era by the things you put in this book.” *You* as the writers are as much as I am from that victory stand putting my fist to the sky. *You’re* the town criers. You have to be creative.

Like Dr. [Shannon] Carter said, “Man, how much time did you have to orchestrate that demonstration? How much time did you have to bring it together?” And I had to express to her, say, “Dr. Carter, it only took 20 minutes for us to figure out what we was going to do.” I said, “But it took about four years of simmering. We had the pot on the stove, and it was simmering. By the time we got to Mexico City, the fact that the boycott was called off, it was a matter of now the pot is boiling.” Things haven’t changed, the guys felt like they didn’t want to go through the boycott, and here’s reasons they didn’t want to go—and they was entitled to their reasons as much today as it was yesterday—“Hey man, uh, we feel like this boycott isn’t necessary. Well man, I promised my church I was going to win the medal. Man, I promised my mom and father I was going to win. Man, I owe it to myself, I trained in the rain, I owe it to myself.”

I said, “Yeah, but what about the atrocities that happened throughout history that no one said a prayer for those that came over in the maiden voyage? For those people that’s down there in Tulsa, Oklahoma that had their entrepreneurship going that they just burnt up and killed up that nobody ever mentions anymore? What about Troy Davis and individuals like that?” I said, “What we need to do is let’s have a ride on a hypothetical train.” And you know why we had to take that ride? To make them understand 44 years later [now]—see, 44 years earlier [in 1968]...you see the slogans they put up there [references video]: “black skinned storm trooper.” I was anti-this, anti-that. I was the most vilified person probably because I was the most vocal person. But I wasn’t going to let that deter me from what my mission was, and my mission is to reach one person in this auditorium today—just one person—and God tells me my job is done.

So I said, “Are y’all ready to get on this train? Are you willing to ride with me?” They said, “Yeah, we’ll ride with you.” I said, “The object for us to ride on this train is to have some philosophical discussion about the pros and cons of an Olympic boycott. All I’m asking you to do, basically, is to give up 15 minutes in the sun.” Because that’s what you had, 15 minutes to receive your medal, and it’s over. So I said to them, I said, “All right, now we on the train. Let’s throw the cards on the table. Let’s talk about the pros of the

boycott; let's talk about the negatives of the boycott." I said, "I just want you to realize that what I'm talking about doing will be something that will be ever-lasting, so you talking about something that will be for 15 minutes of your life." I said, "Because five years after the Olympics is over, they don't remember who won the 100 meters. They don't remember who won the 200 meters." I said, "But you can do something that will be ever-lasting." So in the meantime while we rolling down the tracks, you saw people outside. They had the banners out, the flags out just like when we was in the military [and] was going to war, and everyone's outside saying, "God Bless America." They cheering us on because we're their warriors. So as we go down the track, someone says, "Hey man, you know I have a lot better understanding now about why this boycott is necessary." He said, "We have consensus; we have understanding. Let me find the red lever—I'll pull the red lever to stop the train." [I said,] "What are you stopping the train for?" [He said,] "Well if we have consensus, man, it's no good to have consensus and keep confined to ourselves. We got to let the world know. So I'm stopping the train because now we're putting the banners on the side of the train." 1968 Boycott...Potential. [laughter]

All right, let's start the train back up again. The train starts rolling. We look at the window now. All those people that were out there singing "God Bless America" and waving us on, they're gone. Not no more. So in other words, we don't have the right to make the decision for ourselves as to whether we feel something is good or bad. But in the place of them leaving, missiles and rockets and firebombs came to the train. Train still rolling, [but] it's on fire now—smoke everywhere. Mayhem. Chaos.

So now here we are 44 years later, and when someone walks up to me and wants to take a picture—and I see a lot of those guys, they telling me, "Move over, move over man. Let me get in the picture." All those building statues—26 feet down there in San Jose State: "Oh man, let me get a brick with my name written on the base for the base of the statue." And I tell them, I said, "Man, I love you less than yesterday and boy more than tomorrow, but you can never get in the picture. You will never get a brick at the base of the statue." [They say,] "What are you talking about man? We ran track together!" See because they gon' come up to you later when you try to get them to wake up, and once you go to Hill and be successful at whatever your endeavors are, then they gon' want to cry and take the picture with you. And what you tell them, you say, "Listen. If you want to get in the picture, I have no problem letting you in, but you got to do one thing first." They say, "What's that?" I say, "Step on up here and open up your shirt. Pull up your pants leg. Roll up your sleeve." [They say,] "What you looking for?" [I say,] "I'm looking for burns. If you don't have no burns on your body, that means when things got hot you bailed." Understand? Because in your line of work trying to wake up society, things gon' get hot. The thing is whether you have the gumption, the audacity to say, "I defy what you do. I defy what you stand for."

As I told people yesterday, the biggest problem that we have in this society right now is that we have a socialistic mind and a capitalistic society. That's everything. That's, "I don't have the money, but I think I should still be entitled to medical treatment. I don't have the money man, but I think I should be entitled to push my kid to go to UCLA." But

they tell you, say, “Nah man, if you don’t have that money, I don’t care how much brain you got. You’re not going to UCLA. You don’t have that money, your friendship gon’ be on the street tomorrow.” So once we get a balance in this and make our government have an understanding and say, “Hey man, if we going to cover the people, we have to cover *all* of the people—not just the people that you choose to cover.” That’s what my fight is.

See, my problem is that my buddies have a very severe problem. And that problem is they are afraid to offend their oppressors. They are afraid to offend their oppressors. They feel like, “Oh man, I understand what you saying, and I agree with what you saying, but man my theory is that when that chicken got on the fence and laid that egg, the egg stayed on the fence—it didn’t fall to the right or to the left. Oh, when my wife got pregnant, she wasn’t pregnant—she was almost pregnant.” Nah, see, either you’re pregnant or you’re not pregnant. Either the chicken laid the egg, and it fell to the left or it fell to the right, but it did not stay on the fence.

You have choices that you have to make when you start to write your stories, and you have to make the right choices because whatever you write, remember, it’s for the duration of time. They can destroy a picture, but they can never destroy your words.

Why did I use my athleticism where most guys sit up and talk about how great they are as athletes? I do it. I only do it to my wife, though. [*laughter*] To my wife, I was a superstar. [*laughter*] But relative to me getting on to the public, I don’t talk about my athleticism, but I use my athleticism as a springboard once again to be a voice. Yeah, they would love for me to sit back and tell me, say, “Man you out of place. You shouldn’t be considered about that.” How can I be in the world and not have any concern about the injustices in this world? We *all* have to realize that it could be you tomorrow—because of your religion, because of what nation you came from or your heritage, because you have too much money. They might tell you, say, “We’re coming after you because you have too much money.”

I went down to Wall Street to Occupy Wall Street in New York. And it’s always good to go back home, but when I went back to Wall Street, I told them, I say, “Why am I here? I’m here for you. Why am I here for you? Because I am you.” 44 years ago, I decided to get involved in a fight. I don’t get involved in fights other than to do anything but win. I told other people, I said, “You know what kept me and gave me longevity is that God put it in my mind years ago if you gon’ realize that this life that you live is a game.”

Anybody in this auditorium could tell me what’s the concept of the game. Why you in the game? You ain’t in the game to lose; you in the game to win. But my message to the people in Wall Street was, “In order to win a game, you got to know the rules of the game.” We studied real hard what we did in Mexico City. We studied what we did real hard leading up to Mexico City. We can’t have individuals saying we occupying Wall Street and set off a big fire and have them just probable cause to come in and start cracking heads and busting [people] upside the head. As it is right now, someone come in and do mayhem and kill Trayvon Martin. And we know justifiably this man gunned him down, but we still going through changes to try and get some justice in that area. So now, if someone sets up a situation for this kid to get killed, who do you blame? The

perpetrator? Or do you blame the kid that let him into this situation? So all I'm saying is that we got to make sure we're right in what we're doing.

Mexico City? I was born to do that. I tell people I came on this planet to do that. Based on the fact that when I was seven years old, God gave me a vision. And you always question yourself. When God gives you something, you feel like, a guy being in the military and all the platoon got killed and you the only one that lived. For the rest of your life, you asking God, "Why did you save me?" Well God gave me vision, and for 67 years down there—at least for 60 years for sure—I been asking, "Why did you choose me Lord?" To show me on my wall one morning me in a farm—I didn't even know what a stadium was at the time, so I said farm. Well all the people was in there, and they was all, "Yippee-ki-yay" and they was so excited, and I'm in the middle of the field on a box. He didn't put nobody out on this box but me. I'm there by myself. I'm right-handed. I always did everything with this right hand. In this vision, when it dawned on my little brain that these individuals was applauding for me, because no one was out there but me, and I went to wave. And I put my left hand up to wave, and I got my hand up about that high [*gestures*], and all the happiness and joy turned to anger and venom. Stormy weather. Spitting. Throwing things. Name calling. Telling me where to go. And hat vision shook me up so bad.

15 years later I was on the victory stand in Mexico City. First thing that came to mind—and you have to forgive my language—but the first thing in my mind, I said, "Oh shit." [*laughter*] That's what that vision was about. [*audio clip of announcer from Mexico City announcing the race with Tommie Smith and John Carlos*] Because the exact same thing that happened in that vision as a little boy happened to me when I was 23 years old. I'm not left-handed; I'm right-handed. When I had that glove on, I had it on my left hand. You heard many stories about old John Carlos left his gloves [at] home? Nonsense. There was only one pair of gloves. Mr. Smith had the gloves. I had the idea. Okay? Why did I wear the beads? I put the beads on because I experienced so many young individuals when I was a kid hearing about them dying in the South because of lynching. I wanted to be cognizant—nah, in remembrance—of those individuals. Why did we wear black socks with no shoes? Because we thought about the people of color not here in the United States but around the world that was living in poverty every day. We the greatest nation in the world—they sending space ships to the moon, and they telling me they can't kill a cockroach? I'm not buying it.

So when you start to write, you have to write and elevate these things to a point where people can understand why you have so much passion in the work that you do. Because that's the thing that carries you over is the *passion* for what you do. I have *passion* for the human race. I love people. But I don't like nobody want to try and override everyone's situation. You know you sit back and think about, when you write, make them understand the difference in walking down the street having a good time and the difference in walking down the street and falling down with a heart attack and can't breathe, and you got a black man or black woman running over trying to put those big black lips on you to give you life. Do you have time to be prejudiced or biased or racist at that time? [*laughter*] No. [*applause*]

Sit back and tell them at the same time when you write, tell them, say, “Hey, why is it the only time we come together is when we have a major catastrophe from God? We have a hurricane. Everybody get together—we love one another then. We have a fire—we all got this water together. We love one another then. The minute the tsunami’s over and done, then everyone goes back into their own separate, individual ways, and it’s not your fault. We were taught this from grade school, from middle school, to high school. Even on the college campuses you see it, too. Segregation. The Hispanics sit together. The Blacks sit together. The whites sit together. We might have one or two cross the line, and they be vilified for crossing the line. And then when you sit back and you say, “Who do you see other than in the school or in the institution where they have this segregation going on? It’s the state penitentiary!” The same thing—we taught this. They teach me about history—the little history they did teach me about—but they never taught me about the culture of our ethnicities. I don’t know nothing about the Italians no more than, *he’s Italian*. I could tell an Italian, say, “Man, you closer to me than this guy.” He say, “Why?” I say, “Look at the color of your skin, man.” I say, “A guy named Hannibal came to you. You know about Hannibal? Let’s talk about that.” But they don’t teach us about the different cultures in the education system. Well I talked about racism in the educational system. Why is it that we really still got the box closed relative to teaching about different ethnic groups in this society?

They gon’ have game like that, and you have to be the ones who write about these games. If you shun your responsibilities, say “I’m a tell *some* of the story.” You as bad as the guys that for 44 years came to John Carlos, said, “John, I want to interview you.” [I said,] “What you want to interview me for?” [They said,] “I want to tell your story.” But when all the dust settles, they tell *their* story. They don’t tell my story. They pick out the parts that they think is relevant to what they want to run across to people, but things that I think is the meat of the story they want to shun that. As writers, it’s your responsibility to put in the whole truth and nothing but the truth. Don’t worry about what people might say *now*. As I said, they gon’ want to get in the picture later. They’ll be knocking you out the way.

I have one last situation, and we gon’ ask some questions, too. When I was a kid, I had a situation with my mom. My mom used to come in—she worked at Bellevue; she was a nurse at Bellevue. She worked at nights. She’d give up her nights with her man to bring a few extra dollars in the house. So my momma would come home in the morning, and all the kids would be downstairs. We’d be playing stickball and the whole nine yards and parents sitting in the benches. And my mother would come in, and she’d give me the nod. She’d walk right on upstairs. She booted the women [and went] on upstairs. So one day, I’m upstairs and I said to my mother, I said, “Mom, how come you don’t never come downstairs and talk to the other women—sit on the bench and talk to them? Are you stuck up?” My mother looked at me, she said, “What did you say?” [*laughter*] Like the dummy, [I said,] “Are you stuck up?” [*laughter*] When I looked back, my mother had tears in her eyes. And my mother said to me, she said, “I’ve never raised my kids to think they were better than anyone, and I’ve never carried myself to think I was better than anyone.” I said, “Well mom, why don’t you come downstairs and sit down?” She said to me, she said, “Johnny, I work in the operating room.” She said, “I can’t go in the operating room with sores on me.” See, we had an infestation of caterpillars, and if

anyone knows about caterpillars—they so fragile, if one of them fall on your neck, and you go back to wipe it off, it done busted by the time you get your hand to your face, and you got a rash on your neck. So I said, “Oh, that’s valid. I like that answer, Mom! I’ll take care of them.”

I went straight the next morning to the manager’s office in the project. I said, “We have a problem.” [He said,] “What’s the problem?” I said, “Man, uh, these caterpillars.” Now mind you, I used to go up the pool in the white area. They had the same trees minus the caterpillars because they sprayed for them every year. [I said,] “We have a problem with these caterpillars.” [He said,] “What are you talking about? Get out of here.” And that’s the first time I learned that they had a panic button. [He] pushed the panic button. Next thing you knew, the police and the guards they were dragging me out. I broke back and went to his office. I said, “Man, you got 48 hours.” I gave him 48 hours—what my father used to give me. [laughter] [I said,] “You got 48 hours. If you don’t handle the problem, I will.” The police look at me, said, “You threatening that man?” I said, “Nah, I’m not threatening him, but I did give him a money back guarantee. If he don’t do it, I will.” I waited 48 hours. Didn’t do anything. I told all the women, “Go down to the other end of the project or go upstairs. Gon’ be some problems around here.”

I went down to the gas station. My partner’s father owned a gas station. Sometimes my father sent me to get him some gas. He said, “Where’s the bucket?” I said, “He didn’t give me one.” He said, “Go back there and get one.” I got the biggest one I could find, filled it up with gas. He said, “Where the money?” [I said,] “He’ll take care of it later.” I got the gas; now I’m rolling. Now there was four trees. There was a tunnel coming down, and then there’s two trees on each side. Well the first tree I went down there and hit. We used to have stick matches. I hit that with my zipper, threw it on there, and just, “Whoosh!” Fire jumped out, and all the people running around, “Oh crazy Johnny. Crazy Johnny, he’s doing something!” [laughter] I heard that all my life. By the time I go to the next tree and dump the tree, I couldn’t even get to the matches [because] the fire had done leaped over. Now everybody in the projects is running like ballistic. I get over to the third tree. I hit the third tree, I hit my match again, throw it on there. By that time, the police done come and the guard, and they didn’t know whether they should jump on me or try and put the fire out. When they hesitated, I hit the fourth tree. [laughter] Then they wrestled me to the ground.

Now I had to go to court, took me to jail. I went to court. Here’s the story my mother told my father, say, “Earl, I don’t know what that boy gon’ do next. I’m so embarrassed, I’m not going down there to watch them lock my baby up. I’m not going. You gon’ have to go.” So y father said, “All right.” So we get down, we going to court, and my father said, “Well son, I want you to know me and your mom love you. Your brothers and sisters love you, but don’t look like you coming home. [laughter] They gon’ keep you on this one.” And my father never said one time why did I do it. We got into court and the judge asked my father, says, “Mr. Carlos. Does your son have any mental deficiencies?” My father says, “None that I know of.” He said, “Well why would he do what he did?” And my father said, “You know, your Honor, that’s a good question, but he’s here. Why don’t you ask him?” And I told the judge, I said, “Your Honor.” I said, “I asked my mother

why she don't come downstairs. She explained to me she don't come downstairs due to the caterpillars." I said, "And she's absolutely right. She should have the same right to come downstairs and sit out [on the benches] as well as any other parent here. But based on her job, she couldn't come because the project is infested with caterpillars." I said, "The white folks up there, I go to their pool up there. They spray the trees every year. They don't have the same problem we have." The judge looked at the manager. The manager he said, "When was the last time you guys sprayed?" The judge waited for an answer, said, "Your Honor, I don't really have that information here." So the judge looked at him, said, "Look. I tell you what you do. It's time for lunch. We gon' take a lunch—recess. When you come back, you have your records with you."

The judge was a smart man, and a fair man, because when we went to recess, he went back in his chambers, and he called up the New York City Housing Authority and told them to come down with their records in terms of how much money they give for the spray every year. We come back from lunch. Now my father's telling me, "Son, things don't look good. Browbeating me, boy, your mom is crying. She's embarrassed. All the people in the projects is concerned." We get back to court, [judge] says, "Is the manager here?" Manager brings up a little folder, one slip of paper in it. He tells the judge, says, "Your Honor," he says, "my secretary's out ill today, and I don't know where all the records are." The judge says, "Okay, sit down. Is anyone here from the New York Housing Authority?" Here a guy come up, he got a big bustling accordion-like folders. [The judge] said, "Do you have your records in there? Can you tell me how often the city receives money to housing authority, how much money they receive for the spray?" He looked. He said, "Every year, sir." [The judge] said, "Every year?" He said, "How many times did they say they didn't spray?" [The man] checked again, said, "They spray every year, sir." The man looks at my father, looked at me, and said, "Mr. Carlos. When is the last time you remember someone spraying?" He said, "Well, Johnny's a teenager now. When we moved into this project, he was a little baby playing in the wading pool." He said, "You see he not a baby no more, and they haven't sprayed since we was a little kid in that pool." [The judge] looks at my manager, he looks at my father, he said, "Are you sure?" My father said, "Yes sir." They fired the manager before we could leave the courtroom. [*laughter*]

Now the bottom line—what I'm trying to say is it might look bad for you, about what you say. You might be ridiculed by people for writing what you have to write. But in the long run, God will see that you come out on top because you doing the right thing. So when we left the courtroom, my father said something to me that stands out in my life and will probably stay with me for the rest of my life. My father said to me, he told me, "Son, I can't tell you about the pride that I have right now based on what happened in that courtroom." And I thought that was like the greatest thing in the world when your dad tells you about how proud he is. But then he went one step further to tell me how much *respect* he had for me. And that's a heavy statement for a father to tell his kid about having respect. You know about the pride and the love thing. But when he told me about the respect and told me, "I respect you, son, because you done a lot of things in your life. And I might not have understood them because I put that 48-hour move on you. I got that button many times." But he said, "You never backed down for what you believe in."

And if you guys are here with that passion for the job that you took, *never back down*. Because what you're writing for is not for your life today. It's for your kids and your kid's peers. That's why we bought a house—not for us to live in. We leaving something for our kids. We pushing our kids to get an education—not for me to stick my chest out that my kid got a doctorate degree or my kid's got a BA. I want my kids to have the best. And the only way you going to leave a true legacy is through your *words*—through what you put down. Let them *feel* what you write. Let them *understand* why you feel what you write. I'm just merely getting through this essay. Put your passion into it. God bless you and thank you for giving me the opportunity.

[Applause]

Cue music: “*We the People Who are Darker Than Blue*” by Curtis Mayfield

SC: Decades later, the silent protest resonates as never before. Today, these demonstrators are generally regarded as heroes. At the time, however, they were widely understood as dangerous, angry, and anti-American. As I listen to Carlos share his experiences, I am reminded what James Baldwin said about related efforts: “I love America more than any other country in the world,” he said. “And, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.” They criticized American because they expected more from people. Carlos called attention to ongoing injustices because he has always had faith that things could change. Carlos inspires me as I'm sure he inspires you. He is unquestionably an American hero. And to be completely frank, that is a little bit intimidating. An extraordinary person like Carlos can make a real difference. But what about far more ordinary people like me, like many of my students, like the vast majority of people that we might encounter in everyday life?

As I think about that demonstration in Mexico City, the question I keep asking myself is what might a global rhetorical event like this have to teach about rhetoric in our everyday lives? Few of us will ever have this kind of access to a global audience. However, that does not mean access is unavailable to the rest of us. Carlos's story also reminds me of the extraordinary strength of ordinary people and the ubiquity of the local, even on a global stage.

Indeed, the vast majority of rhetoric in our everyday lives takes place at local levels. In *Language as a Local Practice*, Alistar Pennycook insists that indeed, “everything happens locally . . . no matter how global an event, it *still* always happens locally.”

Carlos frequently describes his activism as a series of discrete but related events experienced at very local levels: the first time he heard Malcolm X on the radio for example, his fight with the New York Housing Authority on behalf of his mother, his first exposure to Jim Crow's legacy as a brand new college student arriving from Harlem at the Dallas airport in 1966, even his first direct link to the global movement that fueled his demonstration the following year in Mexico City in 1968. Carlos locates that moment of contact between the global and the local at the East Texas post office, where he picked

up his latest issue of *Track and Field* and turned to an article about the Olympic Project for Human Rights. Even that global protest in Mexico City happened locally—for Norman, Smith, and Carlos as they heard the national anthem play and saw the flag begin to rise, for the audience watching the events unfold from their stadium seats overlooking the field, for the millions of viewers witnessing it as it was broadcast into their living rooms. This notion of space as it relates to activism has motivated the vast majority of my research in this area, especially where the circulation of texts is involved. For a more in-depth discussion, check out the references that are provided at the episode description, including the video introduction.

Background Music: “Auditorium” by Mos Def

SC: The silent protest offers a powerful example of the discrepancies that always accompany activism. Change takes time. As Angela Davis reminds us, “The victories that happen are not always the ones we fought for, but we should still be celebrating.” Her work with the Black Panthers during this same era provides another example of this impact and this slow process. The process is never ending. As long as humans live together, injustices will persist. Still, we must continue to fight. We just have to continue to fight. We will never get the change we *want*, but as Dr. Carlos reminds us as long as we keep working for it, the world will continue its development as a more just place for *everyone* (rather than a select few).

Cue music: “Stop” by J Dilla

BK: This Rhetorical Life is brought to you by graduate students in the Composition and Cultural Rhetoric Program at Syracuse University. Executive Producers of this Rhetorical Life are Ben Kuebrich and Allison Hitt with additional production and editing from Karriann Soto, Tamara Issak, and Seth Davis.