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Exploring Social Studies Through
Multicultural Literature: Legend of the
St Ann's Flood

Sara Winstead Fry
Boise State University, sarafry@boisestate.edu

Exploring Social Studies through Multicultural Literature: *Legend of the St Ann's Flood*

Sara Winstead Fry
Boise State University
College of Education – CIFS
1910 University Drive
Boise, ID 83725-1745
sarafr@boisestate.edu

Author Biography

Sara Winstead Fry teaches elementary social studies methods at Boise State University. She earned her Ph.D. from the University of Wyoming, and her research interests include social studies education, beginning teacher induction, and instructional technology. Prior to her university career, Sara taught middle school social studies and language arts in Colorado and Port of Spain, Trinidad (where she lived in a house on the banks of the St Ann's river).

Abstract

The search for literature that is high quality, high interest, written at age-appropriate levels for adolescent readers, addresses social studies topics, and presents multicultural perspectives can be daunting. *Legend of the St Ann's Flood* is a novel that meets all of these goals. Its setting in Trinidad and Tobago provides the opportunity for students to learn about a country and region that are frequently overlooked in social studies curriculum in the United States. This article provides historical and cultural background information about Trinidad and Tobago, an overview of the novel, and specific teaching suggestions that integrate reading and writing into social studies instruction.

Every teacher knows a child like Joseph – he struggles in school and is always in trouble. Conventional instruction rarely motivates him, and his struggles challenge us to expand our teaching repertoire in order to help him succeed. When Joseph appears as the unlikely hero of a trade book written for middle-level readers, *Legend of the St Ann's Flood* by Debbie Jacob (2004), the result is an opportunity to study culture, geography, global connections, and character education. Joseph's kind heart and intelligence shine through as readers become engrossed in his adventures with his good friend Jaya. The book captivates readers through rich folklore that excites the imagination and likeable characters middle schoolers can relate to because they know – or even are – boys like Joseph and girls like Jaya. This article reviews *Legend of the St Ann's Flood* and then describes how it can be used to: a) help students develop reading and writing skills through literacy activities that allow students to explore social studies themes and character education issues presented in the book, b) provide students with the opportunity to study global issues, and c) enrich a multicultural social studies curriculum. To begin, background information¹ about the story's setting, the deadly flood that inspired the legend, and Trinidad and Tobago's history and culture is provided.

Background

On October 5, 1993 a torrential downpour drenched Port of Spain, the capital city of Trinidad and Tobago. The storm led to severe flash flooding of the St Ann's River. For the small town of St Ann's, a suburb adjoining the northern part of Port of Spain, the result was deadly. Six lives were lost in the flood, houses were damaged, and a middle school was cut off from the rest of the town due to high flood waters.

[Insert Image 2 (map of Trinidad and Tobago) approximately here]

Port of Spain is located on the island of Trinidad, which is just seven miles off of the northeast coast of Venezuela. Trinidad is the southernmost island in the Caribbean chain. It has a maritime tropical climate, with a rainy season from June to December and a dry season during the rest of the year. Heavy rain is common during the rainy season, and a problematic drainage system in the capital city coupled with deforestation means minor flooding is also common. But the severity of the 1993 St Ann's flood was atypical, and even scientists were perplexed by its ferocity. There was no hurricane, tropical storm, or other powerful weather system in Trinidad and Tobago's vicinity that might have offered an explanation for the severe flood. Jacob (2004) explained her inspiration for writing the legend, "No one has been able to come up with a convincing explanation for [the storm's] ferocity so why not allow our imaginations to explain what science cannot?" (110).

Jacob honored Trinidad's history and tradition of story telling by having a character named Jabari tell the *Legend of St Ann's Flood*. Jabari is a common male name among Trinidadians of African heritage, and his role as story teller reflects the African griot's contribution to Trinidadian history. In West Africa the griot was a traveling singer and story teller. When slaves were brought from West Africa during Trinidad's colonial period, which began with Spanish settlement in 1592, the griot tradition continued and facilitated communication between slaves (Williams 1964). As a result, griots helped to preserve and expand traditions, folklore, and legends. After slavery was abolished in 1834 (under the British, who captured Trinidad in 1797), the griot's role evolved into its modern form: the calypsonian, a contemporary bard who shares tales and political commentary through the popular musical style calypso. Thus, Jacob's (2004) use of a story teller named Jabari to tell the legend reflects Trinidad and Tobago's history and culture, as does the name she gave to another character in the book: Jaya.

A popular East Indian female name in Trinidad, Jaya originates from the Hindu faith. Like people of African ancestry, East Indians have also influenced Trinidad and Tobago's history and culture. After slavery was abolished, East Indians were brought to the islands as indentured servants to work on sugarcane plantations. After indentured servitude was abolished in 1917, many East Indians remained (Williams 1964). According to the 2000 census, the majority of the population in Trinidad and Tobago, which received its independence from Britain in 1962, was of East Indian (40%) and African (37.5) ancestry (CIA 2008). The characters' names are one way that *Legend of the St Ann's Flood* reflects Trinidad and Tobago's population demographics, history, and culture; the use of folklore characters provides another.

A Folklore-Rich Beginning

Jacob wastes no time getting readers' attention by introducing two characters from Trinidadian folklore in the first page of the book. Mama Dlo, the queen of the forest, is a giant anaconda with a human face. Readers meet Mama Dlo when she is engaged in a heated argument with Papa Bois, who is the half-man, half-deer king of the forest. They argue about what to do with Jabari, a young boy who failed to heed an important message from Trinidadian folklore: children should be home before dark. Jabari stayed out late, and he was lured into the heart of the forest by the legendary Douens – spirits of children who died before baptism. The Douens brought the boy to Mama Dlo, who wants to eat him, which is understandable since she is a giant anaconda and needs nourishment to keep up her strength. But Papa Bois decides that Jabari is needed for a more important task; he is given his freedom in exchange for telling the world how two brave children saved St Ann's from total destruction during the October 1993 flood. After this action-packed introduction, readers follow Jabari out of the forest and into the house of a journalist to whom he tells the tale. Papa Bois's words "Let the legend begin" (Jacob 2004, 6) usher in the main story line, and readers get to meet Joseph, the hero of the legend.

Joseph: The Boy Who Is Always in Trouble

Joseph is drawing a picture of his favorite creature – a snake – when readers meet him in his middle school classroom. His teacher reprimands him for not his doing math, which briefly redirects his attention. The focus on school work does not last; before long Joseph is daydreaming about searching for snakes in Trinidad’s Caroni River and listening to his friend Jaya describe snake charmers in India.

Joseph is quickly established as a likeable dreamer who is often at odds with his teacher, Miss Peters, who always seems certain he is up to no good. Her efforts to shame him into behaving by yelling things like, “You’re always the last one in line and you’re always causing problems. You never pay attention” (18) have no effect; Joseph is an expert at tuning her out by thinking about more exciting things like snakes. Such interactions are likely to endear Joseph to middle-level readers. The interactions have a powerful impact on teachers as well since Miss Peters’ sharp words and unkind approach are clearly ineffective with the boy readers quickly come to adore.

Readers then follow Joseph, Jaya, and Miss Peters to the zoo for a class trip. Joseph becomes separated from Jaya and the rest of his class when they arrive at the zoo. He goes to find the snakes, and ends up having an amazing experience because he meets a temporary zoo keeper named Roy who lets him *hold* a small anaconda. Roy is a simple, kind-hearted young man who is the victim of bullying by a mean-spirited zoo keeper. Before long Roy is called away to perform a menial task. Joseph is left alone and soon finds himself accidentally locked in the reptile house with the anaconda on his arm.

The Magic

While a mildly panicked Joseph struggles to find a way out of the locked reptile house, a storm brews over Port of Spain. Dark clouds gather, and the air becomes completely still; then lightening flashes and powerful gusts of wind begin to blow. Joseph somehow, seemingly by magic, gets the locked door to the reptile house to open, and he makes a quick decision to keep the snake. He had always wanted one. With his new pet safe in his lunchbox, Joseph sprints to the school bus just in time to be scolded by Miss Peters for selfishly keeping everyone waiting while the storm grew so precarious. Once on the bus Joseph falls asleep and has a dream that foreshadows the magical adventures to come. In the dream Joseph and Jaya come face to face with the terrifying Mama Dlo, who is angry because her son has been kidnapped.

Joseph awakens from his dream to find himself back at the school. The rain storm has worsened; terrible thunder and lightening fill the air, and torrents of rain cause the streets to flood. From the school window the children are able to see some of the results of the storm – the St Ann’s river overflows its banks and part of the water creates a new river that flows right in front of the middle school. For a few pages the magic of *Legend of the St Ann’s Flood* and the non-fiction world of history coincide: The school was cut off from the rest of the city while children and teachers were trapped inside helplessly watching as large debris, like tree trunks, violently tossed about in the raging river.

The children are eventually rescued by fire trucks, but Joseph and his snake-filled lunch box are rescued earlier by his uncle who somehow (magically?) gets to the school despite the impassible, debris-filled roads. When Joseph arrives home it becomes clear that the small anaconda he took from the zoo is no ordinary snake. The snake is real, Joseph is sure of it, but his mother cannot see it. Even when the anaconda is wrapped around his head, Joseph’s mom just asks if his uncle bought him a new hat. As the story unfolds readers learn that the snake has a name, Simon, and he is indeed a magic snake. And his mother is the angry forest queen Mama Dlo.

Simon is going through growing pains just like a human adolescent and finds himself in conflict with his mother. Mama Dlo has tried to teach him to hate people. She believes all humans are evil and endeavors to find ways to keep them out of the forest. His words, “I don’t want to hate people just because they’re people” (p. 85) reflect an internal struggle faced by anyone who has questioned the prejudiced beliefs of family

members or close friends. It can be hard to openly disagree with one's parents, and Mama Dlo's angry fits and magical powers make Simon's situation more challenging. Simon tells Joseph that he had a fight with his mother when she ordered him to kill a child who wandered into the forest, and he went off into the forest to think through the fight. It was then, in a moment of carelessness, that some men captured him and brought him to the zoo. Mama Dlo's anger caused her to release the horrible storm that flooded the St Ann's river. It was with great difficulty that the forest king, Papa Bois, got her to end the flood.

Joseph liberated Simon, but when Mama Dlo finds out where Simon is, she concludes that Joseph and Jaya kidnapped him. Knowing his new friends' lives are at risk because of his mother's anger, Simon helps Jaya and Joseph develop a daring plan to confront Mama Dlo with the truth. The risky plan puts the children's lives in great peril, but ultimately the legend has a happy ending. Joseph, Jaya, and Simon end up talking to Papa Bois who kindly but firmly tells them they have to make their own decision about how to resolve the problem with Mama Dlo. Simon decides to stay in the forest so he can try to convince his mother not to hate humans. Joseph promises to teach humans not to hate snakes and to care about the forest. The children return from the forest as changed people. Jaya grows up to be an ophthalmologist who helps her patients see the world better. Joseph grows up to a famous biologist and protector of the forest, and Roy, the bullied zoo keeper, becomes his ambitious research assistant. Joseph regularly teaches children about the animals and land around them because, as Roy said, "Teach them when they are young... and they'll remember it when they are grown up" (p. 106). Joseph, like Jaya, helps people see the world around them; he also helps them want to care for it.

The book leaves readers satisfied by the resolution and inspired by how the boy who was always in trouble and does poorly in school finds success. Joseph is the unlikely hero who reminds readers of the importance of friendship and standing up for what is right, which provides ample opportunity for middle-level readers to examine important topics in character education. The book is rich with information that reflects Trinidad and Tobago's culture and geography, thus providing the opportunity for thematic study that allows students to develop social studies understandings and literacy skills.

Reading, Writing, and Social Studies

Effective teaching of social studies can provide students with the opportunity to develop their reading and writing skills. Indeed, literacy instruction is so important at the middle- and secondary-level that the International Reading Association recommended providing adolescents with reading comprehension instruction in all content areas (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, and Rycik 2000). The three activities described in this section help students deepen their understanding of *Legend of St Ann's Flood*, develop literacy skills, and examine Trinidad and Tobago's culture, global connections, and character education.

Sitting in the Hotseat to Examine Culture

Sitting in the hotseat is an interactive literacy strategy that allows students to take on the role of a literary character or expert about a topic (Wilhelm 2002). A student sits in the hotseat, which is simply a chair located at the front of the classroom, and talks from the character's perspective and responds to questions from classmates. The strategy "invites students to hone their ability to analyze characters, infer, elaborate, and think on their feet" (82). Wilhelm included a quote from one of his student's journal entries that illustrated the technique's power to engage adolescent learners; "I can see why they call the hotseat the hotseat. You feel hot when you are in it! Instead of being bored in class, you feel alive" (82). The student in the hotseat can also be assisted by a team of advisors who provide help and suggestions if needed.

In order to prepare students for sitting in the hotseat during or after reading *Legend of the St Ann's Flood*, teachers should have students work in focus groups to research examples of Trinidad and Tobago's culture that are embedded in the book. Possible topics from the book include folklore, calypso, East Indian and African contributions to culture, and exotic-sounding food that reflect the nation's international influences. The book specifically mentions roti, pilau, tamarind balls, and callaloo. This topic can be expanded to

include how Trinidad and Tobago's geography contributes to the growth of the tropical ingredients that go into these dishes.

After conducting research about their assigned topic, each focus group brainstorms a list of questions to ask about the topics they did *not* research. Then one student from each focus group sits in the hotseat and assumes the role of one of the book's characters or an expert about the aspect of culture their group researched. The student in the hotseat then responds to questions posed by students from the *other* focus groups. If the student in the hot seat gets stumped by a question, students from her or his focus group can help answer. The preparation for sitting in the hotseat allows students to develop research and questioning skills in order to learn about Trinidad and Tobago's culture. The act of sitting in the hotseat and questioning the student who sits there provides a meaningful and exciting way for students to share the fruits of their research. The activity can be expanded beyond the NCSS Standard I: Culture to include other themes such as global connections and character education.

Poem Strips to Examine People, Places, and Environments

The poem strips literacy strategy allows students to delve deeply into a text by rereading sections to identify particularly powerful and meaningful parts.² Students identify five sentences or phrases that stand out to them in the text and write them on individual strips of paper that the teacher provides. Students then work in small groups of three to five people to create a poem that uses everyone's strips. They collaborate to arrange the strips in whatever way they think conveys the most powerful impression for a reader. Since students often identify the same sentences or phrases, they have to determine how to use repetition effectively. The final organization of strips is taped to a large piece of paper and read to the entire class. When read aloud, the poems convey a powerful message that the teacher then debriefs in order to help the students understand the issue more deeply and develop questions about the topic and events.

Poem strips can be created from *Legend of the St Ann's Flood* to help students address NCSS Standard III: People, Places & Environments. One approach is to have students identify statements or sentences that reflect the relationship between the people in the story and their environment. To help focus their efforts, students can review specific chapters. The sample of such a poem strip poem created by reviewing chapters 6 and 8

[insert Sample Poem Strip Poem as a text box near this paragraph]

Sample Poem Strip Poem about Human-Environment Interaction

“The radio say it’s a freak storm.”
Cars twisted and turned and floated like boats
the St Ann’s River swelled and broke its banks
the St Ann’s River ripped away the walls of some of the houses in its path
“The radio says it’s a freak storm.”
The children ran to the window and watched debris
Mrs Noonan tried to look calm even though she knew everyone was trapped.
They were cut off by the flood
“Surely the river can’t climb any higher?”
St Ann’s is cut off from the rest of Port of Spain
Mrs Noonan tried to look calm even though she knew everyone was trapped.
the river kept rising and snatching everything in sight
“Let’s hope we’re high enough”
Someone will have to come and clear away the trees, the cars, and all the garbage.
“The radio says it’s a freak storm.”

specifically raises issues about how to respond when people are endangered by natural disasters, post-disaster clean up efforts, and how humans try to inhibit damage caused by severe storms. The poems provide teachers with a means of formatively assessing whether or not students understand human-environment interaction. Having students share their poems aloud emphasizes the power of the flood and this important part of the book. By following the sharing of poem-strip poems with a debriefing, the teacher can get students excited to study geography. Poem strips can also be used to address other aspects of social studies, including culture, character education, and global connections.

Character Education through Writing in Role and Choral Montage

Writing in the role of characters from a text and presenting the writing through a choral montage allows students to deepen their understanding of a text's people, situation, and theme (Costello, Lawlis and Swingle 2005). These techniques allow students to consider conflicting perspectives held by two characters in a text as well as that of an outsider: a journalist. Writing in the role of a journalist who is on the scene preparing a front-page story for the morning edition of a newspaper provides meaningful third-party insights to the text. In order to extend writing in role to include choral montage, approximately 1/3 of a class should be assigned to each of three roles: conflicting character A, conflicting character B, and journalist. Simon and Mama Dlo or Mama Dlo and Papa Bois are two sets of characters from *Legend of the St Ann's Flood* who have differing perspectives to explore through writing in role. Students do not have to be given an extensive amount of time to prepare their writing; draft-quality pieces can be thoughtfully prepared in five to ten minutes.

After students complete their writing, they underline a key idea or short phrase that they are comfortable sharing out loud. Next students are arranged in three circles: character-A writers sit in a circle on the floor, while character-B writers sit on chairs forming a circle around the character-A writers. The journalists stand in a larger circle around the character-B writers. The teacher then navigates around the circles and taps individual students as a cue to read their excerpt aloud. All students who wrote in one role can also be asked to read aloud as a chorus. The effect is a powerful exchange of writing and ideas that the teacher can then debrief to help students better understand the differing perspectives (Costello, Lawlis and Swingle 2005).

Jacob (2004) embedded major issues pertinent to character education in *Legend of the St Ann's Flood*. Chapters 2 and 4 concern Roy and bullying, while chapters 4 and 16 address Joseph's kindness towards Roy. Simon's struggles as he tries to resolve his serious disagreement with his prejudiced mother is a dominant theme in chapters 11 and 14-16. Friendship and loyalty are explored in chapters 12-16, and chapter 16 can be used alone to address how to ethically make difficult decisions. Teachers can help students unpack these issues through writing in role and choral montage; these literacy strategies can also be used to address culture and global issues.

Global Issues

The National Council for the Social Studies (1994) curriculum standards underscored the importance of experiences that allow students to study global connections and interdependence among diverse world cultures. *Legend of the St Ann's Flood* presents the opportunity to explore timely issues that can help students understand global interdependence. In the Afterword, Jacob (2004) explained that deforestation due to slash-and-burn farming and hillside house construction have made flooding a common occurrence in Trinidad. Students can study the impact deforestation has on the environment in Trinidad and around the world. They can examine the economic issues that lead people in developing nations like Trinidad to cut down forests and compare those reasons to the rationale for forest management plans implemented in countries like the United States and Canada. Students can use the 5 themes of geography to deepen their understanding of deforestation's prevalence and worldwide impact.

Trinidad and Tobago faces other issues of global importance that are not included *Legend of the St Ann's Flood*. These issues can be addressed through a thematic unit about how individual nations are affected by global issues. For example, Trinidad and Tobago has one of the strongest economies of all Caribbean nations due in part to petroleum and natural gas reserves located in Trinidad. The environmental impact of petroleum and natural gas extraction and the ever-increasing global reliance on fossil fuels are issues of international importance. Despite its relatively strong economy, nearly 1/5 of Trinidad and Tobago's population lives below the poverty line (CIA 2008). Trinidad and Tobago also has an extremely diverse population. People of African and East Indian ancestry make up the majority of the population, but there is also a strong cultural influence from citizens of Chinese and European ancestry. At times the country has been confronted by conflicting religions and cultures, as well as criminal activity led by radical religious groups. Alleviating poverty and responding to conflicting cultures are issues of global importance that students can study through a unit about Trinidad and Tobago. Examining such issues from multiple points of view is important because students need "a *global perspective* that includes knowledge, skills, and commitments ... to live wisely in a world that possesses limited resources and that is characterized by cultural diversity" (National Council for the Social Studies 1994, 7).

Trade Books in a Multicultural Social Studies Curriculum

Legend of the St Ann's Flood is a trade book that can make a meaningful addition to a multicultural social studies curriculum designed to include diverse perspectives and voices. McCarty (2007) explained that trade books with multicultural themes allow children to "get to know" (49) a person who lives in another country. In contrast to textbooks, which tend to teach generalities about people in other countries, McCarty demonstrated that trade books are more likely to excite readers.

Trade books have the additional advantage of making multicultural content more accessible to middle-level learners than social studies text books, which are frequently criticized for being hard to read and not being engaging (Brown 2007; Fordham, Wellman, and Sandmann 2002; Villano 2005). They are particularly challenging for poor readers in the middle grades who have to adjust from narrative texts, which are common in elementary schools, to the expository format common in text books. When middle school social studies teachers do not provide reading comprehension as part of their instruction, poor readers are left on their own to make sense of complicated textbooks (Ciardiello 2002). In response to the reading challenges posed by middle- and secondary-level textbooks, the International Reading Association underscored the importance of also allowing adolescent readers to select high-interest texts (Moore, et al. 2000). Folklore-rich trade books like *Legend of the St Ann's Flood* can provide the sort of low reading level, high-interest multicultural literature that engages struggling readers and helps them build comprehension skills.

Jacob's use of Trinidadian folklore in *Legend of the St Ann's Flood* also strengthens the book's ability to contribute to a multicultural curriculum. Darling (1996) explained that folklore has moral and social significance for a culture. It can serve a valuable component of a multicultural curriculum because "social studies teachers interested in deepening students' global perspectives can find a rich source of cultural knowledge in the imaginative folktales of a society" (180).

Concluding Thoughts

The time allocated for social studies instruction in America's elementary and middle schools has decreased due to No Child Left Behind's (NCLB) emphasis on literacy and mathematics (Leming, Ellington, and Schug 2006). Since NCLB will be part of the American education scene for the foreseeable future, the use of interdisciplinary instructional techniques seems essential for social studies' survival. *Legend of the St Ann's Flood* provides opportunities to teach reading and writing skills in the context of social studies. While educators have long valued such interdisciplinary approaches, they are particularly important in the current era where reading instruction is privileged to such an extent that teachers may "sacrifice teaching their students the foundations of citizenship" (Hinde 2005, 105).

Using high-interest trade books like *Legend of the St Ann's Flood* is also important given NCLB's emphasis on reading. Fiction can provide a more engaging introduction to social studies topics than text books. The likeable main characters in *Legend* embody goodness and remind readers of real people they know. The folklore, magic, and quick pace of the book draw readers in the first time Mama Dlo wails and angrily shakes her huge human head and scaly body. The book provides ample opportunities for meaningful explorations in social studies, captures students' interests, and sweeps them up into the excitement of reading in a way that is sure to leave no child behind.

Notes

1. See the Appendix for a list of resources teachers and students can use to learn more background information about Trinidad and Tobago.
2. I cannot attribute the poem strips instructional technique to a published reference. I learned the technique from a colleague who learned it from someone else who learned it years earlier at a social studies conference. I have been unable to locate a book or article that summarizes the technique; thus, I apologize for being unable to give the original author(s) proper credit for a technique that has impressive results.

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APPENDIX

The following resources provide additional information about Trinidad and Tobago.

- Sing Me a Rainbow was an exhibit of art from Trinidad and Tobago presented by the Smithsonian Latino Center in 1998. The main page has links to the virtual exhibit, history of art in the country, history of Carnival, the natural history of the islands, and a teacher's guide: <http://latino.si.edu/rainbow/default.html>. The educator's guide can also be used by students: <http://latino.si.edu/rainbow/education/default.htm>.
- The CIA World Factbook provides a summary of information about Trinidad and Tobago's geography, population demographics, government and economy: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/td.html>
- In addition to describing calypso, steel pan, and other forms of music that are a part of Trinidad's carnival, *Carnival Music in Trinidad* provides historical and social context for carnival. The book also includes a CD with 18 popular carnival tunes:
Dudley, S. 2004. *Carnival music in Trinidad*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- National Geographic provides information about Trinidad and Tobago through their People & Places website: http://www3.nationalgeographic.com/places/countries/country_trinidadandtobago.html as well as through their Music website: http://worldmusic.nationalgeographic.com/worldmusic/view/page.basic/country/content.country/trinidad___tobago_865
- Google Maps provides a map of Trinidad and Tobago: <http://maps.google.com/maps?f=q&hl=en&geocode=&q=trinidad+and+tobago&ie=UTF8&z=8>, that can be zoomed in sufficiently for students to see St Ann's: <http://maps.google.com/maps?f=q&hl=en&geocode=&q=trinidad+and+tobago+st+ann's&ie=UTF8&ll=10.68608,-61.512794&spn=0.069498,0.150375&z=13>