

## Doc Chat Episode Fourteen Transcript

### Exploring the Black Alternative Press of the 1960s and 1970s

KATE CORDES: All right. Why don't we get started? Welcome, everyone, to Doc Chat. My name is Kate Cordes. I'm the associate director of reference and outreach at the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building at the New York Public Library. Doc Chat is a weekly program series from the Library's Center for Research in the Humanities, a series that digs deep into the stories behind the Library's most interesting collections, and highlights ways that teachers can incorporate them into the classroom. In this episode, Julie Golia, the library's curator of history, social sciences, and government information, is joined by Amaka Okechukwu, assistant professor of sociology at George Mason University, and the author of the 2019 book, "To Fulfill These Rights, Political Struggle Over Affirmative Action and Open Admissions." Julie and Amaka will explore a small-print magazine from the 1960s and 1970s called "Black Dialogue," and will contextualize it in the era that it was published and written. Our guests will speak for about 10 to 15 minutes before we open up the conversation. During the program, feel free to use the chat function to share general comments. I would make sure to change your chat mode to "panelists and attendees," so that everyone is included in the conversation. Once we begin the question-and-answer segment, please use Zoom's question-and-answer function, the Q&A button at the bottom of your screen, rather than the chat function to pose your questions. If you wish to remain anonymous, please click that option before submitting your question. We would also like to know a bit more about you, so if you would please fill out the poll that I'm about to launch, we'd greatly appreciate that. And now, Julie, over to you.

JULIE GOLIA: Thanks, Kate. Hi, Amaka.

AMAKA OKECHUKWU: Hi.

JULIE GOLIA: So glad that you're here.

AMAKA OKECHUKWU: I'm so happy to be here.

JULIE GOLIA: So for those of you who've been to Doc Chat before, you know that we often rely on our digital collection site, which includes almost a million digitized items to give access to the primary sources that we feature on Doc Chat. But today, Amaka and I are actually going to dig into another resource. We have many resources here at NYPL that can be used in the classroom.

So we're going to be looking at a database, or we're going to be looking at periodicals from a database called Independent Voices, and Kate is going to be dropping a lot of links into the chat for you all to follow along. So Independent Voices is an open-access digital collection of alternative press, newspapers, magazines, and journals drawn from special collections at lots of different participating libraries. And when I say "open access," that means that you don't need a login. You don't need a library card. You can just access it yourself, and essentially, this is made possible by funding from institutions like NYPL. So I'm excited for us to be digging into this today, especially since it, like, dovetails so beautifully with Amaka's current research, which I'm very, very excited about. Amaka and I worked together at the Brooklyn Historical Society, and she's been doing some great work on black social, cultural, and intellectual life in urban spaces in the late 20th century. So, Amaka, before we start and we dig in, will you tell people a little bit about what you've been looking at, and what you've been studying in your own work?

AMAKA OKECHUKWU: Right. Well, thank you again for inviting me. I'm currently writing a book, doing some research on my next book, which is about community organizing, and black social life in central Brooklyn during the '70s and '80s. And so, I've actually been, you know, doing some exploration of alternative periodicals during that time period as a way into the project, so I'm excited to talk more about the publications today.

JULIE GOLIA: Yay. That makes me very happy, and, you know, we'd love to see how NYPL stuff gets used in lots of different ways by lots of different scholars. And there's one caveat I want to give everybody. As we go through the slides today, forgive us. They're a tad blurry. One thing that Independent Voices doesn't let you do is to high-resolution downloads of images on here. They want you to look on the site, so Kate's going to be popping a lot of links into the chat. And I encourage you, if it's hard to see things on the slideshow, then to follow along -- follow along on your own browser. But -- so we are going to be looking at one small, but influential, periodical that was published for about a decade in the 1960s and '70s called "Black Dialogue." So "Black Dialogue," established in 1965 in San Francisco by a group of college students who were involved in the Negro Student Association at San Francisco State College, was sort of the precursor of the Black Student Union. We're going to talk a little bit more about this, but really fascinating interplay between politics and art, and even art as its own political expression. And the copies that we're going to look at today are made available thanks to the University of Wisconsin's digitization efforts. Amaka, I was struck by the year it started, 1965, which is such a turning point in Civil Rights Movement, in terms of Black Power. So tell us about this year.

AMAKA OKECHUKWU: Yeah, I mean, by 1965, we have the passage of most civil rights legislation, right, the Civil Rights Act of '64, Voting Rights Act of '65. And so, we're really moving into a more militant period. Malcolm X is assassinated in '65, and so, there's a kind of fork in the road in regards to the black movement, where a lot of people are going towards more radical Black Nationalists, and deeper into Black Power part of the period. And so, you know, these publications are really important, because a lot of the tensions of the period, this evolution in the

political ideology, and various forms of expression are really playing out on the pages of these kinds of publications.

JULIE GOLIA: And I was also just thinking about this period that it spanned, '65 to '75, and you also see it's a -- the interplay of Black Power ideas, and really overtly political ideas, and then also kind of the rise of, like, you know, social consciousness movements, and real focuses on, like, art as expression. And a lot of this is crystallized, I think, so interestingly in this periodical.

AMAKA OKECHUKWU: Absolutely. I mean, I think that it's key to really think about this publication in the context of the Black Arts Movement, and for those of you that are unfamiliar, the Black Arts Movement is really what we could talk about as the counterpart, as the artistic counterpart to Black Power, right? It's concerned with a black aesthetic, a black style, a black grammar, vernacular, right? It's very political, and it really resisted the impulse to conform to white elite standards for cultural expression. And so, "Black Dialogue" is really -- comes into being as it relates to the Black Arts Movement as well.

JULIE GOLIA: It's interesting, because, you know, I studied sort of the history of print media, and have done a lot of work on, like, "The Chicago Defender," and some of the major, you know, black weeklies, and those are really commercialized presses. But here, we're looking at sort of a through-line of journalism, black -- of sort of black print voice that seems to be really almost actively anti-commercial, and pushing back against that, which is fascinating.

AMAKA OKECHUKWU: Yeah, absolutely. I mean, I think that, thinking about print culture during this period, social movements had their own publications. Organizations had their own publications, and these were spaces for debate, for working through political contradictions. You know, these were also spaces of just, you know, propaganda, and, you know, pushing forward the line of particular organizations, and ideologies, and approaches. And so, you know, I think these publications are really important in that context, and then -- lot of organizations that had newspapers and magazines. These were fundraisers for the organization. So an example being "The Black Panther Party Newspaper" -- you know, that funds -- those funds went back into the organization as well. So, you know, these publications play a really important role in disseminating the ideas around movement, around changing philosophy, and just self-determination during this period.

JULIE GOLIA: I mean, and I -- one thing that struck me -- and we'll turn the slide and look at this -- is that -- sort of the reflectiveness of the editors from the very beginning of sort of their own evolution and their own place in this intellectual narrative, right? And so, like, you and I were doing some research on this at a time, and some of the richest history that we found on this was in the actual pages of the newspaper itself.

AMAKA OKECHUKWU: Yeah, absolutely. Are we -- we're already jumping into --

JULIE GOLIA: I did. I'm jumping us in [laughter].

AMAKA OKECHUKWU: -- okay. Okay. So, you know, "Black Dialogue," you know, as you mentioned, really comes out of students that were organizing in San Francisco State and black student union organizing. And then, it sort of grew into this other thing, right? So I believe the offices changed to New York at some point, and so, it has -- you know, the intention is to have a bigger audience, for sure. And I know that when we were doing some research, we were looking into -- I believe it was the summer of 1970 issue, and, you know, we picked a few documents to sort of do a deep dive into, as a way to just show some examples of how some of this dialogue and debate was occurring around -- you know, across the pages of "Black Dialogue." So one thing that we sort of flagged was the Black Manifesto. I don't know if we have a slide for that.

JULIE GOLIA: I've got that pulled up. Can you see it okay? Yeah.

AMAKA OKECHUKWU: Yeah. So this is the Black Manifesto, which is delivered by James Forman, who's a major figure, right, in civil rights and Black Power, for sure. And the Black Manifesto really emerges out of the Black Economic Development Conference that took place in Detroit in 1969. And so, James Forman delivers this speech, and at the conference where the speech was developed, the attendees decide that the manifesto should be delivered to predominantly white congregations to demand reparations. And it demands \$500 million to be given to specific black organizations, and it challenges white Christians and Jews to actually practice nonviolence, and sort of, you know, actually internalize the values, you know, that are supposed to be at the center of the religious practice. And I think this is important to think about, in terms of a demand for reparations being made to churches, right, instead of the state, in thinking about how the Civil Rights Movement really emerges out of, you know, the black church, and the black Christian tradition, and how this is a sort of way to call out the complicity of white Christians and Jews in, you know, reifying and reproducing white supremacy during this time period. And so, James Forman -- he delivers this speech at Riverside Church, demands reparations. He is not invited. He crashes the Sunday service [laughter].

And I think this is important to consider in a long history of demands for reparations. In this current moment, right, we have Black Lives Matter and other organizations that have been -- that have placed reparations back into the public dialogue and discourse. But here's an example of the longer history of these demands around reparations.

JULIE GOLIA: Well, and I mean, I think this is -- so one of the cool things I think about, say, teaching with something like this is, you can also do, like, a -- like, a larger assessment of how much this speech takes up in this one issue, right? I mean, this is a real, I think, commitment on the part of this periodical, to lay out -- I think it's something like a 28-point manifesto. I mean, it's incredibly detailed, and merits, I think, really sort of deep analysis by students and teachers. But this is a big chunk of the periodical.

AMAKA OKECHUKWU: It is, and there's also a response to this -- to this manifesto, which I think is important, again, in thinking about this debate, right? And so, Jackie Earley, who was a Black Arts Movement poet, an artist, responds in the following article, and, you know, she raises

a few questions in regards to, one, what it means to address and center a white audience, rather than sort of reaching back to the black grassroots and the black masses. Especially, you know, as she says, is, you know, if you claim to be their representative, you need to be back in the black communities, sort of building consensus around this first, but she also expresses a lack of faith in this being an effective way of obtaining reparations. It's -- you know, she -- it's a kind of throwaway comment, but she says, "You know, it'd be more effective to rob banks than to demand this from the church," which is kind of interesting, considering that it anticipates some black radical activity later on in the '70s, with people that actually do go and rob banks, and expropriate money from Brinks trucks. But she's -- you know, she's kind of, you know, not really thinking that this is the best way to go about doing this, and then she also implicitly questions that the reparations should be going to organizations, as it says in the manifesto, rather than being given to all black people, right? So she's questioning whether siphoning this amount of money into organizations is -- you know, she doesn't think it's very productive. And so, this is written in a very narrative fashion. She's almost a character in this story. It's very conversational, and it's pretty dismissive, right? So this is a good example of the kind of debate, you know, that's occurring on the pages of these kinds of publications.

JULIE GOLIA: Yeah, it actually, I feel like, perfectly encapsulates something that we keep coming back to, which is this sort of -- the inability to pull apart the politics and the art. Because the essay does not read like sort of a formal point one, point two, point three. It's almost like a performance piece in a way, in response to something that is very, "whereas, whereas, whereas," you know?

AMAKA OKECHUKWU: Yes, and I think in that way, right -- I think we see the presence of the Black Arts Movement there, right? Because the response, in some ways, takes on the form of more creative expression and response there, so --

JULIE GOLIA: Yeah, and I mean, I think that is, like, a perfect segue into the fact that, while a big portion of this particular issue is taken up by the Forman Manifesto, there's a lot of art in this. And one thing that I was struck in -- like, in some of our research is just how much poetry that apparently the editors of the magazine received, so much so that they had to actually break off and create a separate poetry journal. So pages like this, you'll see often in -- throughout "Black Dialogue," but then also, we have this AfriCOBRA, sort of another almost manifesto, or sort of collective statement that -- in this very same issue. Tell us about AfriCOBRA.

AMAKA OKECHUKWU: Yeah, this is certainly a period of manifestos, of people professing for revolution. You need to have, you know, the founding documents of the revolution, so we have lots of manifestos. AfriCOBRA was a Chicago-based black art collective, and it stood for the African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists. And it was founded in 1968, and this was the artists' collective that really embraced black pride, a black transnational identity, and was really about community and collective progress, rather than individual progress. They saw art as a means of political change, right? They're about black aesthetics, black methods, and really a commitment to art for the black community, as opposed to art for an elite art world, right? Anyone that

attended "The Soul of a Nation" exhibit that was at Brooklyn Museum in 2019 and 2020 would be familiar with AfriCOBRA, because they were pretty well represented in that exhibit. And so, like, I will briefly read some pieces, in terms of the black aesthetic, and the kinds of principles that they're talking about, right? "Symmetry that is free, repetition with change based on African music and African movement, organic-looking, feeling forms." This is a big one, "Shine, a major quality, a major quality. We want the things to shine, to have the right luster of a just-washed 'fro, of spit-shined shoes, of de-ashed elbows and knees and noses. Color, color, color, color that shines, color that is free of rules and regulation, color that shines, color that is expressively awesome, color that defies, identifies, and directs." And so, these are artists that are really articulating, you know, Black Power in terms of a visual grammar, a visual aesthetic, right? It's a good example to show this translation of Black Power into visual aesthetics. And so, this piece is really good for showing how black artists were doing work for the black community, and how their own aesthetic approaches emerged. So "Black Dialogue" reproduces the AfriCOBRA Manifesto, and in the following article by Sharilyn C. Wright [assumed spelling] delivers a positive review of their work, which was at Studio Museum in Harlem, for their show "Ten in Search of a Nation." And I believe Sharilyn was actually a student of Jeff Donaldson, who was a co-founder of AfriCOBRA, though I don't think she was an actual member. But, you know, this is, again, just an example of how Black Power becomes translated into the language of aesthetics.

JULIE GOLIA: You know, hearing you talk about this prompts -- so, and I know we have quite a few teachers in the audience today -- so many thoughts about sort of ways of teaching with this. You know, I'd, like, love the idea that was like, we did manifestos at this time, and a fascinating, I think, comparison between the two manifestos, and how they function, and they're meant to plead to an audience, you know? And then, even just the idea of, like, pushing students -- and this could really work for younger students, I think, to carve out and really articulate aspects of the aesthetic, of the black aesthetic. You know what I mean? And to really -- to analyze that, say not just in a history course, but an art course, for example.

AMAKA OKECHUKWU: Absolutely in an art course. I hope that art students are learning about the Black Arts Movement. But yeah, I agree with you. I think it would be really great to place different manifestos and platforms in conversation with each other, because I think that, you know, these are primary sources that really are able to illustrate, again, these tensions, these different approaches, different philosophies. And so, yeah, I think they'd be really great teaching tools.

JULIE GOLIA: This seems like a great chance, a great moment for us to open up to questions. So, Kate, I'm going to toss it over to you.

KATE CORDES: All right. I have a question about, as you mentioned, Julie, the pedagogical approaches to using these publications and these open-access resources. What would be one way, would you recommend, to, as you've kind of talked about this -- but to build projects

around this, particularly for students who may not have the in-depth knowledge of the breadth of the Civil Rights Movement, of the Black Aesthetics Movement, and everything pretty much is --

JULIE GOLIA: Well, I'll just say -- I'll let Amaka speak to the content more specifically, but one thing that actually comes to mind is, I think that when it comes to teaching media to students, a great way of making it engaging is to push for compare and contrast to media today. And one of the big themes of, I think, what we talked about today is the idea of the periodical as a community, and a place for debate and dialogue. And so, one of the major things that comes to my mind is something like Black Twitter. And so, to set up a compare and contrast about an analysis of Black Twitter, and, say, an analysis of one of the issues here, and to push students to see the way that there is a through-line and a dialogue, but also ways that it departs really significantly. And I think one of the things that, you know, I keep saying is, like, the relation of capitalism, right, like sort of the relation of the commercial vehicle. Twitter is a fundamentally commercial vehicle, and this is, I think, an anti-commercial vehicle. I don't know. Amaka, what do you think about that?

AMAKA OKECHUKWU: Yeah, I think that's a great approach. I think that, you know, depending on the age group or whatever, I think you could also do a creative assignment where you're, you know, making your own pamphlets, right, do a small version of this type of publication. And it, again, can incorporate reproductions of primary documents, or, you know, speeches, or things that, you know, you've been reading and engaging with in the class, as well as creative expression, poetry, illustration. Like, I think it's a really good opportunity to do something on a smallish scale for an assignment. So I think there's so many ways into using these kinds of materials.

KATE CORDES: Right. You just made me think of people who teach good content with production of 'zines.

AMAKA OKECHUKWU: Mm-hmm, exactly.

KATE CORDES: Yeah.

JULIE GOLIA: And actually, I just got a -- like a shameless Doc Chat plug, is that we have a 'zine-making Doc Chat coming up, I think, in late March or early April. So everybody keep an eye out for that, and don't forget to sign up for, you know, your Doc Chat alerts. Yeah, I don't know. Somebody's asking a question in the question-and-answers about, you know, whether "Black Dialogue" excluded white contributions. I mean, I think this is -- I mean, to me, this prompts a really interesting question about, like, who the readership is, and I think the value of a black print community for a black readership, without having to dialogue with sort of the -- like, a larger white mainstream narrative. But, Amaka, I don't know. Do we know anything about readership, about whether they were -- white contributors?

AMAKA OKECHUKWU: I mean, I'm sure there were white readers, but, I mean, I think it's -- you know, it's called "Black Dialogue," right? So the intention is for this to be an inter-community conversation about, you know, the -- what's happening, movements, the best way forward, et cetera. I know that "Black Dialogue" over time became more explicitly Black Nationalist as well. And so, you know, I don't know if white contributors were included at any point, but certainly towards the end, they were not. And so, again, I think it's important to think about audience here, and also just -- also diversity in regards to the black contributors. Because, again, we have, you know, poets, and, you know, visual artists, and, you know, so many different people that are contributing, you know, from Miriam Baraka [assumed spelling] to -- I mean, there's just so many people. So, I mean, that's how I would answer that, but I don't -- we didn't do any explicit research around whether white contributors were -- you know, were part of --

JULIE GOLIA: And in fact -- and in fact, researchers should use this to go ahead and do that, but I think that you're -- that what -- your point of sort of -- this periodical allows you to see the diversity of black voice, and also the primacy of black voice is part of the political statement, right? So I think that is, I think, maybe the most important takeaway here, rather than did they exclude white contributor or whatever.

AMAKA OKECHUKWU: Agreed.

KATE CORDES: I have a -- do we know --on Independent Voices, is -- are the full issues of "Black Dialogue" available?

JULIE GOLIA: They are, and that's the beauty of Independent Voices, is the entire issue is digitized. And so, you can use it -- and again, this is sort of for teachers. You can use it by pulling out an article that you want them to look at, or you can do an analysis of an entire issue. And, I mean, again, as, like, somebody who's really interested in the form of these things, and the way that content directs with advertising and other things like that, that's an amazing way to look at things. But if there's just one article that you want students to look at, you can do that as well.

AMAKA OKECHUKWU: Yeah, we didn't even talk about advertisements, but there's so many interesting advertisements. You know, through the advertisement, you can even see the sort of cross-national relationships that exist between "Black Dialogue" and other publications, as well as, you know, the role of local institutions, local black bookstores, and other sort of local, small black businesses. So even the advertisements are interesting. I mean, we could probably do a whole separate -- advertisements [laughter].

KATE CORDES: Thank you.

JULIE GOLIA: We thought about it.

AMAKA OKECHUKWU: Yeah [laughter].



KATE CORDES: We have questions about two other -- "The Black Panther Newspaper" available through any of these databases, and another magazine called "American Dialogue," but I'm not familiar with that one. Do you know about the availability of "The Black Panther Newsletter -- Newspaper"?

JULIE GOLIA: I don't think it's through "Black Dialogue," and I would have to do some research. I would be very surprised if we didn't offer -- if they are indeed available, if we didn't offer them --

KATE CORDES: An attendee says Letter-form Archives has "Black Panther Newspaper" available.

JULIE GOLIA: There we go.

KATE CORDES: So there's one answer.

JULIE GOLIA: And if we do have it, I will -- it'll -- I'll include it in the blog -- follow up with.

AMAKA OKECHUKWU: Yeah, Freedom Archives, also, I believe, has "The Black Panther" issues.

JULIE GOLIA: Great.

KATE CORDES: Let me just --

AMAKA OKECHUKWU: I can say -- there's a question about the contributors being from across the nation or local, and from what we've seen, I mean, there were definitely contributors from all around the nation, you know, in what we looked at. Again, we have reproductions of speeches, so that's people from all over the place, and then you have some artists that were local to the Bay Area, especially early on, since this initially emerges out of San Francisco State. But then, you know, there are -- there's Nikki Giovanni, like I said, and Amiri Baraka. I mean, there's people from all over the country contributing both original pieces as well as reproduced pieces as well.

JULIE GOLIA: And Jamie in the chat asks about do we know how "Black Dialogue" was distributed, funded, printed, how many copies were printed? These are all actually really excellent questions. Were they mailed to subscribers? We've got a little bit of information about this from some interviews that some of the editors have done sort of later in life, and we can share those in the blog posts that we'll follow up with. But, Amaka, if I'm recalling correctly, they did a -- there was a lot of shoe leather involved in getting subscribers, and making connections with people, and really giving it that national scope that you just talked about.

AMAKA OKECHUKWU: Yeah, I mean, in terms of how most of these kinds of papers were circulated, I mean, people were walking around. You know, they were -- it was very grassroots, right, in regards to both the -- even keeping the doors open. I mean, there's a lot of conversation in the issue about, you know, the sustainability of the journal being able to, you know, pay to continue to have it produced, right? So these are very kind of grassroots undertakings, which means that, you know, you're walking around. You're at the bus stop. You're at the train stop, right, that kind of thing, and then, through the advertisements, it looks like a lot of people were also subscribing to it, and it being mailed out as well.

JULIE GOLIA: Yeah, and I think a lot of presence in black bookshops, if I'm not mistaken.

AMAKA OKECHUKWU: For sure, definitely.

KATE CORDES: So we're towards the close of this program. Julie, would you want to just talk about how someone gains access to the digitized resources?

JULIE GOLIA: Yep. So Kate sent out the direct link in the chat, which you guys should all grab, but if you want to access it through NYPL, which we love, from our homepage, you can go to research on the navigation bar, and then go to articles and databases, and search "Independent Voices," and you'll get the direct link there, and enjoy.

KATE CORDES: All right. Thank you so much. That was -- these always feel so short, and all these questions came in at the end, really thought-provoking. So, sorry to leave so soon, but there are more Doc Chats on different subjects, and they are held every Thursday at 3:30. Our next episode is with the Library's Ian Fowler and Camilla Townsend [assumed spellings], distinguished professor of history at Rutgers University. And they will be analyzing John Ogilby's 1671 "Atlas of the Americas," and considering how works like these aimed to sell British consumers, investors, and future colonizers on a racist and Euro-centric vision of the New World. You can register in the chat, and look for future Doc Chat event pages on the Library's calendar, research newsletter, and social media. And I'm about to pop those things into that now. So lovely to see so many people here today, and keep an eye out for the link we'll send you to a recording of this, and the blog with more resources. Thank you so much, everyone.

JULIE GOLIA: Thank you.

AMAKA OKECHUKWU: Thanks.

JULIE GOLIA: Bye, everyone.