

## Doc Chat Episode Sixteen Transcript

### Teaching the #Syllabus (February 18, 2021)

JULIE GOLIA: Hi everybody. Welcome to Doc Chat. We'll get started in just a minute as people begin to make their way into the room. Okay, I think we're ready to get started. Welcome to Doc Chat everybody. Happy Thursday. I'm Julie Golia. I'm the curator of history, social sciences, and government information at the New York Public Library. For those of you who haven't been before, Doc Chat is a weekly program series from the Center for Research in Humanities that digs deep into stories behind the library's most interesting collections and highlights ways the teachers can incorporate them into the classroom. So, in this episode Zakiya Collier who is the digital archivist in Archives Manuscripts and Rare Books Division of the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, is joined by Professor Yarimar Bonilla to discuss the Hashtag Syllabus Movement, it's intellectual purpose and the ways that these materials that it collects can be deployed in the classroom. We're really excited to have Dr. Bonilla who is Professor in the Department of Africana and Puerto Rican Latino Studies at Hunter College and in the Ph.D. Program in Anthropology at the CUNY Graduate Center. She is the author of "Non-Sovereign Futures: French Caribbean Politics in the Wake of Disenchantment" and co editor of "Aftershocks of Disaster: Puerto Rico Before and After the Storm." She's also the faculty leader of the Puerto Rico Syllabus Project which is what she is going to discuss here today. So, some logistics; our guests are going to speak for 10 to 15 minutes before we open up the conversation to questions, but during the program, you all should feel free as you always do to use the Chat function to share general comments, though make sure that you change your chat mode to panelists and attendees so that everyone is included. Once we begin the question and answer segment, we're going to ask you to switchover to Zoom's Question and Answer function rather than the Chat function to post your questions. If you wish to remain anonymous, make sure to click that option before submitting your question and we'd also like to know a bit more about you, so I'm going to ask you as we always do, to fill out the polls that I'm about to launch now, and with that, I'm going to hand it over to Zakiya.

ZAKIYA COLLIER: Alright. Thanks Julie so much for that wonderful introduction and thank you everybody who is here today to learn and talk with us today. So, Doc Chat--oh and today's episode is Teaching the Syllabus as Julie said. And Doc Chats typically rely on NYPL's amazing digital collections which has over--almost a million items that, primary sources that we feature, but NYPL also has so many other amazing resources that can be used in the classroom. And so, today we're going to be talking about the Schomburg Center Hashtag Syllabus Web Archive Collection for which I am the curator and it contains educational resources such as crowd-source syllabi, public reading lists which highlights that cultural production, race, police violence, and other social justice issues within the Black community. The development of the Hashtag Syllabus Collection is made possible through the generic support of community webs

which is funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services and the Internet Archive, as well as the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and our support for the two-year grant funded by Hashtag SchomburgSyllabus for which the collection is named. And so, when and this is the SchomburgSyllabus collection here. And so, when planning this Doc Chat episode on political educational resources, I knew I made sure that it was on today, February 18th, in order to honor our ancestor, educator, author and NYPL life trustee Toni Morrison whose birthday is today. And so, I'll share this quote quickly that's particularly relevant for what we'll discuss today. I tell my students "I tell my students when you get these jobs, which you've been brilliantly trained for, just remember that your real job is that if you are free, you need to free somebody else. If you have some powers then your job is to empower somebody else." So, and in thinking about this specifically and thinking about the work of freeing someone else and doing so through digital protests and Hashtag Syllabi, I thought of Yarimar Bonilla who is an amazing scholar, a former Schomburg and resident, Schomburg scholar and resident and one of the directors of the Puerto Rico Syllabus which we'll talk about today. And, so welcome Dr. Bonilla could you please tell us a little bit more about what you're working on right now in addition to the Puerto Rico Syllabus?

YARIMAR BONILLA: Thank you Zakiya. It's so great to be here. So, my first book which I wrote in large part in the basement of the Schomburg, was the Non-Sovereign Features that I'm so, I'm such a nerd. I get so happy to see it in the library catalog, and so what I'm working on now, I've been working for several years about Puerto Rico, first a book about Puerto Rico: After Maria thinking about post disaster and recovery issues, and also getting back to what I was writing about before Maria which was a book about the statehood movement titled, "An Unthinkable State" trying to think about whether we can imagine the statehood movement as a form of postcolonial politics. So, those are my kind of individual projects in addition to working on Puerto Rico Syllabus and other collective projects.

ZAKIYA COLLIER: Amazing. I look forward to those future projects. You mentioned Hurricane Maria which is actually sort of how I first came to know about the Puerto Rico Syllabus which I'm going to show you all here on my screen now. This is the live version of the website, and we have this Hurricane Maria section was in 2017, but the syllabus had already been late 2017 and the syllabus had already been in development. Could you tell us a little bit about the history of the syllabus and, you know, why it was important to do this through digital resources?

YARIMAR BONILLA: So, yeah, so the syllabus started really narrowly focused on the issues of the debt in Puerto Rico. Around 2016 when I had first arrived in Puerto Rico to do research, there were these series of Supreme Court hearings, there was the imposition of a fiscal control board, and of a new era of austerity in Puerto Rico. And so, in collaboration with a lot of activists and particularly students and faculty who were on strike at the University in Puerto Rico and then at this point I was back in New York, I said you know, "How can I help? How can I support?" And they said, "Well, obviously we need help getting our head around this debt." You know, so even as they were kind of on the frontlines battling against the repercussions of the debt and the austerity measures being implemented, there was a real problem in Puerto Rico of

understanding where did that debt come from? What is it? What are its historical roots? And this is something that people in Puerto Rico are still battling over and still trying to get this debt audited. So, Puerto Rico Syllabus, originally we had thought it would be a hashtag campaign where we would start Tweeting and start asking people to join in and Tweet their own resources about the debt, and this is how, for example, the CharlestonSyllabus got started and several other HashtagSyllabus campaigns. But then, we said well to launch a campaign we should get it going, we should have some resources. So, like many public syllabi it started as a Google Doc that a lot of us were, you know, starting to put stuff in and then it got a little unwieldy. Then it was a Google Doc with like a table of contents and then you know I--I know a little bit about WordPress. I'm like "Well let me put it on a WordPress site", and so, there is a kind of early, not as beautiful a version of that. And then just this past year, we've hired a web designer who made this beautiful site for us. And so, and so that's how it began and we launched it on May 1st. There were these big protests in Puerto Rico and it, you know, it quickly started to gain traction, but it didn't really become a campaign. You know, people weren't really like creating it. They were more just using it. I think partly because we frontloaded it maybe too much and then put so many resources on there. And so, one critique that--not a critique, but a reaction that we got initially that really troubled me was where people would look at it and say, "Oh, wow that's so much information. How, wow how could I ever, you know, dive into that?" And so, part of what we've tried to do now if you click-on the part where it says, "Syllabus" in the menu on the side, so we've reduced it to kind of these main topics, although if you click-on them then you'll see there's a bunch of units within each topic, but still, we're trying to make it not intimidating because part of what we wanted to do is you know the topic of the debt it can seem like you have to be an economist to be able to speak knowledgeably about the debt or a hedge fund manager or something, right? And so, what we want is for the topic of the debt to be open and available to everyone and to also think beyond the realm of economics to think through an intersectional lens and through also a humanistic lens about the impacts of the debt. So, you know, we also imagine this is a kind of feminist project and we're a feminist collective and now women-led project, but we're also trying to think about the debt in relationship to other things like femicide in Puerto Rico, gender violence, issues of race, etcetera and connecting them to the debt and to kind of recognize that everyone [audio issues] is experiencing the austerity regime in the same way. So, we launched this but then Puerto Rico has not stayed still since we did this. There was Hurricane Maria, then there you know there were big major protests in Puerto Rico. There have been earthquakes, now the pandemic. And so, we've struggled to kind of decide where Puerto Rico Syllabus begins and end and we do want to retain some of the focus around the debt even as we continue to address all the things that keep happening like Hurricane Maria, so there's a huge you know section on Hurricane Maria and more recently about the protests in 2019.

ZAKIYA COLLIER: Alright, thank you. Yeah, like you mentioned, the syllabi sort of developed over time which you know was a Google Doc and then a WordPress site, and that's sort of the emphasis for this collection to really not only to document these syllabi, but to document their growth. And so, here is a web archived copy from June 2020 of the old WordPress site. And so, you know, same content but looks a little different and one of the ways that I imagine the

syllabus being used in a class is other than you know the resources themselves, but also the study for of how this has multiplied and what types of resources were added over time, and you know, really thinking about it as a point of community engagement. And so, you know, we're going to turn this to June 2020 and you know here's a web archive copy which, you know, this banner up here lets you know it's in our collection. So, when you all get a chance to take a look you'll see this here letting you know when it was preserved. And so, this looks very much like the live site right now, so this was in October, but really able to sort of see this growth and the explosion of the resources as this has happened over time. And so, you mentioned the most recent edition to the syllabus which was surrounding the protests in the summer of 2019, could you talk to us a little bit about sort of you know this new section and how this developed and, you know, what's included in this?

YARIMAR BONILLA: So, and you know I should say, we're a collective--I was going to say coalition, we're a feminist collective and this particular section was developed mostly by [foreign name spoken] and [foreign name spoken] both members of our collective, and so we you know the part of what we struggle with is are we an archive, are we a syllabus, what are we, right? And so, you know, to be a syllabus means to kind of narrow down some of the information and not just archive everything, which for the summer of 2019, you know, this political movement there was so much a femora that was produced and so we tried to really focus on some themes of what were the kind of emerging issues during that time, and particularly, to focus on social media posts. We brought in music, because that's the other thing that especially with our collaborator [foreign name spoken], we're trying very much to include not just literature from the social sciences and especially not just from economics, but really having a humanistic approach to the debt. And, you know, I see you're clicking there, you know, we also try for everything that's on there to have an annotation so that people doing research can quickly see like, okay is this something that I need? Will this be helpful to me? And we're moving towards making the site fully bilingual, so in the near future all of those annotations--well, right now if you click-on the--on the flag in Spanish some of the stuff will be in Spanish, but we're still working on getting the whole site to be bilingual. And so, yeah so in this unit you can see some of the kind of major news from that moment like what was that sparked the protests, what did the protests look like, what were the demands, what were the demographics of the people participating, and also what was the soundtrack of that moment and also the kind of the feeling of it, the embodied experience of participating in these protests and how they drew a very diverse demographic that came to you know to have their voice heard and that also won because they got the governor to step down. So, it's also a bit of a celebration post, you know, thinking about what Puerto Ricans were able to achieve.

ZAKIYA COLLIER: That's so amazing. I really love that you have those annotations there which kind of really distinguish this from like a typical classroom syllabus where you know the goal is to go read it and then sort of come back and discuss, but really this syllabus sets people up to sort of do their own self-guided study and to free themselves you know with the information that's made available here. And so, we talked a little bit about you know deciding to include Instagram posts which is like another--another point of really democratizing this and really you

know seeing the people as like a forum of knowledge, you know, in order to contextualize this and to really get to be in the feel of what's happening or in the streets, and so, I want to ask you do you have any thoughts about you know how this could be used in the classroom even though it is sort of geared towards self-study, but have you used them in the classroom or you know students, antidotes?

YARIMAR BONILLA: Well, I--I use it as to kind of cheat. When I'm creating my syllabus I go and look, okay like let me find some themes and some material that we've found good enough to put on the syllabus and it should be good enough for my class. So, I haven't--I know that some folks have taught the syllabus kind of relieves it as the core for their classes, for me, I you know I just use certain material and so when we created this we really had--we had a diverse audience in mind, although we couldn't have imagined you know the uses to which it's been put because I--we've received emails from filmmakers who have used this, you know, people working on films about post Maria or post Maria Puerto Rico, or post disaster post crisis Puerto Rico. They've used this to prepare their background research. We've also worked in collaboration with some playwrights who created a play about Puerto Rico's death crisis and they used this syllabus to inform them and also to create a series of T-charts as a part of their performances. We've also had a lot of journalists use this to prepare when they're writing new stories about Puerto Rico, because as we might know, there's a real lack of knowledge about Puerto Rico in the American mainstream, and so sometimes reporters get assigned to do a story about Puerto Rico and they need a lot of help preparing for that, and I know that it's also been used by high school students doing kind of independent studies or independent projects. So, really people have used it in all sorts of ways.

ZAKIYA COLLIER: Alright, and before we wrap up, I just want to in a few words you know syllabi in many ways can be seen as an argument, and so if you have to say the Puerto Rico Syllabus was making one argument what would that argument be?

YARIMAR BONILLA: One argument?! Just one! I think it would be a multilayered argument. So, a.

ZAKIYA COLLIER: Of course.

YARIMAR BONILLA: First of all, how you know the contemporary debt crisis has a deep history and so to understand that that crisis you kind of have to go back and understand Puerto Rico's role within the United States and within the American economy. Second, that the debt crisis has consequences and implications beyond the financial realm and its--but that also that is experienced differently, so not everyone is experiencing the austerity regime the same way. And I guess lastly, that you know, that there are alternatives to the policy that the United States has had towards the debt crisis and that you know those alternatives are already being explored and brought into being by Puerto Rican communities. I should say we also have a page on the syllabus about all the community organizations that are working on issues of the debt crisis and you know improving Puerto Rico's situation.

ZAKIYA COLLIER: Alright. Thank you Yarimar. Alright, and so we're going to transition into questions, and so but before we do that we have another birthday that I want to honor, Audre Lorde who you know attributes our very own Augusta Baker [inaudible] 135th Street branch of New York Public Library for teaching her to read and write, and she later became a librarian in her own right, and so I'm not going to read this in interest of time, but I'll leave it here and pass it back to Julie.

JULIE GOLIA: I wish we could take credit for the unbelievable poetry of celebrating these two birthdays on the day of this event. It's absolutely amazing. This is so wonderful both of you and we actually already have a bunch of questions lined up that I'm excited to dig in to. So, the first question, thanks for this opportunity to learn more about the Puerto Rico Syllabus. Please address the recent pro-statement vote in Puerto Rico and how the needle might move further toward independence.

YARIMAR BONILLA: Okay, so this is outside the realm of the syllabus, so just speaking as Yarimar Bonilla, not as Puerto Rico Syllabus, yeah so there was a recent vote and every vote the statehood movement had a significant amount of support which is part of why I'm interested in writing more about it; however, you know, the problem with Puerto Rico's colonial status is I think resides less in Puerto Rico and more in Washington, and so these votes that are had over and over again you know they have--they're not tied to any binding legislation, you know, and I always remind people what we need is for Washington politicians to make it clear not just what they're, you know, what they want for Puerto Rico because they always say, "Oh, we support self-determination." But really like what is their investment in Puerto Rico? Why does the United States have colonies and continue to benefit from them? And I think until the United States is clear and open about the way it benefits from its empire which is not just Puerto Rico, but also the Virgin Islands, Samoa, Guam, etcetera and then so there's a kind of better understanding of the United States not just as a nation, but as this kind of archipelagic empire and we understand how that system works, I don't think we can really decolonize any tiny part of it. So, that's--that's my answer.

JULIE GOLIA: And I think that's a great sort of way for teachers to also think about teaching American colonialism, right? That that is not just about you know the late 19th early 20th-century, that this story is still going in a way that I think is often obscured in the way that we think about the syllabi American history. So, I love that--that framing of that. How do you curate and edit the syllabus? And I would ask both of you to answer this question.

YARIMAR BONILLA: So, we're a team and so basically we all are constantly on the lookout for important new articles or academic resources that come out. We have, I don't know if this is too technical, but we have a slack channel and we have a channel that's just for links and so we're constantly releasing things, putting them there and then we have meetings once a year or more, when we go through that and say okay well what are the additions that we think need to be made, and we also have a button on the Syllabus website where people can submit their

recommendations. And we're moving right now, I mean obviously the pandemic has slowed everyone's plans for everything down, but we're moving towards making this a more democratic resource, a more open resource where folks can more easily make suggestions and that that won't get kind of, you know, bottlenecked waiting for us to review them.

ZAKIYA COLLIER: And for me, this really--the hashtag syllabi are like sort of fall within a legacy of you know distribution of reading lists and bibliographies, especially during politically heighten moments and really to help people to contextualize and self-educate around what's going on. And so, I really think extensively about what that includes and you know there are the syllabi that sort of have the hashtag in front of them and really started on social media, but I'm also noticing just a general increase in people adding syllabi to their websites, you know, like podcasts have syllabi linked with them. You know, people are just creating resource lists and really valuing the importance of being able to, you know, take the resources and do what you will with them. And so, I just try to, you know, as I come across things like as I'm in a webinar and they're like we have a syllabus, a reading list, and I'm like ooh yes add to collection. And like Yarimar shared also a collaborative effort as well where people who know that are working on this collection, like send me syllabi in the middle of the night, they're like you might be interested in this one. And then also my fabulous colleagues at the Schomburg Center are always sending things my way and so it's really like a group effort to locate these syllabi.

JULIE GOLIA: I do think it's fascinating to think about the syllabi and teaching in two ways as a body of resources around teaching on a subject and then in a more meadow way around the concept of teaching about the syllabus movement itself, right? I mean I think that's a really fascinating twist. We have a question here from Gabrielle. I'm a grad student working on incorporating the Syllabus into a future undergraduate course, are there any plans to connect educators and community facilitators who will be using the Syllabus as a resource? Thank you for putting such an amazing necessary resource out there.

YARIMAR BONILLA: Thank you. Yes, so I currently have a fellowship from the CUNY Center for the Humanities as kind of public fellowship, and our plan for that period was to create kind of in-person connections with virtual components, but we wanted to move from the cyberspace to real--in real life space, but with the pandemic when I look at well we need to stay in cyberspace, but we wanted to do some Teach-Outs and seminars, etcetera and so the person who wrote that, please write to us, because we'd love to know what people are doing with it and we want to find ways to connect more with you all. One thing we're doing now is we have two curricular fellows that we have been able to fund who are going to create modules for specific themes, kind of like specific course theme that they're teaching; one is about the environment and the other one is about race and gender through the Puerto Rico Syllabus. And so, that's a--it's a new initiative. We still don't 100% know what it's going to look like, but we're confident it's going to be an amazing resource and so we hope to keep doing that where we can have folks, you know, create things for us so that it's not just we're linking to external sites which is what we were doing what we have been doing so far, but also to create our own educational materials and have not just links, but also like worksheets and discussion guides, and more material of

that sort. And so, anyone who's already created these and wants to collaborate with us, we're very open to doing that, because part of what we want to do as well is to help think about how we can give more of a spotlight to this that we refer to as social scholarships, so we know what public scholarship is, but I think the idea of social scholarship using social media and creating kind of a virtual community we're still kind of figuring out what that means. And so, we're trying to create a new precedent for this.

JULIE GOLIA: This is really exciting stuff guys. We still actually have a lot of questions. Forgive me questioners, I will save a copy of the questions and we'll see if we can answer them the best we can in the follow-up blog post. So, I'm going to put links to all of these resources back into the Chat for everybody just one more time. Zakiya, Yarimar is there anything that people need to know about accessing these besides the link?

YARIMAR BONILLA: Just that we're very happy if you visit us [brief laughter].

JULIE GOLIA: Wonderful.

ZAKIYA COLLIER: And so, the Puerto Rico Syllabus is live and you're able to see it there and you're also able to see the previous version in the HashtagSyllabus collection, and all these are publicly available, you can also checkout our other web archive collections including the most recent on COVID-19.

JULIE GOLIA: Wonderful. Thank you again to both of you. So, folks Doc Chats are held every Thursday at 3:30 PM. On our next episode, NYPL Miguel Rosales, and the costume designer, Raven Ong analyze Images of Filipiniana Dress and the context of the Philippines' colonial past and discuss the way in which clothing influences the weaving a national narrative. I've had a sneak preview of some of the images they're going to look at and it's pretty fantastic. So, I hope I'll see you there next week. We'll pop a link for that into the Chat right now along with some other important things including where you can find blog posts on the NYPL blog, and so make sure to register at the link in the Chat, look for future Doc Chat events on NYPL's calendar, in our research newsletter, and on social media. Yarimar, Zakiya thank you again for such a wonderful event and we'll see you all next week.

YARIMAR BONILLA: Thank you everybody.

ZAKIYA COLLIER: Thank you.