

Doc Chat Episode Three Transcript

KATE CORDES: Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to Doc Chat. I'm Kate Cordes, the Associate Director of Reference and Outreach at the New York Public Library. Doc Chat is a weekly program series from the Library's Center for Research and the Humanities that digs deep into the stories behind the most interesting collections and highlights ways teachers can incorporate them into the classroom.

In today's episode, the first of our Fall season, Julie Golia, Curator of History, Social Sciences, and Government Information at the Library, is joined by Prithi Kanakamedala, Associate Professor of History at the Bronx Community College of CUNY. They will discuss one anti-slavery illustration from the library's collections and what it can tell us about the racial politics of abolitionism. Our guests will speak 10 to 15 minutes, and we'll open up the conversation. Please use the question and answer function at the bottom of the screen rather than the chat function to share questions and comments. If you wish to remain anonymous, click that before you submit your question. We encourage use of the chat function separate from the Q&A to share any general comments you want to share with us, though please change your chat mode to panelists and attendees so everyone can see what you've written. We'd also like to know a little bit more about you so please fill out the poll that I'm about to launch now, and I will also kick it over to Julie and Prithi.

JULIE GOLIA: Thanks, Kate. And Prithi, thank you so much for joining us today. So nice to have you on Doc Chat.

PRITHI KANAKAMEDALA: Thank you.

JULIE GOLIA: So let's take a look at the document that Prithi and I will talk about today. First of all, we're active on Twitter, so feel free to follow us. We often talk about abolitionism and other historical topics there, as well as in places like this. So here is the document that Prithi and I are going to discuss today. So we're going to give you a teeny bit of information about this right now, but before giving you too much, we'll want to get your comments and thoughts on this at sort of first blush. So here's the info we'll give you: This is an 1853 illustration called "The Friends of humanity laying the axe to the upas tree of slavery." You've got the year, and we want to hear from you now.

We want you to use the chat to tell us a little bit about what is the first thing that you notice about this document? If you want to look at it more closely, click on the link Kate put in the chat, but we'd love for people joining us to give us your first impressions of this very interesting very

detailed document. Tell us what you see. So, Prithi, what's the first thing you notice about it?

PRITHI KANAKAMEDALA: The first thing I see, Julie, are two men who appear to be White, and they appear to be in a very active motion holding axes, about to chop down that tree, so I see a tree and I see two White men in the forefront.

JULIE GOLIA: And I am noticing the words, which are very evocative. And the ones that actually stand out to me are, there's some quite sexualized ones: Lust, rapine. There's almost like a salacious nature to this and actually somebody from our audience agrees, first impression, many negative attributes of society all hinge upon slavery. I mean, including in this case, like, some really kind of sexualized dangers you wouldn't necessarily expect to see amongst the middle-class people, right?

PRITHI KANAKAMEDALA: Mm-hmm, absolutely.

JULIE GOLIA: Any other observations? It doesn't look like there are any Black people depicted.

PRITHI KANAKAMEDALA: Right.

JULIE GOLIA: We've got a couple people observing this, and we're going to talk a little bit more about that. You can keep your -- please feel free to keep your observations coming in. The two gentlemen's hats look Lincolnesque. I agree. These kinds of illustrations can often tell us a little bit about the times, the fashion styles. What do the axes say, someone has asked? One of them I believe says, Uncle Tom's Cabin and the other says anti-slavery something. Another observer, you've got chains and also a snake hanging from the tree. We've got really good observations here. Keep them coming.

While you guys keep looking at this I'll tell you more about it and we can come back to some of your observations. So this is one of I would say many graphic and evocative images that were included in a man named Wilson Armistead's pamphlets, 500,000 Strokes for Freedom. Who is this Wilson Armistead? He was British and a Quaker and a merchant and a very, very active and prolific anti-slavery reformer. He was President of the Leeds anti-slavery society. He authored and edited many books, I'm quite jealous of him actually, including the one we're looking at, and I would say Armistead -- and, Prithi, I'm curious about what you think about this, as well. He embodies this Trans-Atlantic back and forth in terms of the evolution of anti-slavery ideas. For example, when he visits the United States in 1850, he tours with William Lloyd Garrison.

And that year also saw the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act. Prithi, this is something you've studied extensively. Tell the audience a little bit about why this Fugitive Slave Act is so

important.

PRITHI KANAKAMEDALA: Sure, so the Fugitive Slave Act was part of the Compromise of 1850, and the most important part of it was that it allowed the federal government to create special federal agents that could cross state lines, so the notion of the free North and the slave South suddenly becomes very blurred and at the center of it of course is Black people's freedom. All of a sudden, you had special federal agents that could come into states like New York, right, that was considered a free state by 1850, because slavery had ended in 1827, and if you were a person of African descent, you could be arrested by these special federal agents just on the suspicion of being an enslaved person.

The trickiness of that was or the injustice of that was, of course, that the person who was being accused, their testimony was not permitted in court, so anything you had to say did not matter. The other thing was it just took the accusation of one person to have that person of color arrested, and we found that judges in those courts, so there was no trial by jury, it was a judge, and judges were often given special incentives, so the Fugitive Slave Law was horrific on a federal level, but it gave ammunition to the abolitionists to really rally around this cause, and it's especially sort of crucial specific to New York because the first person to be arrested after the federal government passes that fugitive slave law is actually a New Yorker. It is a gentleman living in Williamsburg, his name is James Hamlet. He works at the South Street Seaport, and he's arrested under those circumstances, the son of a former slave-holder or an alleged former slave holder simply says, I think he was an enslaved person from Maryland and he's arrested under those circumstances.

JULIE GOLIA: What's so fascinating about it is you have this trouble escaping from slavery, escaping up North and what happens in 1850 is there's nowhere else to escape, right? And it's not like people have all these opportunities to leave the country although what's I think is very interesting if we bring it back to Armistead for a second is this rather famous couple Ellen and William Craft, who became a major part of the anti-slavery lecture circuit who had settled in Boston had enough connections actually to leave the country, and went to Great Britain to stay with Wilson Armistead who made, he made a big deal out of this. He was savvy in terms of the practice of saying, "I have these fugitive slaves I'm protecting," as a way of highlighting the horrors of the Fugitive Slave Act and somebody is asking was the Fugitive Slave Act a federal law? And the answer is yes, it was. So it goes back to these fascinating questions which are maybe for another Doc Chat about the meaning of the concepts of state's rights and federal rights around slavery but let's get back to our document for a second. Prithi was this book that Armistead put together the first time we've ever seen this image?

PRITHI KANAKAMEDALA: It wasn't. One thing about the abolitionists in certainly print culture is they were the sort of original meme artists. They often recycled images so there is a citation that it appeared in Scotland as early as 1808 which makes sense because Britain abolishes the

slave trade in 1807 around what you see if you study the history of British Colonial slavery is that Britain remakes its own national image post-abolition of the slave trade to think about itself and it raises almost all connections to slavery even though slavery in the form of colonies is still happening, right up to the 1830s. And this prolific sort of production of images in which Britain prides itself as somehow an anti-slavery pioneer starts to appear a lot.

Another one you'll see recycled often between the British abolitionists and the Americans are -- is that image that most people know, the iconic one, Am I not a Slave and a Brother, in which that Black man is kneeling.

JULIE GOLIA: It's fascinating, it puts to mind immediately and this is something for teachers to think about, memes, rights? It's like the memefication of the 19th century abolitionist image. They were incredibly savvy about using and reusing these images and kind of burning them into the psyche of people's brains. A lot of our attendees are noticing the words, Prithi. It's really worth thinking about, how we would come to analyze these ourselves and also with students. It's a lot of words, and what are we to take away from some of the individual words, but also the meaning of them writ large?

PRITHI KANAKAMEDALA: Yeah, absolutely. There are a lot of words, and I think what I would sort of impress upon people is what's really going on here is a kind of moral suasion. The abolitionists while tackling slavery which of course was embedded politically, economically and socially into the United States, and even in Britain's economy, what they were really looking to do is change hearts and minds with this language, to convince you as the reader or the viewer of this image, of the sin of slavery, which of course buys into a very Christian notion of morality. And again, to win over hearts and minds, which has all sorts of trickiness attached to it when you're thinking about structural and systemic racism, but that's what the abolitionists went for. They went for hearts and minds and winning people over by putting these sort of very controversial words up and asking the viewer or the reader, is this what we want to be associated with as a society.

JULIE GOLIA: Yeah, and it's so interesting to think about this in the context of the second great awakening and the personalization of religion and the sort of focus on emotion and empathy. It really does tie in I think so deeply with that and that's another thing I think for teachers to kind of think about, teaching in that context of religious history, because this is so tied to that. I'm struck by the tree. I just think this idea of the tree as symbol is really fascinating. First of all, the depth of the roots, the idea it's this thing that's deeply tied and very difficult to take up. And then the Upas tree which has become a famous symbol of slavery, it's a famously poisonous tree, one with incredibly deep roots, they're hard to kill and to me it prompts this idea of thinking about different trees as symbols throughout American history even though this is a British image. It was certainly used in the United States, as well. The idea of the tree of liberty, and then I'm struck even moving forward into the late 19th and early 20th century about the

notion of the symbol of a tree around issues of lynching, right?

So you see this kind of through line of that symbol that I think is really fascinating.

PRITHI KANAKAMEDALA: Yeah, absolutely. And the chains on that tree which I'm waiting to get to what we don't see but yes.

JULIE GOLIA: To that end I actually think it's a great segue. A number of our always brilliant and astute Doc Chat attendees observed just that. They're making really great observations about the nature of the way people look in the background, at who we don't see so tell us a little bit more about it because that was your initial observation, as well.

PRITHI KANAKAMEDALA: Absolutely. So we talk about it as the silences of the archives, silencing the past. What we don't see often speaks louder than what we can see. There's a two-fold erasure here I would argue both in a classroom and as a public historian talking to audiences and the two-fold erasure is this: One is of enslaved people, the people and the kind of cure ages acts they undertook to cure their freedom have been erased and reduced to a symbol, and those symbols as somebody rightly pointed out in the chats are the a chains. We've lost their agency and the other agency we've lost which historians have been writing about for decades now and most recently it's talked about extensively that free Black communities and Black men and women in the North were at the center of the U.S. abolition movement.

And by that I mean as long as slavery existed, Black people in the North knew that freedom would not really be theirs, and so they kind of complicated this notion of what freedom would be. Slavery must end immediately, right? That was the main sort of demand of the abolitionists but what Black people did was really push the envelope and reimagine what this great experiment of democracy in the United States must look like, and they also asked for their own legal and political freedoms at the same time.

So what we're missing from this image and it goes back to what I'm saying about the audience and who is creating this image and who they're trying to appeal to, this was not created by a Black abolitionist trying to appeal to Black readers or viewers, right? And as a result, you have this kind of erasure from the archives of the immense amount of work that Black people did in the abolition movement, and if we're talking about New York and Brooklyn, they were at the center of that movement. They pioneered and started the abolitionist movement in New York and Brooklyn, separate cities at that time in history.

So I would almost argue that erasure of Black people both enslaved and free is a violent erasure that historians talked about more recently, such as Natasha Lightfoot. Something is happening when we don't see things in our archives and in our histories.

JULIE GOLIA: And I think just to relate that to this issue of how you teach and somebody has asked, they want to hear a little bit about silences in the archives and we can definitely tackle that more in the question period. The challenge of teaching a history that is difficult for students to find in the historical record.

PRITHI KANAKAMEDALA: Right.

JULIE GOLIA: Before we shift to question and answer, Prithi, I wonder if you could share some thoughts on ways to push students to see these silenced stories and to find and take back these silenced stories.

PRITHI KANAKAMEDALA: Absolutely. So there's a few ways in which you can talk about silences in the archives. One of the main things is as a Professor at BCC CUNY, my students are primarily people of color, students of color, and I think it is so important they be able to see themselves and obviously not literally because they're talking about silences but they be able to see themselves both in history and the archives, and so something that I do is we look at portraits of free Black people, and I can tell you both as a public historian, as an educator, we really have some work to do.

I still find that at public programs and in my classroom, people don't see images of free Black people very often. There's a famous one, Frederick Douglass, a young Frederick Douglass and I often have students tell me he looks angry, right? Because we, I say we, I mean as educators, I think we need to find a language and lexicon to talk about what trauma looks like visually, and what self-determination looks like visually.

And so a really easy thing to do is to pair this with portraits of people who did live back then and who were at the center of the movement. Another way to do it of course is to put it alongside census records, to put it alongside newspaper archives in which Black abolitionists are talking and sort of speaking into those silences, and another way to do it and I feel as though students are fairly sophisticated people in themselves, is that they realize the silences for themselves, right? That they realize that history, and I think somebody already said it in the chat, that history has really been written in a certain fashion.

And so that those narratives have to be reinterpreted and historians have so much more work to do than just literally looking at archives and interpreting what is in front of them but reimagining what the past might have looked like.

JULIE GOLIA: I think that's such a thoughtful way of talking about it. And I do want to come back to one more thing that you said earlier, which is the idea that by emotionalizing this, we actually erase something else too, which is the structural origins of racism, and in my

experiences, and I'm sure that you had similar, students might react really positively to this abolitionist print and I don't think that's something to be discouraged but I think really getting students to pinpoint the fact that if things like pity are the motivations for abolitionism where does that leave us in terms of laws, right? Another thing to pad into this cadre of primary sources might be actually reading through the law of the Fugitive Slave Act. Do you know what I mean? And pairing that with the story of a single person, a single person whose life was so changed by that and I have a feeling that our attendees have lots of other ideas. I think this is a great time, Kate, for me to throw it back to you. I'm going to stop screen sharing, and we can start chatting.

KATE CORDES: So I encourage everyone to add their questions in the Q&A part and we will address them as they come in. I would like to start off by just talking about the object itself, that the illustration was found in which I took advantage of being in the Library and requested the book in which the pamphlet is found. The image is found, and it's so tiny. I expected it to be a broad side for some reason so this is a bound book of pamphlets, and there is the image. It's about postcard-sized little image.

And I had a question, Armistead is British and he was in communication with his abolitionist colleagues in the United States at the time but this was a series of published pamphlets published, but who was the audience? Was it already members that were convinced of the cause? Or who got their hands on it? And what effect might it have had?

PRITHI KANAKAMEDALA: Yeah, so one thing I wanted to add was about the size of the image. The reason it's so small was because abolitionists were pioneers in print culture so there are multiple sort of introductions or ways to get at abolitionism and one is the history of print culture. They seize upon print culture because it's the cheapest mode in which they can disseminate to wide audiences and that's why that image is so small. The point wasn't to preserve it, right? Ironically it's now at the New York Public Library. The point was to get out the message quickly about slavery. So they would hand out these pamphlets. Occasionally there's descriptions these pamphlets would be in store windows or you could be a subscriber.

And I would actually argue that the main audience for this was actually people who were already convinced of slavery's immorality and its sin and its need to be abolished. These were not necessarily sent to the South, although we have a very famous example, and it's talked about extensively in her book, about whole mail bags going down to the South, filled with anti-slavery materials, with them being burned upon receipt in the South, but the main recipients really were people who really were on board, already with it.

JULIE GOLIA: I just want to say again when thinking about designing a curriculum, curricula around this, there are amazing parallels to today, you know? I mean really remarkable so if we're thinking something about drawing out the origins of civics, participation, and the way

people participate on social media today, I think the abolitionists are unbelievable predecessors to this and could prompt a really great conversation with students.

PRITHI KANAKAMEDALA: Somebody has written what is the modern equivalent today? I would say you can find no greater example as Julie sort of alluded to if you look at the Black Lives Matter movement and the way in which organizers on the ground use social media to get the message out.

I feel as though those pamphlets are a very early example in print culture of what eventually becomes sort of the way organizers are using social media today.

KATE CORDES: A question from Dominique. Biography is a powerful way to encourage people to connect with histories. What do you think are the biggest pitfalls of this approach and what are the good ways to address them.

JULIE GOLIA: Prithi, you did so much amazing biography for the exhibition at Brooklyn Historical Society when we both worked there, which is getting much praise in the chat which is great to hear. Prithi was the curator of that. So just to build on that question, you did a ton of biography work, and you managed to make it into a broader narrative, so how did you balance those?

PRITHI KANAKAMEDALA: Thank you, Julie, for the compliment. I wanted to piggyback on something you said. You said we can put people's narratives, people's lives, next to documents that would have or laws that would have affected the way in which they lived and I think that is key. Biographies are important, right? That's the work we do as historians and researchers. We go into the census records, we build a profile of somebody from the past, but I think the crucial thing is to understand, and what I love to do certainly will I in the classroom and as a public historian is what did the city look like, smell like, and sound like at the time that that person that we are bringing back from the past, what would the streets that they walked, how did it affect them as an organizer or as somebody just living in the city at the time?

And for that to happen, I think you need to bring in so much more from the archives than just bringing in biographies to people. I think the fear for me of doing biographies is we end up in a kind of narrative of exceptionalism, right, that every single African American that you're going to read about made this, or they did this for themselves, and what we end up doing as multiple historians have showed is you end up narrowing that radical movement down to one or two people.

So it becomes Frederick Douglass. It becomes Harriet Tubman, and the ordinary people that all had names, were all doing the work on the ground, also then become a second degree of erasure when bringing their stories back to life so biographies are important but I would

urge people maps are a fantastic place to start with students or even just in the public humanities, to think about the ways in which people moved through space, and the ways in which the city affected them.

KATE CORDES: So, Julie, would you mind just explaining once more how to access the image? Or put the link in the chat again.

JULIE GOLIA: Absolutely, I'm going to share my screen. Just hang on one more time. Actually, you know what? We don't even need to do that. You all, if anybody has been to Doc Chat before you've heard me sing the praises of our digital collections. And Kate has put a link in the chat for this, so our digital collections have over 800,000 objects on them, and this is one of those.

The link will take you directly there, and you'll see that when you sort of, when you look at the hierarchy of this, that there are other images from the 500,000 strokes for freedom in the digital collections as well, so you also have the opportunity to do a nice compare and contrast or use different or more images from that, as well.

And we would love to hear, if you use this, come back to Doc Chat, tell us more about it because we want to hear how this document works in the classroom.

KATE CORDES: All right, I'm going to wrap it up. I know it's a super-quick event, and I'm sorry we didn't get a chance to get to all your questions, but just for people who are new to Doc Chat, the document and other resources along with the video of this episode, along with the transcript, will be published shortly on a blog post on our website which we'll send out to everyone who registered and all previous episodes can be found there, as well.

These Doc Chat episodes are held every Thursday at 3:30. You can check out episodes, let me just share the link in the chat, our next episode, super exciting, is going to tackle an iconic revolutionary era broadside. Let me put that info here. That will be from our prints department, with Liz Covart who does the Ben Franklin's World podcast and that information is in the chat. So I just want to thank you, everyone, for attending today, and thanks, Prithi and Julie, for being such informative panelists.