Representations of Student Activism in the Black Radical Press
(March 31, 2022)

KATE CORDES Hi. Welcome to Doc Chat. My name is Kate Cordes. I'm the Associate Director for Reference and Outreach at the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building. And this is Doc Chat, a weekly program series from the New York Public Library's Center for Research in the Humanities that digs deep into the stories behind the library's most interesting collections. In this episode, Melanie Locay, the Associate Manager of Library's Center for Research in the Humanities is joined by Mosi Secret, an independent journalist who has written for the New York Times and is currently working on a book, Teaching Them: The 1960s Experiment to Desegregate the Boarding Schools of the South. He is also a recipient of the library's Diamonstein-Spielvogel Fellowship. So many thanks to Diamonstein-Spielvogel Foundation for supporting that fellowship program. Our presenters will examine a letter written by a high school student, 1966, which is featured in the historic Black underground publication, Black Dialogue. And they will discuss experiences of Black students in the 1960s. Our guests will speak for about 15 minutes before we open up the conversation. And during the program, feel free to use the chat function to share your comments. Though, make sure you change the chat mode to include everyone. And once we begin the question and answer segment, use the Q&A function at the bottom of your screen rather than the chat function to pose your questions. And if you wish to remain anonymous, just click that option before submitting your question. And with that bit of housekeeping, I'm going to pass it over to Melanie and Mosi.

MELANIE LOCAY Thank you so much, Kate. Yes, welcome to our talk. I'm going to head to our first slide here. So Independent Voices is an open access resource. It's the largest digital collection of alternative press titles. For educators, that's incredible that you have access to such a resource, open access to share with your students. The Black American series of this collection, Futures Publications, The Movement, Freedomways, and Black Dialogue. These publications centered Black Power, the Black Arts Movement, Black nationalism, and created space for writings that amplified questions relating to Black liberation to what was happening politically, economically, federally on both local levels and larger levels. I guess that's what federally means. And in the arts. Today, we'll be taking a look at a letter featured in the January 1966 issue of Black Dialogue. A journal founded in 1964 by students attending San Francisco State University who were active in the Back nationalist movement. Black Dialogue was the first to publish. This is very exciting for me to find in working with this database. Black Dialogue was the first to publish Amiri Baraka's essay, The Revolutionary Theatre. Baraka was a poet and activist. The essay had been commissioned by the New York Times in December of 1964. But they later refused to run it upon seeing the final draft of the essay, as did the Village Voice, which was a pretty progressive publication of the time. So providing a platform for discussions
such as the one of Baraka’s manifesto, and the discussions it was sparked is what the intention was by the students in creating Black Dialogue as the title says. So providing a forum for open discussion of literary and political questions related to the movement. Let me go to the black, sorry, should probably be reading that. Well, I had this slide up. So Black Dialogue, founded in 1964, titled Black Dialogue and the information about Amiri Baraka’s essay. So here’s the letter that we’re going to be discussing. Today, we’ll be taking a look at this letter featured in the January 1966 issue of Black Dialogue. It opens with my beloved brothers and sisters of Watts. And not to worry, we’re going to be showing slides that take a more, a closer look to the letter because, congrats to you if you can read it as the font is right now. The open letter by a high school student at Oakland focuses on the Watts riots or Riots Rebellion or Watts Uprising, which occurred over six nights in August of 1965 in response to use of force by police officers during the arrest of a Black motorist during a traffic stop. It was reported that 34 people were killed and 1,032 injured. Other factors likely contributing to the uprising were the failures of federal anti-poverty programs, recent repeal of Fair Housing Act in the city, and the lack of work and skill training opportunities for residents of the area. The young author of the letter in Black Dialogue is expressing solidarity with the protesters from Watts. Most of your book focuses on high school students in the same time period. Could you speak about, a bit about the students in your book?

MOSI SECRET Sure. Thank you, Melanie and thanks, Kate. Can everyone hear me? You can hear me?

LOCAY Yeah. Or at least --

SECRET Cool. So my book focuses on this kind of curious history in the late ’60s. There was this heiress named Anne Forsyth, who was a granddaughter of R.J. Reynolds, who decided that she wanted to take mostly Black children, also brown children from segregated schools across the south and send them into these elite boarding prep schools. And her idea was that she wanted these Black pioneers to be kind of emissaries of a kind of Black -- -- excellence so that the White students in these schools would know what Black people were capable of and would thus, kind of grow up to kind of usher in a more progressive southern community and a more progressive south. So we have kids taken from these segregated societies and into these kind of ultra-wide spaces as an attempt at some type of social redress in a way to kind of usher in a more progressive south. And when I look at the image that we have in this letter, I am really kind of drawn to one, one kind of sentence, which I think strikes a nice parallel between what the students in my research were experiencing in respond to --

LOCAY All right. I’m trying to get to that slide. I’m bouncing around. Which one are we talking about? The start? The first?

SECRET Is the, the paragraph that reads the enemy also called your insurrection senseless.

LOCAY The enemy. Here we go.
SECRET Yeah. So the enemy also called your insurrection senseless but we know that it was very sensible. And then this sentence in particular. This again shows the falsity of the old myth of the Afro-Americans being passive and apathetic. Now, this woman who started this program had this idea that the way to prove that Black people were not passive and apathetic was to put them in these competitive educational environments and to show that they could compete. And it's really kind of one end of the spectrum to me of responses to this myth that was growing up, that came out of Jim Crow. And of course, dates back to the period of enslavement of Black people, this idea that Black people are lazy and passive. And so she thought she would put these people in this situation where they could perform. It's a very -- -- if we could say, establishment response to this social problem because in going to these schools, they're accepting certain, I think, accepting certain kind of assumptions that go along with these schools. And I think that this letter that we have from the archive is so interesting because it kind of shows the other end of the spectrum, which is people who were responding -- -- in the streets, who were kind of rallying around black nationalist rhetoric and black nationalist organizing, and who were also, in some cases, resorting to violence. And so we see, like, a full spectrum of responses to what was happening in the 1960s. In those, I think, in those two, in these two histories, independent histories.

LOCAY We see it in their images too. This is a photo from the New York Times Magazine article that you did that started your research, I believe, on this work that's now launched you into this book. And this image of these two young men. And then there's the image from Black Dialogue of what's titled as Brothers From Watts. So there's a little bit of aesthetic differences. You mentioned that the students when they were in these boarding schools, they had a real disconnect to their peers. They were in these White spaces, they were disconnected with maybe what the fashion was, what was being listened to.

SECRET Yeah, yeah. So like it was, it's like, I have to remind myself that it was such a different moment in history when news and information traveled much more slowly. So when these kids were away at school, they would only hear about new music or new styles of dress or whatever, and long-distance calls, which were expensive, or when they went home for the summer and those kinds of things. And so they were, there was this sense among the friends who they left behind, and even among themselves that they were kind of losing some of their, what at that time would have been considered their black identity. And what's interesting is, especially if you go back to that picture of Bill and Marvin who look extremely preppy. As they grow older, Marvin particular, he's particularly who's the one on the left, decides that he's going to grow out an afro. He starts wearing dashiki to school. And he really starts to take on some of the symbolism of that we, symbolism and dress of Black nationalist movements. And it's important to kind of reclaim something that he thought he had given away by going to the school. So that's definitely something that was happening, and they also began to recognize.

LOCAY I love that because that's a way to have a personal autonomy and a space that's very much controlled by others. I wanted to, what's really great about taking a look at this letter and
in a classroom setting to interrogate a resource is to look at what could have been the mindset of the person that created this, who was this directed to? It is addressed to the people of Oakland, people of Watts, pardon me, praising their actions? It opens with my beloved brothers and sisters of Watts. And we've talked about if, do you feel the writer of this letter would have understood the plight of these students in Virginia?

SECRET It's an interesting question because I think that, you know, -- -- a part of, if I can generalize, a part of Black culture at that time, which I think was pretty broad-based, was this belief in the ability of education to promote kind of social uplift or to promote. Yeah, I think that's a good way to put it. And so, you know, we have, in this case, parents who are being approached. I'm talking about the parents in the book that I'm researching, who are being approached and told that, okay, your kid's going to get this incredible education that's reserved for select few. It will provide entree to them to spaces that Black people usually don't have access to. What do you think? And I think, most parents in that situation, even though they were seeing their parents, even though they were seeing their kids into situations in which they could not be protected, would have said yes just because of the way that education was regarded. So I will say that I do think that that is a bridge that, that is a bridge even to people who would be in for more radical communities because there was this kind of universal value for education. That said, I do think that -- -- you know, Black nationalism is all about we can do everything ourselves. We can support ourselves. We can, you know, nourish our own communities. We can provide for us for ourselves. And if you look at the word, it's not in this paragraph, but lower down. They use the word, enemy. There really is this.

LOCAY The enemy called it the riot.

SECRET Yeah, there really is this sense that white people are enemies not to be trusted. And so in that sense, they would have regarded some of these kids who are going into these schools as foolish for thinking that this would be successful in the long run. So I don't think that they would have, in that sense, kind of considered them brothers and sisters.

LOCAY That's very interesting. In the first paragraph, and I know it's going to come up again. There's the use of the white liberal, which is still something that's being spoken about very much in the conversation now as far as, what does it mean? Is the white liberal an ally authentically? What does allyship mean? The students in your book, I find it so interesting that also they're being brought into a school where it's just assumed that the white students of this elite school will be the leaders of their societies, they will be the heads of. It's just the assumption. So they are being brought, these Black students with the hope that they will gain an empathy and they will, in their leadership of the worlds around them, they will be benevolent. But it's just the assumption is made that that's who, is who they will be. There's not this, like, maybe some of them will be, but it's just this assumption. So I think that's interesting to think about with white liberal, white liberalism and education.

SECRET Yeah, yeah. I mean, I think that it also, that phrase also makes me think about this
idea that -- -- there are these progressive attempts to make change that make change in some ways but leave other kinds of things in place. And it kind of piggybacks on what you're saying. So, you know, it opens up this space, which I think is a laudable thing to open up these kinds of, you know, all white spaces, but at the same time, it leaves these things in place, which is this idea that there are elite from these schools that deserve to be leaders in this way. And so I think that, you know, the term white liberal which might even be in quotes in this letter.

LOCAY There’s later a white, we'll look at later though, later in the paragraph. Yeah. In this [inaudible].

SECRET Yeah. So I think that the idea kind of speaks to that of this kind of like --

LOCAY They're unmasking. It says unmasked the white liberal.

SECRET Yeah, this idea that, these attempts at change are deep enough to improve the lives of the people who would have been riding in or protesting in the Watts uprising, for example. Like that idea, I think would, to the person writing this letter and to the kind of -- -- movement. People who would have been in solidarity with him might have been an absurd idea.

LOCAY The letter, and we've spoken about this, is written incredibly well and really thoroughly and very meaningfully to the actions that were taken during the insurrection. So it's surprising that it's, I don't want to say it's surprising it's a high school student because that could be a reductive high school students, especially in that time period. Students are the ones really leading the charge and a lot of the social movements that are happening. See, what do you think it would be like for the students from the black communities to head off to the white schools following those? Would the Watts Riots be on their minds? The cohort that goes off after that happens.

SECRET Yeah, I think so. I mean, so the Watts Riot [inaudible] in August of ’65. The first class of students who went to the 20 boarding schools in the south went in the fall of 1967. And you remember that in the summer of 1967, also, there were riots all across the United States. And like dozens of cities, most of which also followed incidents of police violence. Actually, you don't even have to speculate about it being on their mind because in interviews, they've told me that just about the contrast of going to these schools after that period of upheaval. And it was, you know, I think it was a mix of feelings for them. And on the one hand, I think that there is this kind of, like, human satisfaction and being in, like, a peaceful setting. And so to leave, you know, -- -- upheaval and turmoil for like these serene, wooded enclaves. Must have felt at least in the beginning, like, you know, like a breath of fresh air. Literally, a breath of fresh air. So I think that there was that kind of feeling of escape. But they’re also, you know, as I mentioned earlier, was this sense of, perhaps, turning a back on -- -- something which was, should have been or was their identity. And so I think that they felt that conflict.

LOCAY Definitely. And serene, probably aesthetically, but definitely, with its own aggressions
towards that.

SECRET Yeah, yeah, definitely.

LOCAY In the environment that they were in. I'm trying to be mindful of the time.

SECRET Can we look at the cartoon before we --

LOCAY Yes, that's definitely what I want to look at next.

SECRET I like this cartoon because, so here we have, because it kind of echoes some of the things that we're talking about. Here we have -- -- an older Black gentleman who, if you read the caption, is going to be talking about, you know, like weighty intellectual subjects. So he's someone who has achieved a very high level of education and who presumably believes that this high level of education will -- -- endear him to these white people who are around him, which is very much echoes the situation that we have in the schools. We have these Black kids who think they're going to go into these schools and perform well. And then that will open the hearts and minds of their white peers to, you know, how great Black people can be.

LOCAY Yeah.

SECRET But in this cartoon, you know, the cartoonist criticizes that idea because this Black gentleman who's here to present some scholarship or whatever is asked to, you know, "Would you sing us a spiritual?" Which is really a way of, nothing wrong with spirituals, but it's really a way of kind of negating his educational attainment in this kind of [inaudible] setting. So I just think it really kind of raised a lot of the questions that we see in this -- -- in this conversation that we're having.

LOCAY It's definitely interesting that the editors chose to run this alongside with this letter. And those kinds of choices, I'm sure they are being done very intentional as they're thinking, you know, we're going to have this illustration alongside the student has very much spoken to the experience of, well, the student is a student themselves. And I know I go back to that unmasking of the white liberal because it's such a point that we come back to, like the performative allyship. The performative equity or inclusivity actions. And so like he's saying, yeah, you can read your super intense paper, but first, you know, sing us a spiritual because this is still what you are and how we view you in this space.

SECRET Yeah. I do want to, I do want to stress -- -- in regards to the white, in regards to the white liberal thing, I don't want to portray this attempt as -- -- not deserving of some commendation because while it wasn't like totally radical, in other ways, it was kind of radical. And that, the, and I know that I always equivocate but that's just because of these things are very complex. But I think that I don't want to totally dismiss the effort because she believed in the kind of educational capacity and intellectual capacity of Black children in a way that a lot of
people really didn't. So even the fact that she thought these kids could go into these schools and perform, speaks to something, some kind of some level of understanding that she had. And she paid for all of them. So there was some level of heroism there that I don't want to, like, totally dismiss.

LOCAY I definitely would recommend everyone. We'll have the links in the chat, listen to this American life episodes that cover also these interviews that you conducted. Because there is the recordings of when they go and speak with these kids, and they ask them questions. And so there is an interest that they're taking, the Stouffer Foundation people when they're speaking with different kids of potentially funding.

SECRET Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, you know, like, and that's, and that's, in all of this, all these nuances are part of what makes book-length treatment of this topic justifiable, is that it's, they're all of these kind of interesting questions that in complexities that are not easy to solve. Like I was, I was reading something today and the reason, you know, like, in the subtitle of the book, I use the word experiment to desegregate the boarding schools in the south. And the reason I like this word experiment is because we can't necessarily say that this worked, or that this achieved the goals they had, in terms of transforming the south into this progressive place. But no one is really smart enough to solve social problems, like, in their head. You have to try stuff, see if it works. And if it doesn't work, you have to try something else. And so like that, trying of it, I think, is interesting. And this is an effort that didn't really work. But there's still a lot to learn from why it didn't work. And those types of things can be, those questions can be elucidated in looking at the kind of full spectrum of responses to that moment.

LOCAY I want to, sorry to cut you off. We want to get to questions. And I think that's also if educators are looking at these journals, you see some of the experimentation of how it's happening over different decades and the work that's being done. So please, Kate, if you want to open it up to questions.

CORDES Sure. Just to remind people to drop their questions in the Q&A box at the bottom of the screen. I have a question about the language. Melanie, skip back a few to, basically, how does the language that the student, I don't know if we know who the student is. I want us to assume things. How's the language of this piece echo broader movements at the time, particularly, the use of referring to what -- -- we call the Watts Riots? This is insurrection and an uprising. And also referring to the people involved in this uprising or insurrection or riot as guerrillas. Kind of, is it related to kind of global insurrection movements, the Vietnam, anything like that? Is that a typical for this writings in the student magazines?

SECRET Well, I think I'll take a stab at that. I think that if we look at just a few years before this, so this is in '67. I think maybe in '65 or '64 -- -- the Black Panther Party in Oakland, San Francisco Bay Area, went to the state capitol armed and made certain demands on behalf of the Black community there. And, you know, they're posturing their style of dress, all of the kind of visual and verbal symbols that they were using were -- -- militaristic in a sense. And could be
and we're building on kind of guerrilla warfare kind of imagery. And so when I, when I think about this letter and kind of referring to the insurrectionist, protesters, whatever word that we should use as guerrillas, I think that it kind of harkens back to what the Black Panther Party was doing, and an image of the Black community that they were trying to project. Especially when we think about the fact that all this stuff was happening or this letter and the party, all of it was happening in the San Francisco Bay Area.

LOCAY I think it's interesting also that the letter closes with that the enemy has atomic bombs, jet airplanes, that they have Allah, and who can defeat Almighty Allah? At the same time, there's Mohammed speaks, which is another underground publication that's happening this drawing a lot from Black Muslim movements. And so that, you can gauge a lot of where the student is too and maybe what they're influenced by, or what they are drawn to, and what's happening at the moment. Kate, actually white heads is in quotations. And when we were trying to take stabs at this, and I welcome anyone who's here, who if they might have contextual information on this from the time period. Noted it could have been authorities that were wearing white helmets. Because they talk about during the Watts Riots, even firefighters were staying at bay because of the presence of the insurrectionist and the authorities didn't know who to protect. And so it was very interesting.

CORDES In using this, you know, in instruction or in a classroom, or in kind of highlighting why this letter is relevant and interesting to us today, what issues or themes would you say from the center are relevant, or would you tie it into to contemporary events?

SECRET I mean, unfortunately, so many of the things that were happening in the late '60s are still happening today. So they're still mass responses to police violence. I mean, that's the thing that immediately comes to mind. So it kind of speaks to, you know, those conversations that are ongoing.

LOCAY Youth being involved is something that I see, what are we up to, Gen Z? I think are what the young people are. And you see this engagement in social activism and engagement in walkouts at schools and this real interest in like I have a say. I have agency and how to decide how the world around me should be conducted. And that harkens to what the young people were doing at that time. I see, like, a growth again of zines. And so that's something that one can say parallels this, which I think is very exciting.

CORDES Makes me also think about, you know, as a librarian constantly worried about archiving things today. It's like they're, I don't know what the student newsletters are today. What is the future version of this database Independent Voices, these student magazines and such that they get on our digital archiving? I think -- -- like, we are at the end of the hour. And I just want thank everyone for joining us. And to highlight what Melanie noted at the top of the event, the Black Dialogue. And hundreds of other alternative press newspapers, magazines, and journals are available in this database, Independent Voices, which is an open-access digital collection. Hundreds of publications produced by feminist, dissident GIs, campus radicals,
Native Americans, anti-war activists, Black Power advocates, you name it, including the extreme right-wing press and others during the second half of the 20th century. And I'm going to drop a link in the chat to that here. I'm also dropping into the chat the essays referred to here that Mosi published on the integration of elite prep schools in the ’60s with Bill and Marvin and focus of his current work and his fellowship at the library. And links to these and other resources along with the video and transcript of the episode will be published shortly at the NYPL blog which we'll send out to all registrants when it's up. And all previous episodes can be found there as well. And just a reminder plug for future Doc Chat. They are held every Thursday at 3:30. Our next episode will feature library's curator, Julie Golia and historian Emily Brooks, who will discuss archival records documenting in the 1929 arrest and sentencing records of women in Harlem. Produced by the Committee of Fourteen, a citizen-run anti-vice association. Sounds like a bad idea. Golia and Brooks explore the history of policing and the criminalizing of women of color, working-class women, and young women, and reveal how those documents produced by the carceral state can be read in different ways to affirm the humanities of those they sought to criminalize. You can register at the link in the chat and look for a future Doc Chat event pages on our calendar, research newsletter, and social media. Again, thank you so much for attending today. And thanks, big thank you to Mosi and Melanie for the conversation and bringing this student's letter to light, saying 60, almost 60 years ago. It's incredible.

LOCAY Don't make me do the math.

CORDES Yes, yes. But thank you everyone for joining us and have a fantastic afternoon. Thanks.

SECRET Thank you.