Doc Chat Episode Fifty One Transcript

Policing Gender, Race, and Sexuality in 20th-century New York City (and in the Archives) (April 7, 2022)

KATE CORDES Welcome to Doc Chat. I am Kate Cordes, the Associate Director for Reference and Outreach at the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building. And Doc Chat is a weekly program series from the Library's Center for Research in the Humanities that digs deep into the stories behind the Library's most interesting collections, and highlights the ways that teachers can incorporate them into the classroom. In this episode, Julie Golia and Emily Brooks explore archival records documenting the 1929 arrest and sentencing records of women in Harlem produced by the Committee of Fourteen, a citizen-run anti-vice association. Julie Golia is the Associate Curator of Manuscripts, Archives, and Rare Books, and the Charles J. Liebman Curator of Manuscripts at the New York Public Library. Emily Brooks is a National Endowment for the Humanities long-term Fellow at the New York Public Library and the author of Gotham's War within a War: Anti-Vice Policing, Militarism, and the Birth of Law and Order Liberalism in New York City, in 1934 to 1945, which is under contract with the University of North Carolina Press, which is great news. 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 general comments and thoughts. So make sure you change your chat mode to panelist and attendees so everyone's included in the conversation. And once we begin the Q and A segment, please use the Zoom's Q and A function at the bottom of the screen, rather than the chat, to pose your questions. And if you wish to remain anonymous, just click that option before you submit. And with that, I'm going to pass it over to Julie and Emily.

JULIE GOLIA Thank you Kate. Hi Emily. So glad to be here with you today.

EMILY BROOKS Hi. Thank you, me too.

GOLIA So let's dig into this very interesting document. And those of you who are eager to jump into document analysis, you can all use chat if you want to make your observations about this interesting document. But Emily, give us the basics. What are we looking at here?

BROOKS So the document that I've highlighted for us today is a police card labeled Harlem from the Committee of Fourteen records, at the Manuscripts and Archives Division, dated 1929. So if I was using this document with one of my classes, the first thing that I would want to be thinking about is sort of what is this document? And to get at that, I would just start by basic observation. So what can we see from this document? What can we understand? What can we read from it? And students, I think, would at first start just noticing, it looks like we can see some dates, some numbers, addresses. We can see sentencing here, 100 days, and names. And so

building off of this, we would determine that this was a record of arrests and sentencing for women in the women's court in this particular area of Harlem, for the summer through winter of 1929.

GOLIA And I think we're going, we're going to see today, and the audience is really going to see how deep we can go, and just a basic who, what, when, where, why. And so, I think let's just kind of start digging into it. I think this who question is a really interesting one, and it almost seems kind of, maybe, perhaps difficult for students to answer. So tell us a little bit about this Committee of Fourteen. Presumably students, and I bet some of our audience, might not necessarily know what this organization is.

BROOKS Right, so this is already a really interesting part of this document, because I think just on first glance, one might think that this document would have been produced by the police department. But we know from the digitized archival information that it was produced by this other group called the Committee of Fourteen. So what was the Committee of Fourteen? This was a private reform association, so this is like a voluntary group of activists, mostly middle class and upper class, white New Yorkers, who wanted to enforce their ideas about moral behavior on the city's working class immigrant and African American populations, at a time when these populations were growing among the city's demographics. And there were groups, there were other groups like this in New York. There were groups like this in other cities at the same time. But this Committee of Fourteen was a very influential one of these groups. And so the group was particularly concerned with sex work, which was at this time known as prostitution, with gambling, with juvenile delinquency, with interracial socializing. This group was generally pro-racial segregation because they associated interracial socializing with crime. And they were also concerned with corruption and with radical politics. And they worked with the courts and the police department. As we can see from the existence of this document, sometimes performing their own undercover investigations and then sharing the information to try to spur raids or arrests, but they could also have an adversarial relationship with the NYPD, because these reformers sometimes painted their work as necessary because corrupt police were taking payoffs and allowing morals law violations to occur, which was people referred to these types of sort of low-level violations. And then there's the additional kind of partisan political element of this, which was that these types of reformers tended to be associated with the Republican Party, which in New York had more power at the state level, whereas the Tammany, the Tammany Faction within the Democratic party controlled the police department and the city's mayor's office more regularly. So even just thinking about who created this document, we're already getting into these themes of the relationship between state and non-state actors in the early 20th century. Policing, we're thinking about partisan politics in policing, and we're thinking about racism and segregation in policing.

GOLIA It's interesting to think that like, to think about what a student's perceived answer might be. Like oh, it looks like a police record, but then to kind of take it in this direction. So we're already in complex territory when we're thinking about who the maker of the document is. And then it, I think it even gets a bit more complex when we think about the actual subjects depicted

here. So how do we go about thinking about, you know, Bernice Miller, Dorothy Howard, and the other people who are listed here, who clearly like had no say in the coercive ways that their, their lives and their arrests were documented.

BROOKS Yeah, absolutely. So this document is describing women targeted for low-level arrests in Harlem in 1929. And based on the demographics of the neighborhood and of police activity, we know that many of these women would likely have been African American, and that many of them would also likely have been poor or working class. The relatively short sentences, as well as the fact that we can see some of them received probation or their, their sentences were discharged, likely means that they were arrested for low-level violations like vagrancy or disorderly conduct. And so women like this, working class or poor women who weren't famous or well-known, likely left few other archives or records of their lives. So for historians who are interested in the lives of regular people or social histories, a document like this is an important source. It gives us names and addresses. It provides one very, very small window into how the state and private associations are trying to control these women. But I think there are some important things that we have to keep in mind when working with this document, and have to highlight for students, which is that, one, we can use this document to provide us with some information about how the, about these women, and we can do so from a humanizing perspective, if we read this source against the grain, as historians call it. So we use it for purposes that its authors did not intend it. So even though the state and the Committee of Fourteen is positioning these women as people who violated the law, we don't have to accept that narrative. This record, we can use it as historians and as students. We can see this record as evidence of the behavior of the police officers and the state, but not as evidence of the behavior of the women being described. So in other words, we can see, this document is evidence that the people listed here were arrested for, you know, let's say disorderly conduct, just for example, but not that they were committing disorderly conduct, right? So it's an important distinction to keep in mind. And so, even though this document is sort of purporting to be about these women, I would argue this document is really about the Committee of Fourteen and about the police department, which gets to the second point that I want to make about how we're sort of thinking about using it, which is that, even though we know that this document is, was embedded in these processes of criminalization and coercion and violence, it's still a useful resource because it reveals that history. And many agencies that are part of the carceral state, like police departments, do not always share records that show that history willingly with researchers, or with students, or with the general public, because there's an, an incentive there to obscure historical and contemporary practices of criminalization. So uncovering these kinds of records can be challenging, and that's part of why the Committee of Fourteen records are such a rich resource for historians.

GOLIA That's a really fascinating bit of context, actually, and I think a real argument on this kind of against-the-grain reading. Now let's move on to another W question, our where question. We've got very clear locations here that place this document in Harlem. And give us a little bit of context. I mean, I think, you know, we, the fact that this is in Harlem, which is this historically black community, I think really gives us this window into the kind of, the particular experience

that black women were having with both these private organizations and with the police.

BROOKS Right, exactly. So at this time, as Julie is saying, Harlem is the city's biggest and most influential black community. It's a political and cultural and social center, so people are actively wanting to move there and live there. But residents also face discrimination in access to city resources, to employment, to housing, to education, and they're having to contend with antiblack violence, both from the state and from the white public, and criminalization in public and private spaces. NYPD leaders and white reformers associated black New Yorkers with crime, so Harlem was heavily policed in some ways. But at the same time, city leaders also, as well as criminologists, these reform activists that we're talking about, they also naturalized crime among black Americans. So they sort of viewed it and presented it as innate and not a product of social conditions, in contrast to how they framed crime for European immigrants or for poor whites. And so they sometimes allowed crime to occur in black communities because of that, of that racist framework. And so the community is both overpoliced and under-protected, as a number of historians have described it. And this positionality plays out for Harlem residents in ways that are gendered, with particular consequences for women like those in our document, and that's really clearly illustrated by the work of historian LaShawn Harris, who is cited in our resources log that people should check out.

GOLIA So we're looking at this arrest record over a period of months that encompassed the summer into the fall of 1929. Gives us a sense of the context around when. Why should these dates matter when we're understanding this document?

BROOKS Yeah, so the, the fact that this was created in 1929 is very interesting, because that's one year before a set of very influential investigations into corruption in the city's magistrates court system, of which the women's court was a part. That, and one of the most high-profile and widely covered parts of this investigation, which itself was covered almost every day in the papers, was public testimony from women who had been framed as prostitutes and extorted by NYPD officers, lawyer, and court officials. And then there was also testimony from men who had worked as confidential informants and worked with the police, and they testified about their role as framing with, framing women in this process. So I spoke earlier about the sort of theoretical rationale for reading this source critically. But here we also have this very specific context from this moment in time showing us that police are not reliable reporters of crime here. And furthermore, one of the magistrates that we see listed on this document, Gene Norris, so she is in that, the purple circle at the bottom, was the first woman magistrate in the city, and she was removed after being implicated in these corruption scandals. So discussing Gene Norris' position could be an opening to explore with students how white, mostly middle class women were able to gain some professional admission into carceral state infrastructure during this period, but that this access was often predicated on the criminalization of other women, often those with less social capital, usually working class women, black women, and immigrant women.

GOLIA Yeah, Emily, to wrap up, I mean we've been, now we're going to tackle the biggest

question, the why. So many, I think is really, I think very evident of the themes that are in this 100-year-old document, I think are so relevant to the world we live in today. The, sort of the, the experience of gendered racism, the carceral state, corruption, and I'm just thinking about this as a student is experiencing this in the context of 2022. Talk to me a little bit about how you would frame and manage a document in this context, I think given the real, really conservative and coercive origins of it.

BROOKS Yeah, I think that's a really important question. So as I stated earlier, I really think of this document as about the police and about the Committee of Fourteen. And so one really important way of making this more accessible and more relevant for students is I think pairing it with a secondary source and another primary source that's centering the women who are mentioned in this document but who didn't have any power in its creation, or any say over how they were being depicted and used, and, and named. So that could be some of the work by historians that we're listing in our sources blog, and it could also be articles from contemporary black newspapers like the Amsterdam News and the New York Age, that were calling out police harassment and brutality and creating counter-narratives about the rights of black New Yorkers and black women to public space. I would also say that, and, oh, and I think it's worth noting that both of those can be accessed through NYPL. And if students wanted to even go even further, and go look in the archives, they could go to the Stephen A. Schwarzman Building and look at the Women's Prison Association collections, which were the, another kind of institution that worked with women who had been incarcerated. And the collection there, if you're applying this kind of reading against the grain approach, is a really incredible record of resistance is woven into those sources as well. And then I think the fact that this type of history does still feel relevant to students makes it more compelling for them and makes it more engaging to talk about in the classroom. It shows students that an opportunity to consider the long and troubling histories of racist and sexist criminalization and police violence, the complicated histories of police reform, of women's roles within the carceral state, of partisan politics and policing. All of these are themes that we're seeing discussed regularly in the news today. And I would just add that I do think that the contemporary connections mean that it's, it's extra important for educators to approach this topic with sensitivity and with awareness of their own social position or their racial, gender, sexual class identities, especially in relation to their students. And I think starting from a point of humanizing the people who are being discussed in the document positions the teacher well to do this successfully.

GOLIA I feel like this is a great list for us to pause and start to think about some questions that are audience might have.

CORDES Right, so, please drop your questions into the Q and A. I'd like to start with just calling out a comment in the chat that Nora made, which I thought was very astute, is that students might look at this and say it looks like Citizen or Next Door, where people are kind of ratting on their, their neighbors or feel empowered to take that into their hands.

GOLIA Yeah, I think that's a really good point. I also thought of sort of neighborhood watch

groups, but that's a sort of, an even more contemporary connection.

BROOKS Another great teaching idea is to pair something from 1929 to something today, I think particularly the existence of these kinds of, of like conversations on the internet, to kind of do an analysis of how the two operate similarly or differently.

CORDES Okay. We have a question about the Committee of Fourteen, actually two. One, what happened to the Committee of Fourteen, and were there other committees operating around the same time and in the same neighborhoods?

BROOKS Yeah. So before the Committee of Fourteen, there was a Committee of Fifteen, but it was only in existence for about a year, and the Committee of Fourteen was sort of the bigger one. But there were a number of other private organizations that were doing things like this in New York, and as I said earlier, in other city, particularly cities around the country. And what happened to the, it's a, it's an interesting kind of historical trajectory because these organizations, they sprung up in the early 20th century as cities were growing and becoming increasingly diverse. And there was a number, you, historians often refer to this as the progressive era. There are a number of sort of efforts to change the relationship between urban residents and governments, and also there was significant concern by middle class and upper class white urban residents about their, the fact that their cities were becoming more diverse. And so there were a number of different organizations that were sort of in response to those changes. And the Committee of Fourteen was in existence until the early 1930s, when they lost, they were reliant primarily on donations and, and, during the early Depression, as you can imagine, many of these associations were receiving fewer funds, and so the organization folded. But it's an interesting connection to the growth of these types of surveillance and policing structures within the government. Because at the same time as these private associations are, are folding, the responsibilities of things that they were doing are being adopted by the state. And so there was also a connection, there was a kind of growth in the connections between these private associations and the state during World War I, and then after these organizations fold, in New York for example, the NYPD expands significantly during that period, and you have the creation of agencies like the FBI at the federal level. So there was a growth in the state's ability to sort of take on those types of surveillance projects.

GOLIA I would just add in that there is also a real connection here to prohibition and the end of prohibition, and the rise of another kind of, sort of coercive or surveillance state around the idea of drinking and nightlife. You know, I think George Chauncey's book touches on this in a really nice way about how, there's sort of this irony of the end of prohibition, which is that there are, then grows a, a, a, like a sort of a state apparatus for overseeing nightlife, which then actually has this incredible silencing effect on gay nightlife. And these, this is very tied in to the Committee of, of Fourteen and Fifteen's work. So looking at those together, I think is a, a really interesting sort of learning opportunity, and also a potentially interesting pairing for people who are looking for, for materials for students to read.

BROOKS Yes, absolutely. And that connects to this question that I see in the chat about connecting this history to a cultural history of Harlem during this period, and that's exactly one of the ways that it could be done. The, there are other records of the Committee of Fourteen and other committees like them that are very descriptive. So you have these cases of these investigators going into places like cabarets or speakeasies and writing reports of what they're seeing in there. And so some of those are really, they're, again they're, they have to be read in a very careful way of course, but they do have these kind of interesting descriptions of what nightlife was like viewed from the perspective of these Committee of Fourteen investigators. And Douglas Flowe's recent book, Uncontrollable Blackness, looks at some of the ways some of, for example, black-owned saloons during the early 20th century and sort of community spaces in Harlem as well.

CORDES Thank you. Next question from Bethany. A teaching question. I love the immediacy of connecting this history to the present, which helps students to see the stakes, but I wonder how you preserve a sense of history as a strange land that is not the present when making those connections?

BROOKS Yeah, I mean I think the questions of, sort of continuity and change are, are ones that are, are interesting to be thinking about when you're, when you're exploring histories of policing, because there are a lot of things that, there, there's a lot of continuity. So there are things that are proposed today were in other periods of 20th century history, that are kind of presented as new modes of policing, but historians of policing will look in the past and say, well actually this is really similar to what was introduced as a, a sort of new mode of policing in the 1930s for example, in my research. So I think there is, there's value in understanding what is, what is staying the same. But there are also these significant moments of rupture that we can point to, to show that things are changing over time. So for example, like the transition that I referenced about the, the Seabury Investigation in 1930, which actually threw all of city politics up into the air. The mayor had to resign, and it was only as a result of that investigation that the Tammany Democratic faction within the city lost enough credibility, and so a reform administration under Fiorello La Guardia could successfully come into power in, in the early 1930s, even though when he had run in 1929, before these investigations, he had lost by I think, one of, one of the city's newspapers called it like the most biggest failure in recent history or something. I, but so he lost by a lot, and then you have this investigation, and he won, and changed, changed the city politics in significant ways that actually kind of were influential across the country, and had problematic, I argue in my work, a problematic relationship to policing that has not really been well-understood, because he did make some kind of democratizing reforms in a lot of other areas of urban life. But so anyway, I guess that, that's just one way to kind of think about these particular moments as anchoring it in, in a moment in history, but connecting those sort of larger themes that feel relevant for students.

GOLIA Well, and just a, a quick build on what Emily is saying, I think pointing out how important her research is, is, the, this example of sort of the rise of Fiorello La Guardia and the context of the exposure of a significant amount of corruption. That kind of process often obscures the

continual, the continuing of bad behavior for underserved and underseen communities, which is exactly what happens under La Guardia, right? And so there's this like public airing, you know, continued corruption exists and continues in place, places like Harlem. And I think there's a great parallel there. Actually we're talking about contemporary aspects, there are sort of issues around policing, and to me that goes immediately to Me Too, right, and sort of the, the, the public nature of very outspoken and privileged women being able to say these terrible things are happening to me, and having that kind of publicly seen reaction to that corruption, in ways that still obscures, you know, like the baseline experiences that many women see in like, when they're working in blue collar industries for example. So another, I think really great parallel to like two kind, the kinds of narratives that students are, are exposed to today.

BROOKS And that's exactly what happened in this instance. After the, the Seabury Investigations, the numbers of white women arrested for prostitution dropped precipitously, and the numbers of black women arrested actually increased both proportionally and in raw numbers, and that continues throughout the 1930s. So it's an, exactly an illustration of what Julie is describing, and I think that's, it gets us back to these kind of questions about history as a police reform. I think it, it's an illustration of why the specifics and the details and programs really matter, and sort of how, where resources are being directed is really important to be paying attention to.

CORDES Great, thank you for that. You actually took care of a lot of questions in the Q and A with that answer, so. I did, there was another question I had, but maybe this can wait for the blog which we published about, about the selection of a good document for document analysis that kind of pulls out all these complex issues, you know, in a neat little package. And with that, let me drop some things in the chat. They, links to all our collections and other resources, along with the video and transcript of this episode, will be published shortly on the NYPL blog, which we'll send out to all of our registrants. And all previous episodes can be found there as well, and the easiest way to find blog posts is by subscribing to the Doc Chat channel of the blog, which you'll find in the chat on the side. And Doc Chats are held every Thursday at 3:30. Our next episode will feature Shawn Berg, Center Curator, Dalila Scruggs, and literary scholar Travis M. Foster, who will focus on a daguerrotype of two unidentified white men by African American photographer, abolitionist and businessman Augustus Washington. Scruggs and Foster will discuss Washington's studio practice and examine the gender dynamics behind the, the intimacy exhibited by the men in this 150-year-old photograph. You can register at the link in the chat and look for future Doc Cat event pages on the Library's calendar, research, newsletters, and social media. And with that, I want to say a big thank you to Emily and Julie for the great conversation, and thank you all for attending. Have a great day.