Fields of the Future
A Podcast by Bard Graduate Center
Episode 9: Brandon R. Byrd—Redefining Intellectual History
Recorded: February 4, 2021 | Released: April 29, 2021

Transcript

Introduction: This is Fields of the Future. An interview series by Bard Graduate Center that highlights the work of scholars, artists, and writers who are changing the way we think about the material world. In this episode Peter N. Miller speaks to Brandon R. Byrd about the scope of intellectual history as a field, the "rise" of Black intellectual history, and the urgent necessity to incorporate stories and knowledges that have been left out. Through lively and deliberate intellectual exchange Byrd and Miller explore a discipline in flux.

Peter N. Miller: This is Peter Miller. I'm professor at the Bard Graduate Center. And I've also been dean there for 15 years. And I'm here with Brandon Byrd, Assistant Professor of History in the Department of History at Vanderbilt University, in Nashville, Tennessee. And we're going to talk today about African American intellectual history. We usually begin these interviews asking our guests about objects and the role of objects in their work. We're going to hold that question off for later, and instead begin with the direct question. What is intellectual history?

Brandon R. Byrd: That's a good question. So, I think there's two ways to answer it. The first way is one that I think would be an answer that really comes out of doing an intellectual history in which Black historical actors are centered, in which methodologies are drawn from a range of fields, including Black studies. That intellectual history is, it's something that is in flux, in flux in a good way, that is open to a range of new approaches, a range of new ways of looking at thinkers, a new range of ways of thinking about how ideas move in the world, a new way of thinking about how ideas are formed. So, that's the first way that I would answer that. And that's a way that doesn't really try to set boundaries and doesn't really even try to define or prescribe what intellectual history is. I think maybe another way to answer that question is maybe the way that the field of mainstream intellectual history sort of developed after World War II, and of course, there's been a lot of changes since then. But as a field that is concerned with "intellectuals" and also with how those intellectuals' ideas are formed, and how those ideas move through the world. And I think that idea of intellectual history would oftentimes be set against a more old school sort of history of ideas approach, where it's an approach that really looks at the "big ideas," and in a way that may not necessarily be attentive to the context, the conditions in which those ideas are formed, that may look at how a sort of intertextual approach, if you will, may look at how a history of ideas in which texts are put in conversation with each other. I guess I started off saying that'd be two ways that I would sort of approach that question, but ended up being three.

Peter N. Miller: So, that was a really rich answer. I'm going to come back, I think, and come at it for the next few minutes from different ways. But let me start in with the question of the African American part of African Americans intellectual history. What's the scope there?

Brandon R. Byrd: I mean, the first part that's sort of most explicit would be that it centers Black thinkers and their ideas, which it sounds very superficial when you put it as simple as that. But we have to grapple with the fact that, whether we're talking about that old school history of ideas, or even that more modern, if you will, form of intellectual history, neither of those really, for any intents and purposes, dealt with anybody except white male elites. So again, it's sort of superficial to say, well, African American or Black intellectual history concerns itself with Black thinkers in the way that they conceptualize their world and the way that they produced ideas and those ideas. But in many ways, it's a field that if you take that very, again, what could be positioned as superficial act, well, then you're going to see a whole lot of things differently. Just even if you take an old school approach and you're thinking about democracy is an idea, well, if you're just looking at it from the traditional standpoint of white male elites, just even the fact of taking even if you take a set of elite, Black actors, that very concept is going to look much differently, if you take it from the standpoint of Frederick Douglass. So, that's the first way. But I would say too that, once you take, and this may be getting a bit below surface level now, once you take historical actors who have traditionally been excluded from history, both as a written discipline and who are also in their times treated as marginal actors, well, that entails thinking creatively about sources, and entails thinking creatively about methodologies. If you say, again there's something that somebody like W.E.B. Du Bois did, if you take again, we'll just use that idea of democracy again, if you say, well, I want to approach it not only from the perspective of Black folks, but even from a set of non-elite Black folks, how did formerly enslaved people help remake or reimagine the possibilities of US democracy in a way in which was far beyond the scope of imagining of the "theorist," political theorists of their day. So, those are the two things I say that Black intellectual history, African American intellectual history, is the act of really thinking seriously about Black people as thinkers. And through that act of thinking seriously about Black people as thinkers, it is a field that I think really opens up new questions and new ways of doing history.

Peter N. Miller: Let me ask thinking now about your scintillating book, *The Black Republic*, about African American thinkers thinking about Haiti. What's the stake in it for you describing this kind of intellectual history as African American instead of African diaspora or diasporic?

Brandon R. Byrd: I didn't enter the writing of the book per se with this sort of, oh okay, that's maybe what we see differently. I didn't enter it with that in mind. But I think the payoff for me ended up being a book that was sort of conceptualized as, okay, what were Black folks in the US thinking about Haiti. It ended up being about, okay, what were they thinking not just about Haiti, or even just about themselves, but then also about the United States. As they're grappling with Haiti both as a real place and as an idea, they necessarily have to grapple with their relationship to what is increasingly an imperial nation state. And so, I think that's why thinking about that particular belonging nationally, I think that's why that matters. Why it’s important to

think about their locality, geographically, their locality as citizens of the United States, and not just as they often thought about themselves as Black people, as part of a broader African diaspora. That's a long-winded way of saying that it mattered that they were US citizens and had a self-understanding and a claim to US citizenship. That was not uncomplicated.

Peter N. Miller: So, then are you suggesting that there's actually a kind of temporality to the question that once upon a time, the stakes in the question had to do with United States citizenship, identity, belonging, but that at a certain point, in the twentieth century, pick your spot, that receded and the diasporic identity and the opportunities of thinking internationally asserted itself and provided more, I don't know, more to work with, more grist for thinking. Is there a kind of history in that move from the American stage to the diasporic one?

Brandon R. Byrd: I think these things, that these modes of thinking, these modes of thinking about belonging, that they sit side by side with each other in messy and complicated ways. I think that's a sort of standing feature of the Black experience in not just the United States, but in the new world. There's a different sort of weighing of these commitments in different moments of time for various reasons. And this is something where I'm thinking alongside a wealth of scholars and scholarship now, Brenda Gayle Plummer, Gerald Horne, that weighing and thinking about insurance has a different sort of tenor to it in the Cold War era, for example, where you have a US state that's very eager to position itself as a friend of African Americans here. Because it's concerned about its image on the global stage. You have insurgencies in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean. You have insurgence of Black Power. So, you have a different sort of tenor to help Black folks are thinking about that relationship at that time. Nineteenth century, there's consistent thinking about these different forms of belonging, but there's going to be a different tenor right now, especially an earlier period where those claims to US citizenship are embryonic at best, an era where in many ways that those claims to US citizenship are denied. So, yeah, I think to your question, I wouldn't say there's a moment where, all right, this is the moment where African Americans or even Black people in the new world are weighing questions about diaspora versus questions of citizenship or questions about national belonging or questions about their status within a colonial environment. That's the condition. That's the condition that emerges out of slavery that emerges out of colonialism. And that's the condition of the diasporic subject.

Peter N. Miller: In the article that you published in Modern Intellectual History, in the title, you used the word "rise," the rise of African American intellectual history. What do you mean by rise? And what do you think accounts for that rise?

Brandon R. Byrd: I was riffing off of an influential article, the rise of intellectual history, the rise of US intellectual history, it's one of those. So, I was riffing off that title. And it's not that scholars haven't been doing Black intellectual history for a long time. If we take Black, if we decouple it from the nation state, and we think about Black intellectual history, especially, folks have been doing that for a long, long time, the folks who we would consider in the field to be canonical now, even if they didn't say they were doing intellectual history, but to take DuBois

again, in many ways the *Souls of Black Folk* functions as intellectual history. To take, CLR James, *The Black Jacobins* in many ways functions as at least in part intellectual history. Yeah, so it's been done. It's been done for a long, long time, even if it wasn't recognized as such. Oh, I mean, especially the work of Black women, early Black women historians, who would do ... Brittney Cooper outlines this in her book, the act of listing, where you'd have a work that would list biographies of prominent women of the race. That's a work of intellectual history right there, asserting them into not only history of activism, but history of thinking about womanhood and thinking about the race and thinking about rights. So, rise wasn't meant to signal that this hadn't been done. But really just sort of marking, trying to mark the way in which I do think in recent years, in recent decades, we have folks that really maybe sort of planted a flag, if you will, and sort of set out to say, "Okay, this is what we are doing as intellectual historians and scholars of the Black experience," maybe in a way that scholars in previous generations hadn't necessarily done, because they hadn't felt compelled to do or whatever reason. But we can see that in a book series that are explicitly about Black intellectual history or the Black intellectual tradition, these are books series at Notre Dame, University of Massachusetts Press, the African American Intellectual History Society, organizations, academic organizations that are explicitly dedicated to the field. We see it in hiring lines that are explicitly pursuing folks that say, we want a historian of Black political thought or Black intellectual history. These are lines in history departments. And certainly books, books that explicitly set out to say what I'm doing is intellectual history, what I'm doing, it's sort of naming this as something they were doing. So, that in many ways, I think that that's a phenomenon and it's really taken off in recent years and decades. And again, maybe in a way that even previous generations, who were doing the work, who had been doing the work for a while didn't necessarily concern themselves with.

Peter N. Miller: So, I find this fascinating because I guess I'm a scholarly generation older than you. And when I was sort of being birthed as a professional, intellectual history was dead. It was roundly scorned. It had been beaten to a pulp by the rise of social history a generation earlier. And it was kind of staggering around like a fighter in a late round. And what seemed then to really have legs was cultural history, did a lot of work, and if you think about some of the stuff that came out of the Annales like, history of mentalities or Italian microhistory, it did a lot of what you're talking about, but it didn't call itself intellectual history at all. So, it's really fascinating to see just from a kind of professional disciplinary side, the way in which intellectual history, as you're describing it, has come back with such vigor.

Brandon R. Byrd: Well, I mean, to your point I think even if there are boundaries, they're very fluid between the very things you just named, I think what intellectual historians of the day that you're describing would say is the insurgent field of cultural history, or this creeping thread of social history, that now, at least the historians, that I know that I'm familiar with, that I would say that I'm in community with, and I hope that would say they're in community with me too, that are doing the work of Black intellectual history. I'm not sure that they would say that these things or actually I know, they would say that to wall off social history from cultural history to intellectual history, it's a futile thing to do. It's a self-defeating thing to do. There's nothing productive in doing that. That in many ways if we think about social history, as what would that

be, the history that really concerns itself with lived experience of common people. Well, many of us that are doing work that may be defined as intellectual history, that is certainly a concern. Where you're doing the work and, again, this is not something that's necessarily original. I mean, you think of somebody's work like Lawrence Levine's. If we're concerned with Black people, ultimately, well, you could stay at a very high elite level, sure. But I think for many of us, if you really want to think about the Black experience in a way that doesn't exclude a great swath of Black historical actors, you're going to be concerned with the lived experience of common people in some form or fashion. I think if you look at a phenomenal work like the recent anthology *Towards Intellectual History of Black Women*, they make the very critical point, that many of the thinkers that they're dealing with knew very well and made the point clear, and a point that historians have to appreciate, that in many ways, ideas come from that lived experience, especially if we want to think about the ideas of folks who did not or could not express themselves to the written word. So, to your point, I'm thankful. I'm part of a time, a generation or at least a cohort of scholars that are drawing lessons and drawing methodologies and drawing ideas about sources from a range of different fields from social history, cultural history, intellectual history, et cetera.

Peter N. Miller: So, that ambition to sort of get at what people were thinking and feeling who wouldn't necessarily be committing those feelings and thoughts to writing. That drive I guess you could look back in terms of the history of history, and see this emerging in the late '60s and the different ways in which it filtered into different kinds of historical practice. So, for you, what are exciting ways of getting at those thoughts and feelings as they are thought and felt by people who don't write them down?

Brandon R. Byrd: Yeah, I think that's the work right there. How do you get these stories? How do we get at the way that people made sense of ideas, how do they make sense of the world, you need to use whatever method it takes to get there. And sometimes that is looking at material culture. Sometimes it's looking at objects. Sometimes it's looking at art. Sometimes it's looking at music. Sometimes it's looking at songs. When I first moved here to Nashville, I found out there was a Tucson L'Ouverture Cemetery, it's actually outside of Nashville, and I said, "Well, I got to go there." So, I hit up the archivist of the Williamson County Historical Society and said, "Hey, what do you know about the cemetery?" He said, "Well, what do you need to know? And also, do you want a tour?" So, while I was taking the tour, he said, "Do you know Mariah Reddick?" And I said, "No." But it turns out, she was one of the more well-known formerly enslaved people in Davidson and Williamson County. She was attached to one of the most prominent white families here. And so, I said no and he started telling me about her. First, she's buried at Tucson L'Ouverture Cemetery. But he also said, "I was talking to one of her descendants, her granddaughter," and he said, "My grandma had a picture, a portrait of Tucson L'Ouverture in her household." And so, I never saw that, that object, that portrait. But I think it tells you an immense amount of things about Mariah Reddick and how she conceptualized herself, and especially when you put that in conversation with other sources that when you look at the records. This is a home that she owned outright, her home. It was in her name, her name, not her husband's name. That she, prior to emancipation, was enslaved within the

household, was a "personal servant," maid. So, what claims is she making to freedom that are also about the household, that are about domesticity, that are about womanhood, that are about her claim to that space. Nobody else's claim, by putting Tucson L'Ouverture there, the hero of the Haitian Revolution. Of course, that idea about material culture, that story about material culture comes orally. And it comes to me secondhand. But to me, that's just as important as if Mariah Reddick had written these great treaties about Tucson L'Ouverture.

Peter N. Miller: I mean, I don't know what you think about this, but there's something in the need to tell a story that often discovers new ways to tell it. I'm thinking for me, one of the really remarkable historical projects of the twentieth century was the one undertaken by a Polish social historian, trained in the University of Warsaw in the 1930s by somebody who himself had worked with some of the early Annales historians in Paris. His name was Emanuel Ringelblum, and he was rounded up with the other Jews and put in the Warsaw ghetto. And while he was in there, he organized a research project on everyday life to gather up all of the kinds of ephemera. They commissioned sort of ethnographic stuff. They had reporters write down things that were happening. They had poets write poems. They kind of tried to anticipate how you could have a history of something. And it's the pressure of needing to find sources. So, I'm thinking of the review that you wrote of Winter's and Lindsey's books, and we could add Hartman to the list, there's a kind of real flowering of exciting work on archives, what's in them and what's not in them. And I wonder if that's part of the pressure to get at the lived experience?

Brandon R. Byrd: Yeah, yeah. I think so. I think so. When I think as you were talking and before you said, Hartman, that's who my mind went to. That the story of enslaved girls, that the story of marginalized poor Black girls in the Philadelphia ghetto, that these are stories that demanded telling. And there's some stories that demanded telling because they demand reparations still in the present. And it's out of the need to tell those stories, and with the idea that part of the reason why that these stories may not have been told was because of harm, was because of oppression, which leads to not only the need to tell them, but also to tell them the right way, to attend ethically to these historical actors, not just as somebody as part of a distant past, but as people to whom we are deeply and humanly connected. And to understand that the ways in which, as we try to tell their stories, the ways in which we encounter them are completely wrapped up with, sometimes with the violence and again, the ways in which their stories were suppressed in life. So, this is Hartman, this is Marisa Fuentes, these are scholars, Jessica Marie Johnson, these are scholars of slavery, scholars especially of gender and sexuality, who were really pointing to these concerns and in a way that I think is really productive, or at least should be productive for historians across sort of all fields. And actually as you were talking too, I was thinking of colleagues doing some great work on how do we tell stories of victims of the Holocaust, victims of genocide, that incorporates digital methodologies that may be drawing on digital repositories, that are also completely wrapped up in surveillance state, that are completely wrapped up in the forms of surveillance in which those folks were captured, so raising the same sorts of questions too. And again, that's applicable. It at least should be applicable regardless of what field of history we're working in.

Peter N. Miller: Yes. I mean, I'm thinking of the next question, could be asked from two different directions. And one, the sort of simple way of asking it is like okay, Brandon, but where are the limits? How far can you go and still be a historian? That's one way of asking it. The other way of that would be to say, to be a really good historian, you have to have a certain kind of trained empathy. But having too much empathy can take you beyond into something else. So, it's the same question really. You can answer it either way.

Brandon R. Byrd: Yeah, yeah. I don't know. I guess part of me wants to answer is that, ultimately, who is making this judgment, I guess, is part of the answer. I guess ultimately, there's some journal reviewer, there's some hiring committee, there's some tenure committee that is judging who is a historian, who's not. But I guess part of the answer is that I don't necessarily know that that should be our animating concern. I had a discussion with someone I respect a great deal that said, "I'm not sure that Hartman's critical fabulation is for me. I don't think that's something that we do as historians. We go into the archives. We look at things empirically. We try to capture what happened." So, I know that those things happen. But at the end of the day, I don't think that that would matter to Hartman. So, that's where I draw the confidence saying, like, I'm not sure that sort of judgment, that sort of question about where we draw the line should maybe be the biggest concern. I think the concern is did you get at some truth? Did you get at the way in which if your goal is to get at the subjective experience of a historical actor, if your goal is to get at a certain set of ideas, if your goal is to get at the ways ideas were formed amongst a community of people, well, then that should be your goal. And however you get at it is how you get at it. And if that doesn't necessarily sit right with whoever is playing by a different rulebook, then so be it, maybe.

Peter N. Miller: I guess, I'm thinking more about let's just call it the poetry versus history problem. Poetry is about universals. History about particulars. And we grasp those other subjectivities because we're all human. We can bridge as we can because of that, and then you fill it out with the documents, et cetera, and all the learning that we do. But I guess there's something about when you go to the, let's say, the critical fabulation, to use that as the example on the table, and let's say you do that, what are the terms, the grounds by which I can judge your effort? If we think about scholarship, and this is maybe where scholarship is different from poetry, but I think of scholarship as a kind of intergenerational collective effort. And part of what, at least to me is involved is being critical and self-critical. So, when you make the critical fabulatory move, are you also stepping into a space where nobody can criticize you because what are the grounds?

Brandon R. Byrd: I see what you're saying. I see what you're saying. I think it's still a project of interpretation that is, it's not as if any of these folks that I'm expressing admiration for, they've got their sources too. They're engaged in the act of interpretation as well. They're concerned with contexts, historical context, as well. Their understanding that, again, to the idea of the universe in particular, their understanding that things change over time. I think it is fair to say that the same acts of that scrutiny that would apply to any sort of historical work and reasoned, well-intentioned scrutiny, it is going to apply. It's going to apply no matter how critically you're

approaching the archive, no matter how expansively you're thinking about your approach to writing history.

Peter N. Miller: For me, one of the really interesting things about now, let's say, as opposed to even 30 years ago, now that there's no Soviet Union, there's no Marxism, Leninism, it's possible to sort of recapture Marx and see him for what he was in his own time, a kind of, a philosopher of history who really works it out in this very broad way to turn history on its side on its head, whatever. And you're doing something similar with intellectual history in terms of trying to revive it, recenter it, give it new content. And I'm just wondering about the place of Marx.

Brandon R. Byrd: When you're dealing with Black radicalism, you're going to be thinking with, you're going to be engaging with the history of Black thinkers and their engagement with Marxism, at times, their departures from it, their use of it, their expansion of it.

Peter N. Miller: Do you think that Marx matters now as he might have a generation ago?

Brandon R. Byrd: I think we can be confident in saying that it matters, that there's a lot of energy around racial capitalism. It's a buzzword now, even if folks aren't necessarily acknowledging where they're getting that buzzword from. Even if they're not going back to the work of Cedric Robinson or if they're not going to contemporary scholars, Peter James Hudson, Charisse Burden-Stelly, even if they're not going to them as they should be, it's a buzzword. It's a buzzword in a way that necessarily injects Marxism into the conversation. So, yeah, I think it's fair to say that it matters.

Peter N. Miller: This has been a great conversation. We've been talking today with Brandon Byrd, Professor of History at Vanderbilt University. And it's been a great pleasure, Brandon, thank you so much.

Brandon R. Byrd: Thank you, Peter. I really appreciate it.

Fields of the Future is brought to you by Bard Graduate Center. Our producers are Emily Reilly and Laura Minsky. Art Direction by Jocelyn Lau. Sound design, editing, and composition by Palmer Hefferan. Special Thanks to Amy Estes, Jesse Merandy, Peter Miller, Stowe Nelson, Nadia Rivers, Susan Tane, Hellyn Teng, Maggie Walter, and Susan Weber.