

Book Review

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***Ideas in Unexpected Places:
Reimagining Black
Intellectual History***
**Brandon R. Byrd,
Leslie M. Alexander,
& Russell R. Bickford**

**Reviewed
by Dia Sekayi**

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Introduction

While engaged in research on intellectual humility and how it is received, interpreted, and applied in African American contexts, I knew instinctively and because of conversations with colleagues, that Black intellectual history would need to be explored and presented alongside any discussion of intellectual humility. Intellectual humility is defined as the thoughtful and accurate assessment of one's knowledge and the recognition of the limitations and fallibility therein. Intellectual humility can be considered the center of a continuum with intellectual diffidence on one end, and intellectual arrogance on the other (Church & Samuelson, 2017; Cobb, 2019). Intellectual humility, therefore, is neither of those extremes, though it is often interpreted as the former. I hypothesize that one of the reasons intellectual humility is instinctively processed as self-deprecation is the history associated with Black thought in the United States; thought that has been suppressed, omit-

Dia Sekayi is an associate professor in the Department of Advanced Studies Leadership and Policy of the School of Education and Urban Studies at Morgan State University, Baltimore, Maryland. Her e-mail address is: dia.sekayi@morgan.edu

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ted, and not given its proper due in the literature or in practice (Byrd, 2021; Gordon, 2013; West, 1987). I set out to learn more about Black intellectual history and encountered a new book. Intrigued by the title, *Ideas in Unexpected Places*, I read the work with great excitement about supplementing my intuitive understanding of African American intellectual history and the related trauma and empowerment therein. This volume includes work by an academically diverse group of scholars that represent the fields of geography, Africana studies, American studies, education, English, history, the humanities in medicine, law, and political science. Their disciplinary diversity adds richness to the text and its potential to appeal to a wide audience.

In the foreword Baldwin notes that he pushes the boundaries of intellectual history and acknowledges “that to define an intellectual by training, employment, or even the vaunted idea of vocation also leaves unexamined the gatekeeping elitism and capitalist blind spot that the very notion of ‘professionally trained’ leaves intact” (p. xiii). The result is, in part, an homage to the practical and intellectual value of the efforts of a much wider than usual range of thinkers both in and outside of the academy.

Overview of the Book and Lens for Review

This text promised the reader a look into a broader conception of African American intellectual history than is typically contained within the ivory tower. Though the five-part text is written by traditional scholars, they each present content that captures and values the epistemic work of Black people whose contributions are clearly transformative, but often invisible, underexplored, or undervalued.

Understanding resistance to intellectual humility was my motivation for reading this book, and it is also the lens through which I review it. Acknowledging ideas in unexpected places is an act of intellectual humility. This allowed the editors to recognize and honor the intellectual contributions of those not typically valued as thought leaders or thought partners. Moving forward with this text despite the potential resistance to the academic legitimacy of non-traditional thinkers, was an act of courage. By publishing this book, those non-traditional thinkers are now part of the academic record. Writing this book, therefore, avails new content for exploration by other scholars.

Organization of the Book

The book is organized in five parts: intellectual histories of slavery’s sexualities; abolitionism and Black intellectual history; Black internationalism; Black protest, politics, and power; and the digital as

intellectual. Since the text consists of 17 chapters and space is limited, I will first provide a general review of each of the five parts, then draw examples from the text that document the presence of intellectual humility in the development and content of this text.

General Review of the Five Parts

Part I comprises three chapters that explore and document the culture of sexual exploitation during the period during and after the enslavement of African people in the United States. The perspectives of women were highlighted with a clear theme of the value of experiential knowledge and its utility for a much broader application to social justice. In these chapters, the authors allowed the women's voices to punctuate their own plight with clarity and confidence about exploitation as culturally embedded rather than a series of unrelated incidents. The narratives in which the chapters are grounded reflect experientially based intellectual currency. In fact, chapter 3 makes reference to "the intellectual labor of emancipation" (p. 35).

Part 2 focuses on abolitionism and Black intellectual history. This collection of three chapters highlights a period in history prior to emancipation and illuminates the power of these intellectual expressions even in the throes of enslavement. Chapters 5 and 6 have an international focus and underscore the relevance of Haitian independence for the African diaspora. The elements of the Haitian constitution reflected their foresight regarding the kind of country the citizens wanted: one that was free from colonization, slavery, and war. This constitution was framed as literature by the author; it was seen as an intellectual product.

Part 3 continues a focus on Black internationalism and interdependence. The authors revisit the diasporic relevance of Haiti, the role of Liberia for African American families, and the intersection of DuBois' seminal work on Black reconstruction to each of these countries. The final chapter in this part focuses on the Jonestown tragedy respectfully reframed as an African American effort to improve upon their position in the United States. The connective tissue in these chapters is the African American quest for freedom through international means and the transformative power of Haitian scholarship, in the form of their constitution, for Black people the world over.

Part 4 offers insight into Black protests, politics, and power. Chapter 11 provides an analysis of the written word through its exploration of the Freedom News and the Freedom Schools from which the publication emerged. Chapter 12 also focuses on a structured educational institution, the Communiversities of Chicago; here the author endeavors to "deconstruct the notion of Black Power movement organization as solely erratic" (p. 191). The activism that was born from the Univer-

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sity of Papua, New Guinea is the subject of chapter 13. This chapter highlights the impact of student-led publications and organizations as intellectual contributions. The author gives much needed attention to activism in the Black Pacific and the connections and distinctions between this part of the Black diaspora and that of the United States. Chapter 14 closes out this part with a focus on the written and oral expressions of radical Blackness as a response to the themes of exploitation through imperialism, white supremacy, and capitalism.

Part 5 presents a timely discussion on technology and how the history of African Americans must be considered as this country makes technological strides. One need only refer to the recent transition to virtual life during the pandemic, particularly in the realm of education, to understand that the realities of inequity persist despite digital innovation. In her introduction to this collection of chapters, the author describes digital humanities as inclusive of a broad range of perspectives to the study of humanities that make space for “new kinds of questions and connections.” The chapters in this part tap into creative endeavors as intellectual acts.

Intellectual Humility

The core of intellectual humility is the accurate assessment of one’s own knowledge. However, various scholars have explored the nuance of the concept (Porter et al, 2022). The elements of intellectual humility employed for this review will be owning of the limitations of one’s own knowledge, valuing of the knowledge of others, and the recognition of the potential fallibility of knowledge. In this section, I will highlight a few examples of how intellectual humility functions in this text among the authors and in the lives of the individuals and groups highlighted in the authors’ work.

The text in its entirety pushes me to assess my knowledge regarding the daily lives of enslaved Africans, those in the post-emancipation south, and the politics of expatriation by Blacks in the 20th and 21st centuries. The sociology of education is my primary academic focus, so I found my knowledge lacking. The authors masterfully document the lives of women and families in a way that brings the experience to life. Their treatment of the women’s experiences as their intellectual property was adept and reflected the owning of the authors’ limitations of their ability to fully know the women’s circumstances by deferring to the experiential knowledge the people on whom these chapters were focused.

Owning the Limitations of One’s Knowledge

The undertaking of this book is tacit confirmation of the absence

of broader community voices from our collective academic knowledge base. The reader is edified through understanding the intellectual contributions of people outside of the academic community.

The intellectual value of experiential knowledge is the highlight of this text. Intellectualism is viewed beyond the boundaries of the written and published words of an academic. We are encouraged in the foreword of the book to “rethink the identity of an intellectual...as a concentrated moment in time instead of a job” (p. xiii). The editor goes on to claim the abundance of everyday brilliance.

Part 1 is a collection of work on the sexual exploitation endemic to the culture of the south during slavery and post emancipation. The collection of chapters covers not only the resulting trauma, but the courage of the victims to speak out and lobby for their right to respect, recompense, and healing. In this part of the book, experience is deemed as the core of knowledge; “experience is foundational to knowledge that then informs people’s consciousness” (p.27). In chapter 3, the author writes that “haptic intelligence is vital to human intelligence” (p. 48). The knowledge of one’s body as worthy of inclusion in intellectual history is remarkable. Honoring non-written forms of intellectual capital is a welcome counternarrative.

The chapters draw from enslaved persons’ narratives, both traditional and fiction-based, as well as the use of the law and the press by formerly enslaved persons to transform their own lives and those of their brethren. For example, sexually assaulted women who bore the children of slave holders used paternity laws to lobby for financial support. This exercise of brilliance is far from common knowledge among non-historians.

The use of Haitian independence by the subjects highlighted in Part 2 is an act of intellectual humility; it is an acknowledgement of the value of others’ knowledge and how it might be used to enhance one’s own understanding in ways that have not yet been explored.

Potential Fallibility of Long Held Beliefs

In Part 3, Chapter 10 explores the massacre in Jonestown, Guyana through a lens of African American expatriation and leaves prior study of the event incomplete without this layer of consideration. The author treads lightly out of respect for the tragedy, but presents a rare yet important perspective on the motives of the predominantly Black victims that led them to Guyana.

The chapters in part 5 explore the digital as intellectual. Gumbs’ concept of speculative documentary describes the possibilities for the future that are either limited or expanded as a result of our current

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thinking (p. 253). Viewed through the lens of the fallibility of knowledge, this concept indirectly encourages us as readers to stay open in our thinking and processing of new knowledge, knowledge not yet fully understood, and knowledge that requires reconsideration.

Each of these examples reflects an acceptance that our previous and current ways of thinking about the issues at hand may be incomplete or flawed. In the first example, the reframing is empowering as it identifies the heroism among a group known primarily as victims. This reframing reminds me of how I felt when I learned that Rosa Parks was a civil right activist who made a conscious decision, not just a woman who was too tired to give up her seat as I had been taught. In the second example the flaws in our thinking today may limit future possibilities.

Summary and Implications for the Field

In my qualitative research course, I ask students if they believe that they as researchers can ever know more about the participants' experiences than the participants themselves. About one-third of the class responds immediately with no. When we discuss it, most of them come to clarity that not being able to articulate one's experience in an academic way does not mean that it is not fully understood. They come to understand that there is more than one way to demonstrate knowledge and the experience is and remains the intellectual property of the participant.

This text has several implications for the field of social foundations. First, it is a reminder that those with the most direct experiences have a critical contribution to make to the knowledge base in education. While each of the chapters in the present text was ultimately written by a traditional scholar, each author employed not only the words of "regular folk" to substantiate the authors' claims, but also acted as a vehicle to express the claims that were expressed by "regular folk."

Second and relatedly, the text serves as a reminder that though scholars in the field collect and interpret the stories of their participants, the content is generated by the experience of those participants and carry meaning and value to other similarly situated participants, not just to the scholarly audience. As academics, we target other scholars with our work to satisfy the requirements of the academy, but our work is largely inaccessible to the study participants by virtue of location in scholarly databases to which they likely have no access, or due to the language employed in academic writing.

Finally, the form through which knowledge is expressed in the text is diverse. The written word is typically upheld as the preferred medi-

um through which knowledge is shared. In this text the written format includes newsletters with stories written by children, historical fiction, visual artwork, and poetry. Though the field of social foundations is based in the history, philosophy, anthropology, and sociology of education and is inherently focused on people and their experiences, those experiences tend to be seen as most valid when filtered through the lens of the scholar. We have an opportunity in practice to center the experiences of our constituents and reframe their experiential contributions as valid intellectual products.

Reviewed Book

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