

Announcer: Major funding for BackStory is provided by an anonymous donor, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Joseph and Robert Cornell Memorial Foundation.

Ed Ayers: From Virginia Humanities, this is BackStory, the show that explores the history behind the headlines. I'm Ed Ayers.

Nathan Connolly: I'm Nathan Connolly.

Ed Ayers: If you're just tuning in, we're historians, and each week, along with our colleagues Brian Balogh and Joanne Freeman, we explore the history of one topic that's been in the news, but this episode is a bit different. For several years, BackStory's hosts have been invited to appear on WBUR's Here & Now, and we discuss a broad range of topics that have recently been in the news.

Nathan Connolly: Last week, Ed and I appeared on the program. The topic was America's relationship to tobacco. In the segment, we relied heavily on the research and scholarship of Sarah Milov, an assistant professor of history at the University of Virginia. Her book, *The Cigarette: A Political History*, comes out in October.

Ed Ayers: Regrettably, neither Nathan nor I credited Professor Milov on the air for her work. That's patently unfair, and we're deeply sorry. In this special segment, we're grateful to have Professor Milov join us on the program to talk about what happened last week, as well as the broader issue involving historians who regularly appear in the media. How do we make sure that the people who deserve to be credited are recognized? How do historians share important historical knowledge with the public while making sure that the people who came up with that knowledge get credit?

Ed Ayers: Just as a note to listeners, we're going to be posting this interview in its entirety. Usually we edit a segment around a show's topic, but given the important nature of this conversation, we wanted you to be able to hear the complete discussion. Sarah, thanks very much for joining us today.

Sarah Milov: Thanks. I can't say I'm glad to be here, but I can definitely say I'm really glad to have this conversation with the two of you.

Ed Ayers: Great. Thanks. Tell us a little bit about what this experience has been like for the last week or so.

Sarah Milov: Yeah, what a week, what a month, what a year, and it's only Tuesday, right? First I want to say that I'm actually pretty nervous about being here today, coming onto the show, speaking about what happened, because this whole thing has been really uncomfortable for me. I can see how, from the outside, it might seem like I've only received good attention and, wow, look at those book sales, but this is not how any scholar with her first book coming out wants to be known.

Sarah Milov: Moreover, since the underlying question here is one about expertise, I am actually not an expert on questions of representation and the obligations of public-facing historians. I think it's important for me to just put that out there to kind of preface this conversation, but you know, this continues to be hard for me, even as you all have apologized and are making amends.

Ed Ayers: Yeah. I understand, and in some ways it's unfair to ask you about what we should all do, since none of us know, and that some of us have had more years of experience in this, right?

Sarah Milov: Well, you know, the reason I'm here is because this is a chance to turn this into a broader productive conversation, and I'm really glad BackStory is taking the lead and thinking through bigger norms and practices for the profession.

Nathan Connolly: In terms of how you've experienced these events unfolding, I have to imagine that there was an expectation that your work would be, at some level, relied on for the piece, but that the attribution would have been much sharper in terms of making sure that your voice was acknowledged in the recording of the piece on Here & Now. I guess my question for you would be, as you thought about entering into the media and beginning your career as a scholar, were there any concerns that you had going in that unfortunately might have been realized, and how would you describe just what that process was like as the dates moved forward and as the story picked up momentum?

Sarah Milov: Well, I guess this an interesting window into the late stage of a book coming out that I did not know before the summer, before I got to this stage. My book comes out in October, and pretty recently, maybe a month ago, the publisher received galleys, which are essentially like an advanced copy, and they're disseminated to media outlets to try to generate interest in book reviews once the book comes out.

Sarah Milov: I had received an inquiry from the BackStory team shortly after I had received notice from the press that the galleys were in, and the inquiry basically said, "Hey, we do a segment with WBUR. The segment's on tobacco. Your book's coming out. It's cutting-edge, it's not even published yet." I forwarded this along to the publicist at the press, who then was in touch with the BackStory team, and basically forwarded along the galleys on the condition that I be credited.

Sarah Milov: I would say that my expectation was hopeful. This seemed to me like a very kind of soft, happy, easy rollout, and I think ... you know, I've got to be honest. The whole thing never would have been a story if there were simply a link to either the Amazon preorder page or the Harvard University Press page, because I honestly only expected that level of attribution. In retrospect, that might have been a problem in itself.

Sarah Milov: In retrospect, maybe I would have asked, you know, if you were doing a segment on tobacco. As I later realized, the peg was actually a specific law that

the State of Virginia had passed, the tobacco 21 laws, which raised the legal age for people to buy tobacco products. I might have said, "Well, if it's on tobacco, why not ask me?" In the future I might say that, if I'm to receive such inquiries.

Sarah Milov: Honestly, what I expected was actually rather minimal, and so when I got to the end of that segment, which was long ... it was not, you know, a two-minute, quick, "We've got to cut to a commercial break" kind of thing ... I was really surprised to hear that the information ... because I knew the back story, so to speak, of how the information was translated to the BackStory team, I was quite disappointed to not hear any attribution.

Nathan Connolly: One of the things that I think is really key in this is exactly your point about having a level of expectation about attribution, and in a platform that is apparently clear, or at least on its face clear. For us as a team, we have very clear expectations, conventions, control, of how we put scholars out on BackStory, but the question of Here & Now was one that was evolving for us.

Nathan Connolly: It's interesting because, you know, we've been really committed ... and this is well before my arrival, and Ed can attest to this ... to having BackStory, when it was first a public radio show, really publicizing and advancing the work of young scholars. Part of what the hope was with Here & Now was in some ways keeping up with the news cycle, but also giving new scholarship a chance to have an airing.

Nathan Connolly: The problem, I think, with us, is that we basically tried to cram the BackStory package into what we imagined to be the Here & Now frame, or at least the mainstream public media frame, and in the case of this particular episode, there was a desire or belief at least that we would have multiple sources that would prop up the account that we provided to Here & Now.

Nathan Connolly: The problem in our particular shop was that we had a transition in the research team, and basically we had a smaller number of sources. You were with, you know, a couple of others that Ed and I read personally, and then in the editorial process there was no control. We lost, you know, even more of that content, and it basically did become almost exclusively your own narrative arc in the piece.

Nathan Connolly: The preexisting problem was one in which we didn't have a set of citation conventions already established with Here & Now that would have given you the attribution that you deserved, and you of course felt the full brunt of that once you turn on the radio and you hear this thing, and you're like it's basically a disembodied example of your own scholarship.

Ed Ayers: Yeah. The thing of BackStory having been around for over 10 years now, we thought we had the formula figured out, and we'd never had really any challenge over all that time. The people have been grateful to have a chance, and it's not always a new book. Sometimes we go back five years, you know.

Sarah Milov: That's new in academic [crosstalk 00:08:48]. It just came out, in 2014.

Ed Ayers: Yeah, exactly. It's been sitting on my desk since 2014 but I just now read it, that's right. You know, having the website and acknowledging people at the beginning and the end of interviews and all of that, I think that we thought, "Okay, we've figured out this interface between scholarship and the world," but it turns out that there's a difference between a podcast and a radio show too. You know, we've been a radio show, became a podcast, and then with print media as well and then with social media as well.

Ed Ayers: We're at this point where all these things are intersecting, and it's ... when you're devoting so much of yourself to trying to promote the work of other people and to have failed in this regard, it just is such a disappointment as well as such an embarrassment and it just feels so bad, because it's kind of the reason we're in this. We're very seldom actually putting forward our own ideas. We're often translating and presenting other people.

Sarah Milov: Yeah. I mean, it's really hard, what happened, and I don't think it's been entirely productive, some of the conversation that's happened afterwards, but some of the conversation about who gets to speak and questions of representation and expertise I think are productive. I guess, you know, my question for you guys is, when you were reading the script, did you not have a sense that, "Maybe we should just point Here & Now in the direction of Sarah Milov and Nan Enstad," the other author on whom, I take it, whose work ended up being left on the cutting room floor, but whose fantastic book, *Cigarettes, Inc.*, I think provided some of the informing materials.

Nathan Connolly: Right. Right. No, it's the question, and we are looking at this as a situation where this is something we've thought a lot about, like what should be ideal citation practices, number one, but number two, should we as BackStory basically just be a talent agency, like that directs people to who we know to be the best scholars in the field. I think because we use the show as a way to elevate talent, we think that that's basically the role that we meet there, and then we basically become regular contributors on the NPR platform.

Nathan Connolly: I think you are pointing to what is absolutely a structural problem in the profession, which is to say we have a variety of different arenas, whether it's in cinema or in sports or in politics, where people are drawing from a broad range of material and then they're coming on as regular contributors to be the experts. History obviously is a very sensitive terrain in that regard because of the importance and the centrality of the authors and of authors' contributions to what that argument becomes.

Nathan Connolly: Even more so in this case, with junior people like yourself of tremendous talent and tremendous promise, it's especially I think debilitating to imagine that you would be on the doorstep of releasing a really important work and then you hear your scholarship basically coming out of somebody else's mouth. That's an

extraordinary problem that I certainly feel and I know Ed certainly feels a real obligation to remedy, and that we feel very apologetic about.

Sarah Milov: I totally hear you, and thank you for that.

Ed Ayers: As, let's call it, the most senior person involved here, and also a male and a white guy, people will remember when we first began the show, we sort of, because it began kind of casually, almost accidentally, and we found that we all fit that category, we called ourselves the History Guys to just acknowledge that we knew that, even though it was never our hope or intention to actually monopolize the conversation. We just felt we were in a position to kind of present people, but there's no doubt about it. When you're the voice on the microphone, you're the voice of the expert, and even, as Nathan says, being a talent agent suggests that you're choosing who's talented and not.

Nathan Connolly: True.

Ed Ayers: I think what's different about BackStory is it's the group itself presenting itself to the world, right? We're not dependent on a radio show host or somebody else to do it, so we feel that up to this point we've done a good job. What that suggests is that then we took it upon ourselves, because Here & Now invited us to do it, in some ways to truncate that part of our role and instead to be the voice of the profession. That's a dangerous thing to do, and I think that this incident showed the risks of always compressing expertise through the perspective of just two people who happen to have been on this podcast.

Ed Ayers: I think it's not that we've never thought about it before, and obviously as you know, we've reconfigured our hosts to represent a really broad range of expertise and backgrounds, but it more shows that this job, you can't let up for a second. You just have to assume all the time that you're going to have to be so profoundly aware of the hierarchies and the restrictions that are in there. I think it would have been easy for me ... speaking for myself, who's done this for a long time ... to get a little comfortable in thinking, "Sure, I'm on the benefit of everybody," when I was the one on Here & Now.

Sarah Milov: I think that another element that's kind of going on here is the whole podcast system ... or Nathan, the other media formats that you emphasized like cinema, documentaries, other ways that historians can interface with the public ... they rely on a lot of asymmetry of information and visibility, and that asymmetry might be okay for a journalist or host or personality like Terry Gross or Jeremy Hobson or, you know, name whatever other NPR celebrity you might want to think of. As historians who speak to the public, I wonder if you should question what it means to proclaim yourself the roving history guys.

Sarah Milov: In a way, what has happened, it seems to me, is that in contracting with Here & Now, BackStory essentially became a commodity, of basically being your roving historical researchers, and that ends up submerging so much labor. Not just the

labor of the books that are relied upon ... and yes, my case is an outsized example because it was basically one book and it was an advanced copy ... but even if it were synthetic work, and that is real work, the work to synthesize and to make it public and to package it in an attractive way. There is real work that goes on there, but that too relies on the labor of so many other people, researchers, producers, not to mention the sometimes uncredited historians whose work informs that synthesis.

Sarah Milov: You know, I just think it's probably time ... there are enough historians with podcasts now ... that maybe our professional organizations, the OAH or the AHA, think through just a set of protocols, so that if any other historians are in this situation, you have something to fall back on. "Well, did I meet this checklist?" It should be ever-evolving. I'm not the one who should be involved in coming up with it, but it just seems like the landscape is at the point where that would probably be salubrious.

Ed Ayers: That's a really interesting and helpful suggestion. The OAH took the step last year of creating this database of people who are interested and willing to talk with journalists, and a database in which people's expertise is listed, so we actually have taken steps toward that, but still without the active agent that you're talking about. That'll be relatively inert. That just depends on the initiative of journalists, which is asking a lot that they would know.

Sarah Milov: Well, yeah, and here's where the gender element comes in. I mean, we all know that academia and the media operates by kind of networks of who you know, and we know that in general, women and people of color tend not to be first on the mind of power brokers. I think it will take special initiative and attention, and hopefully this incident will raise that to the forefront of people's minds, if they are in fact in the position to broker an interaction between the media and a scholar who's not yet a public face.

Nathan Connolly: This is an issue that obviously we're grappling with in a very tight frame, but that to your point, Sarah, is being raised again and again. I think back to concerns not even two years ago ... it was last year, actually ... where Oprah Winfrey was using the work of Danielle McGuire to make a broader point about the #MeToo movement, and it basically subverted McGuire's painstaking recovery work, and there were other examples of this. You know, Jim Downs working on anti-gay violence around the shooting in Orlando there, and again, basically his painstaking work of uncovering violence from the early '70s basically becoming just a lead for journalists or whoever else was using this work. I do think that there are processes of abstracting and again disembodiment of the knowledge that we need to be attentive to.

Nathan Connolly: I completely agree with the point about gender and race, in terms of making sure that scholars from these different groups are especially prominent in the work that they do. I also think one of the things that's been frustrating even for us as this relationship has evolved is that it's been unclear, you know, what does

it mean to create content even for a nine- to ten-minute segment, because there are definitely moments where those of us who are hosts were doing primary source research to make an observation for Here & Now.

Nathan Connolly: Other times, we were relying on a cluster of academic articles, right, so there are actual degrees or gradations of work that go into what goes into a podcast or a public radio appearance, and certainly yours is on the far end of that spectrum in terms of the narrowness of the source base in ways that, again, as you very clearly made sure to assert properly, were going to be deeply problematic for anybody in your position.

Nathan Connolly: It does, I think, raise a couple of big questions, which is number one, what does it look like to have a culture of commentary that's not built around brand, but then number two ... and this is an interesting kind of back side of this ... in the fallout over this, there was a lot of response on social media, on Twitter. You know, you and I are both on Twitter, Ed is on Twitter. I mean, this is a platform where there are a lot of historians who are building brands, and the outrage around this particular episode, which was necessary, was also part of this branding question.

Nathan Connolly: I'm curious, as somebody, as a historian who's aware of the historical valences of branding, and in this particular case being on the wrong end of a branding problem that was executed on our part by BackStory in conjunction with Here & Now, what you think that road ahead looks like for senior scholars, junior scholars, for folks who are on the one hand creating scholarship in private but who are also putting their work out there, promoting by way of social media, and effectively building a brand.

Sarah Milov: I guess my reading of the social media maelstrom ... which I think it's important to keep in mind that the reason that this is a story is not because anybody gives a hoot about historians really. It's because it's resonated with a lot of people's experience of two things. One is academia, and we know the kind of citation gap and who gets cited in academia. The other thing, for very online people, I think it may be resonating with people's recent experience of NPR.

Sarah Milov: I think that's also been fueling part of this, that there is some dissatisfaction with maybe how NPR treats women experts. I think in the Chronicle piece that ran today, there was the really egregious example of ... I'm going to mispronounce her name, but I think it's Silke-Maria Weineck ... who co-authored a book about soccer, and she went on NPR, I think All Things Considered, with her co-author. Her entire contribution to the interview was left on the cutting room floor, and it was treated as kind of a casualty of the process.

Sarah Milov: I think that the reason that there's been so much interest and anger about this is because it's touched a nerve for a lot of people, because I think I guess I would approach the question of brand a little differently. I might say, because of the labor crisis in academia, there are a lot of people whose lives and livelihoods

are reliant upon them writing for money, and in order for them to successfully do so, they should rightfully be thought of as experts in the field. Because they're unattached to formal institutions that give them power, they have to be very vocal.

Sarah Milov: This story I think touches them especially, even though it should be noted, I'm to a degree, to a greater degree, protected institutionally because at least I'm on the tenure track, even though I don't have tenure. I guess I just see the brand question a little differently. I see the outrage not as an attempt by people to build themselves up, but as just resonating something they feel bad about, and the internet and Twitter allows them to connect with other people who have had similar experiences.

Ed Ayers: The emphatic support that you've received, Sarah, I think is historically significant, at least from what I've seen on social media, and I'm curious to get your vantage point on it. I noticed, for instance, that Margaret Atwood, the author of *The Handmaid's Tale*, gave an endorsement in anticipation of your book, and I'm curious about what you imagine to be some of the positive takeaways of this incident and how you viewed the social media experience, but also what you see as the book's future going forward.

Sarah Milov: Well, the Atwood moment was certainly surreal. I tweeted back at her ... still no response ... but that I'd be happy to send a copy. I have to say the social media experience, although it has been very positive in the sense that I am receiving support, has been incredibly stressful. I truly don't understand people who live through social media. I turned all my notifications off, and I only found out about the Margaret Atwood thing because somebody screenshotted and texted it to me. I know, my publicist has told me, the publicist for the press has told me, that the book sales, preorders, are really good, but I have to say ... I'm sure you guys experience it this way with a different valence ... it's all spun out of control.

Sarah Milov: The initial kind of insult, if you will, to me, was that my book got a prime time airing, or should have gotten a prime time airing, before it was ready to roll out. I would have liked this to happen with attribution in September, and so while this has been good for me, it all feels like it's on the hummingbird metabolism of social media and whatever the Twitterati want, and so I'm trying to take that to sit down with you guys, have a slower-paced, constructive conversation. I cannot deny that, you know, whatever, it's number one in Agriculture Industry on Amazon.

Ed Ayers: Do you have a screenshot?

Sarah Milov: No. That's entirely too fleeting. Still, I won't reflect back on these three days of my life with relish. They have not been a good three days, Margaret Atwood's tweet aside. What good I hope comes of it is through conversations like this, and conversations I'm sure that are going to happen when other historians sit

down with a journalist. Also, I think what I'm hoping is that journalists ... because the reason this is a story in part is the media loves to talk about itself, and so journalists love this story ... and so I'm hoping that perhaps journalists themselves will take a look at a set of ethos and guidelines to be developed by our profession organizations, and consult those more rigorously about whom they should be speaking to on different topics.

Ed Ayers: That was Sarah Milov, assistant professor of history at the University of Virginia. Her book, *The Cigarette: A Political History*, hits bookshelves this October.

Nathan Connolly: Thanks for listening, and thanks again to Sarah Milov for being part of the conversation. You'll find us at backstoryradio.org, or send an email to backstory@virginia.edu. We're also on Facebook and Twitter at BackStoryRadio. Special thanks this week to the Johns Hopkins Studios in Baltimore.

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