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“A Bundle of Silences: Reimagining Interpretive Approaches to the Past”  
Webinar Transcript

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**Interpretive Theme: Exclusion and Inclusion**

**Webinar Title: Exclusion and Inclusion**

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**Webinar Transcript:**

*Hello.*

I’m Dr. Alaina Roberts, and today I will be talking to you about Exclusion and Inclusion in United States’ history. **[Slide 1]**

*First*, I will give you a broad overview of *one way* our country has fluctuated between exclusion and inclusion of people in various demographic groups.

*Then*, I will finish up with a case study that will demonstrate that we must include discrimination between people *of color* in our discussions about exclusion and inclusion in American history.

I use PowerPoint in this presentation, so each time I show you a slide, I will give you time to read it and take it in **[pause]**

When I was in elementary school, middle school, and high school, I learned about American history as a progression: the United States is born in 1776, slavery comes about, Americans realize slavery is bad, we have the Civil War, then slavery is over, and the Civil Rights movement gets rid of racism.

A very *neat* idea of how the United States is supposedly constantly improving, with Americans involving themselves in institutions like slavery, but abolishing these systems when they realize they're bad.

Maybe you learned something similar.

But *now*, as a professor and *historian*, it's my job to teach that *actually*, American history is far more *complex*—full of ups and downs, and many times where this country as a whole, or *various states*, have taken one step forward, but then, *later* two steps *back*. **[pause]**

Let me tell you what I mean with regard to our topic—*exclusion and inclusion*.

One of the key concepts we associate with the United States is the freedom to vote, but as I'm sure you've seen in recent years, this freedom is something that is being constantly negotiated.

And this was also the case in the *1700s*.

When the Founding Fathers wrote the Declaration of Independence and then the Bill of Rights—*the first 10 amendments of the Constitution*—voting was not among their priorities, even though we might think this was one of the most important distinctions between a monarchy **[one hand]**, which they wanted to leave, **[other hand]** and the new country they wanted to create.

You're probably quite familiar with these documents, but let's take a close look at a few parts of them, starting chronologically with the Declaration of Independence.

These are just a few slices of this important document—they're verbatim quotes from various parts of the declaration, and I'll give you a minute or so to look at this. **[Slide 2: Declaration]**

Together, these excerpts give us a general idea of the Founding Fathers' issues with their monarch, King George III, and, *really*, with the entire political system of monarchy.

By declaring their belief that all men were created equal, the colonists were then at odds with the items they outline in the declaration, particularly the fact that the king had ultimate power over legislation. He could create it, *or refuse to*, and he could ignore the legislative decisions made by colonists, or just make it really difficult for them to even gather together to make these decisions.

So, you would think that the people's right to have a free say in legislation *through voting* would be first and foremost on the Founding Fathers' minds when they are triumphant in the revolution... and succeed at creating the United States.

And they do *discuss* voting... but it doesn't make it into the Bill of Rights. **[pause]** Through the 1770s and on, men like George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, etc. are having many conversations about what voting might look like and whether the average person should even *have* a direct say.

Should it actually be "one man, one vote" on every single issue? Should every person get to *elect* someone who then votes for them on various issues? Should only a certain group of men get to vote?

There are *many* formats and options, but most of them revolve around the idea that only some people, some *men*, are qualified to vote, and therefore, that voting is not a universal right that is foundational to this new country.

From the original Articles of Confederation to the Bill of Rights, we have things like: **[Slide 3: Rights]**

You may have noticed—or you already knew—that there is no universal right to vote. **[pause]**

In 1789, George Washington, this country's *first president*, is elected not by people like you and I, *regular folks*, but by *electors*, who were often community leaders and/or wealthy and well-known men.

The electors had to be white men, and the citizens who *chose* the electors were almost all white men.

So, if we can all agree that voting is one, *very important way* to distinguish who our country allows to participate fully in its political and social systems, then this is a sign that right away, *right after it's born*, the United States *already* has ideas of who is included in this group of people who are *qualified to vote*... and who is not.

This group is not “all men, created equal,” like the Declaration of Independence *claims*... in almost every state, it's *white men* who must own land. But there *were* exceptions.

And New Jersey is actually a state that is the exception to this rule... *for a period of time*.

So this is where we get to my idea of “one step forward, two steps back” that I mentioned at the beginning of my time with you. **[pause]**

After they decided to break from Britain, each colony, which became each *state*, had to create its own constitution.

The first New Jersey Constitution, issued in 1776, granted the right to vote to “all inhabitants” who:

- Were 21 years of age or older
- Resided in one county for at least one year
- And owned property worth at least 50 English pounds

#### **[Slide 4: Constitution]**

So we haven't gotten away from property ownership, which still drastically narrows the amount of people who can vote, and of course maintains an element of economic inequality—because property is wealth. So, a poor or working person is still not voting in New Jersey.

But the phrase, “all inhabitants,” does, *theoretically*, allow for property-owning women and property-owning Black men to vote.

Now, historians disagree about whether this, sort of *loophole*, was purposeful.

New Jersey *was* a state where there was a growing number of abolitionists, and a small but strong number of property-owning women, so it’s possible that at the constitutional convention, the delegates truly *wanted* the state to be more open-minded than many others.

It’s also a possibility that it was... *just an oversight*, and they thought it would just be obvious that they were only referring to white men, since previously that had been the case.

That’s the fun, *and frustrating*, part of history. That there are *always* multiple interpretations and very rarely only one truth. **[pause]**

But regardless of whether or not it was on purpose, women, *predominantly white women*, and Black men, took advantage of this language that did not *specifically* bar them from voting.

New Jersey was the only state where women are thought to have voted in this period, and in 1790, one law even described a voter as “he or she,” so becoming more explicit about the inclusion of women over time.

New Jersey women’s level of electoral participation from the 1770s-1780s is unclear, but what *is clear* is that there was pushback.

In 1797, a New Jersey legislature seat was up for grabs, and it was a tight race. White women ended up being the deciding factor for the winner, a Jeffersonian Republican from Newark.

Then, in 1806, *again*, a tight vote—this time to determine the site of a new county courthouse—was decided by a substantial turnout by white women.

So, *unfortunately*, you might be able to guess what happens next.

Because of the electoral power women exercised in these two votes, they become the topic of conversation and debate. *Is it really okay that women are voting? Are they qualified? Are Black men qualified? Is this what the state constitution originally outlined?*

Then, the next year, the state legislature passed a law clarifying that the state constitution's "all inhabitants" did not actually refer to women, or to people of color, and that only free white men were allowed to vote. **[pause]**

This is not the march of American progress that we're taught. After the Revolution, women in New Jersey get new rights... but when certain people don't like how they *exercise* those rights, they're taken back. *Is that right?* **[pause]**

In Pennsylvania, *where I currently live*, there was a similar situation.

In the colonial period, Pennsylvania allowed free African American men who owned substantial land holdings to vote.

Since Pennsylvania, *especially Philadelphia*, did have a large Black free population, there were opportunities for African Americans to gain wealth by creating businesses that served whites and Blacks. But, *still*, there were not that many of these wealthy Black men.

Like all states, Pennsylvania's constitution went through multiple changes.

This was the wording of the 1790 Pennsylvania constitution article on voting **[Slide 5: Article 3]** *Like in New Jersey, the language left voting up to interpretation. Did "freeman" refer only to white men? Or did it include Black men too?*

Well, at this point, the constitution had already been ratified and it didn't necessarily matter what the writers had originally intended, because many of the Black leaders in Philadelphia wrote to the state legislature, including proof that they were owners of property and tax payers, and saying that they were going to vote.

Then, they went to the polls and successfully voted, although they often faced harassment or the threat of violence. This lasted for almost forty years.

This is *not* something we usually learn about, because we're taught that Black voting happens *only after the Civil War*. **[pause]**

In 1838, Pennsylvania held a constitutional convention to try to lessen property requirements so that even more people—both Black and white—could vote.

But this didn't go over well with some people. A group of Democrats lobbied to use the convention to ban Black men from voting.

In response, several free African American men got together to create what they called, the "Appeal of Forty Thousand Citizens Threatened with Disfranchisement" **[Slide 6: Appeal]**

And, inside this pamphlet, they use the fact that the American Revolution was fought for freedom and equality as their reason why they should get to keep their right to vote. And I'm going to read this along with you, because it's just so beautiful. **[Read out loud--Slide 7: Appeal 2]**

And another paragraph **[Read out loud—Slide 8: Appeal 3]**

They mention the hypocrisy of considering stripping only one group of people's rights while claiming that all men are created equal. **[pause]** They mention that their love for their country—even though they were brought here as slaves, and don't necessarily have any reason to like it. They mention their patriotism and then go on to outline their knowledge of not just the Constitution of the *United States*, but also the state constitution.

**[pause]** This is *eloquent*. This is *respectful*.

And yet, what ends up happening at the convention *instead* of discussing how, *of course Black men have the right to vote*, and we should only *broaden instead of narrow our view of citizenship*...

Thousands of white Pennsylvanians petition the convention to remove suffrage from African Americans completely, and, over the course of several days, they also destroyed and set on fire important buildings in the free Black Philadelphia community, like churches and storefronts.

This is a drawing of one fire **[Slide 9: Fire]**

The places targeted by this mob were places that represented Black success: churches, meeting halls, and the property of Black leaders, and the destruction totaled about \$4000 at the time, which in today's money is around \$116,200.

*Why all this destruction?*

Well, the broader context is that the antislavery movement was growing and African Americans in the state had grown more politically active, holding large conventions in Philadelphia to discuss political and social activism.

Some white people felt more *threatened* than they had before, and they lashed out, wanting to restrict African American rights in return. It wasn't even just about voting, it was also about Black people continually advocating for the abolition of slavery and gaining more supporters. Remember, this is only about twenty years before the start of the Civil War.

In the end, the constitutional convention ended up *opening* suffrage to lower-class whites, but it put an end to voting for African American men, with convention attendees ratifying a new state constitution that specifically limited voting to "white freemen" only.

And it wouldn't be until after the Civil War that Black men would be able to vote again in Pennsylvania.

So let's question again—*why wouldn't we be taught this?* Is it because it calls into question the idea of a straight line of American progress?

Is it because if we knew that Black voting already existed, *way back in the 1700s*, we would know that our country had already made the right choice and then decided to cruelly take it back? **[pause]**

I've given you some background on voting in this country, and two specific examples of New Jersey and Pennsylvania **[pause]**. But if we go even broader... we have *10 states* that early on, originally allowed property-owning Black men and/or women to vote **[Slide 10: Original states]**

By the early 1800s, that number had gotten smaller because of changes like those in New Jersey and Pennsylvania **[Slide 11: Changed states]**

What does this tell us about exclusion and inclusion in early American history?

How would it change the way *you* understood American history if *you* had learned this in middle school or high school?

It doesn't make you hate your country to know that history is more complex. You just realize that it's not *perfect*. **[pause]**

The American Revolution really *was* revolutionary. It made colonists, *now Americans*, think *harder* about race and gender and class. And it led a number of states to decide that they weren't *interested* in continuing slavery or they weren't *interested* in completely blocking off all rights to women. They wanted to *change*.

But there will always be groups of people who don't want more people to have more freedom; and who don't want everyone to have rights.

And that's what we see here. A small minority of people who convinced others to *exclude everyone but white men* from many rights and privileges that the American Revolution was based upon. **[pause]**

Pennsylvania especially, is also an example of how race and class can collide. [pause]

We don't often talk about class in this country, but at the convention in Philadelphia, it was predominantly poor whites starting this mob that destroyed Black property.

They were afraid of African Americans having more wealth or power than them, and so they worked to shut down one of the few rights that free African Americans had access to, and tried to destroy the economic success they had obtained...

Because if African Americans were seen as the lowest, most powerless *class*... poor white men could still feel they were still superior to someone. And this is what we also see with southern slavery—most white people in the South didn't own slaves, but they supported the system of slavery because then there was someone socially, politically, and economically underneath them.

And that's unfortunate. Because there *are* times in history that poor white men and Black men and women and other groups of people... have come together, and achieved gains and seen how similar they *really are*. But it didn't happen enough. [pause]

Now, what I've just discussed, with voting rights and Black and white Americans, continues the sort of Black-white dichotomy we often see in American history. And rightfully so, these two groups are very important.

But there was one *other* major group of people that is essential to understanding this country's early history... and that's *Native Americans*.

Native American voting is a complex issue.

The majority of Native Americans were not citizens of this country until the nineteenth-century at the earliest, and that citizenship didn't necessarily come with voting rights.

But many Native people didn't want to vote or have American citizenship until the twentieth century, because that meant being absorbed into the United States instead of being part of their sovereign Indian nations.

I've included a great book on this topic in your syllabus. But for now, I want to discuss a related issue... because it wasn't only white Americans who had to deal with deciding whether African Americans would have access to rights like voting. **[pause]**

Today, there are over five hundred Indian nations, and in the 1700s and 1800s, there were even *more*.

Five of these Indian nations had members who owned Black slaves. Those five tribes are the: **[Slide 12: Five Tribes]**

These are also some of the biggest Indian nations today, so you may be familiar with one or more of these names.

How and why did these Native women and men own slaves? There are two reasons.

First, they were being pressured by American traders they did business with and the American politicians they made agreements with to not only own enslaved Black people as property...

but *also* to assimilate to American culture in *other ways*, like learning English, teaching their daughters and wives to weave, and engaging in agriculture and private property ownership.

White Americans believed that Native Americans' culture was inferior and uncivilized, and that if they were to survive, they must become more like them.

This is, of course, ridiculous and racist. And Native people were aware of this. They certainly didn't think that they were inferior to white people.

But some of them *did* see the benefit of things like learning English and sending their children to American schools, because then they could better negotiate with Americans.

So, the important context behind the transition into Native American slave-ownership is this harmful attempt by Americans to erase Native culture and encourage assimilation. This is often referred to as the “Civilization Policy.”

But the other reason that many Native Americans decided to engage in slave-ownership was the same reason that white Americans did—to make money! **[pause]**

Some members of these Southeastern tribes decided that it would benefit them to take part in this system, which resembled their pre-contact captivity practices... and their homelands in Mississippi, Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, and North Carolina were conducive to success in the planter economy.

They could easily use enslaved people to plant cotton or corn or tobacco because their lands were agriculturally rich.

This is the plantation of one of the wealthiest Cherokee slave-owners, by the name of James Vann **[Slide 13: Vann house]**

It’s two stories with a third half-story. It has a basement and a wine cellar, and the property also included a blacksmith shop, 42 slave cabins, 6 barns, five smokehouses, a trading post, over 1000 peach trees, and 147 apple trees.

This isn’t the sort of property we usually think of a Native American inhabiting in the 1800s. But this is the wealth that slaveholding provided. **[pause]**

You can actually go see the Vann house today. It’s located in northwest Georgia and it’s been made into a museum. **[pause]**

In 1837 a census was taken of another of these slave-holding Indian nations, the Chickasaw Nation, and it found that there were 1,223 slaves and 255 owners. That made enslaved people

18% of the Chickasaw population, which was approximately the same percentage of white slaves in *Georgia* in the same time period. **[pause]** That's a lot. **[pause]**

*What was life like for the Black slaves of these Native Americans?*

As far as labor, just as in the South, the Black slaves of Indians performed various tasks within agricultural field labor or domestic work.

Both the South and these Indian nations had slave codes that prohibited Black people from learning to read and write and from assembling in large groups.

There is a lot of similarity with regard to the sorts of restrictions put on enslaved Black people, because both white and Indian slaveowners had fears of slave revolts. **[pause]**

But there were also some differences between slaves of white Americans and slaves of Indians.

Slaves in Indian nations had the opportunity to perform different functions than slaves in the U.S.

They often served as interpreters in political and religious realms. Since most of them had previously been owned by whites they spoke English, unlike some of their Indian owners, who usually only spoke their Native languages.

When these enslaved people learned an Indian language to communicate with their owner they were able to serve as go-betweens when traders or governmental agents traveled through the Nation.

They also sometimes served as religious teachers for their owners, reading the bible to them and preaching throughout the nations—*again*, prior ownership by whites had exposed them to Christianity.

Let's take a look at how slaves owned by Indians described their lives. **[Slide 14, then Slide 15]**

These are the real words of formerly enslaved people who are reminding us that everyone's experience of slavery was different. Some had horribly cruel owners, while others did not—but, *either way*, if your life can be irreparably changed by someone else's whims, you're not free—you're not living a good life.

In the 1830s, these slave-owning Indians came under attack—both physically and legally—because of their agriculturally rich land that allowed them to plant and make money of the sale

of their harvests. White plantation owners wanted this land for themselves, and so this is how we get Indian Removal.

You probably were already familiar with Removal, but it takes on a little more complexity when you learn that many of the Native people being forced off their homes so white Americans could build plantations... were *also* slaveowners with plantations.

They did what Americans had told them would supposedly make them civilized, and seen as equals, and yet... when Americans wanted their land, that wasn't enough to stop them. **[pause]**

The Cherokees fought Removal, launching two court cases and eloquently stating their basis for why they should not be removed, which included the fact that they had signed treaties with the United States. They even had large groups of white supporters who spoke out against Removal.

One group of supporters were white women who were also abolitionists. I want to show you one of the pamphlets created by a woman named Catherine Beecher... and her last name, "*Beecher*," made sound familiar, because she was the sister of Harriet Beecher *Stowe*, the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, perhaps the most famous abolitionist piece of literature. So this is a family that believes in activism.

Catherine wrote to the women in her circle **[Slide 16: Circular]**

Now, you can definitely say there are some problematic ideas about Native people in this statement, and you'd see more if you read the whole thing, but, *still*, this is still an effort to stop Removal. **[pause]**

Unfortunately, treaties and pleas like Catherine's were ignored by Congress and by President Andrew Jackson, and eventually the Cherokees, as well as the Creeks, Seminoles, Chickasaws, Choctaws, *and their Black slaves*, as well as many other tribes over time, are forced out of the Southeast and into the West—a place called Indian Territory—today, the state of Oklahoma. **[Slide 16: Removal]**

You can then see how the shape of Oklahoma comes about **[Slide 17: OK]**

Once in Indian Territory, these slave-owning tribes once again set up plantations, and they also rebuilt their governments, creating state houses as well as businesses and newspapers.

So we've established that it wasn't only white Americans who engaged in slavery, and therefore in a system that inherently excluded Black people from humanity and from society.

Native nations also used the labor of Black people to build wealth, and thought of Black people as inherently different, and inferior.

*But how do we get to exclusion and inclusion with voting?*

During the Civil War, members of these slaveholding Indian nations are divided, just like white Americans are divided—so some fight on the side of the Union and some fight on the side of the Confederacy.

And then during and after the Civil War, when Black Americans are emancipated from slavery in the United States, they are *also* emancipated from slavery in these Indian nations.

I'm simplifying things, but what's important is that after the war, tribal leaders have to ask themselves the same question white Americans asked themselves in the 1700s, and then again, after the Civil War:

Who is included and excluded from our nation? Are Black people going to be citizens? Are they going to have all the same rights of citizenship as white people—or, in this case, as *Indians*?

And they actually make similar choices to the United States.

Meaning, at first, *after American pressure*, they allow their former slaves to become citizens of their nations, with all the accompanying rights of citizenship, like voting and serving on juries, and the ability to own property.

But, just like in the United States, Black inclusion bred resentment among some people.

In 1888, the successful candidate for governor of the Chickasaw Nation, W.L. Byrd, made Black exclusion part of his campaign promises, saying that **[Slide 19: Byrd]**

And this sort of sentiment wasn't only present in the Chickasaw Nation.

When asked what he thought about the Black people in his nation, a Cherokee man named William Wilson said they should be moved out of the nation, because **“this land is Cherokee land.”**

*Where did Wilson think these Black people should go? His response was: Americans have millions of acres of land. Why don't you send them out and settle them on it?*

Black people had worked and lived in the Cherokee Nation since the 1700s, so by the time William Wilson makes this comment, there have been Black people in his nation for over *150 years*.

But to him, they still don't deserve citizenship, or even a place in the Cherokee Nation. They were fine when they were providing *free labor as slaves*, but without that, they're useless to him, and should be moved out.

Can you imagine how hurtful it would be to hear that?

Eventually, William Wilson and others like him get their wish.

In the 1970s and 1980s, as tribal governments regain much of the political power they lost in the late 1800s, they push Black citizens out.

By 1990, through referendums or legislation or tribal council votes, all five of these nations—the Cherokees, Creeks, Seminoles, Choctaws, and Chickasaws—have taken back not just voting rights, but citizenship entirely from the Black members of their nations.

Most of these Black descendants remain without the tribal citizenship they are rightfully entitled to.

The Black members of the Cherokee Nation had to file multiple lawsuits that went on for over ten years until a U.S. District Court ruling that allowed them to take back their citizenship.

And this is still an issue for all of the Black members of these other tribes.

This is a BuzzFeed article from 2021 **[Slide 20: BuzzFeed]**

Regardless of your thoughts about the vaccine, you can probably agree that if someone *wants it*, they should be able to *get it*.

And yet, in this article multiple Black members of the Seminole tribe talk about how they were discriminated against, and weren't allowed to get at, being told that they weren't real tribal members.

Black members of the Creek, Choctaw, and Chickasaw Nations cannot vote and are also denied the full rights of citizenship. **[pause]**

So the issue of exclusion and inclusion is very much still a topic of conversation in these Indian nations, just like it is in the United States.

These five slave-holding Indian nations allow us to see how complicated American history is.

Through Removal, we see how Native people had their rights ignored and violated by white settlers. But we also see how *they* ignored and violated the rights of the Black people they enslaved.

Yes, they were just following the model of white Europeans and Americans, but this doesn't make it right. Just like it doesn't make Indian Removal right.

Exclusion and inclusion in American history isn't just about white and Black people. Ideas about who has rights and whose rights should be respected changed all the time and was up for constant debate.

We must understand American history as a series of choices that different groups of people make about who is and is not part of their community, part of their *society*.

White Americans did it with Black people and women and, later, with various immigrants and people of color. But Native Americans also did it, on a smaller scale.

I hope that you've learned at least one thing you didn't previously know, and that this knowledge will help you understand how far our country has come, but also how far we have yet to go, to make sure we truly have an inclusive nation.

*Thank you.*