

In These Times, Season 2
Embedded in History (Episode 2)

Alex Schein :

Last fall we launched our podcast in these times with an examination of COVID-19 and its far reaching impacts. We spoke with students and faculty who shared their personal experiences with the epidemic, along with perspectives drawn from history, science, politics, and beyond. A recurring theme of our first season was the crisis within the COVID crisis. How racial inequality was playing out in the context of the pandemic, revealing itself in unequal health outcomes and boiling over with the death of George Floyd.

This season, we wanted to dive more deeply into this theme, to focus on Black lives and the call for justice. We'll explore the nation's complex history with race, and consider some challenging questions. Who controls the narrative about the US? How far have we moved beyond our history of enslavement and Jim Crow? Are we at a moment of reckoning? In these times, knowledge is more important than ever.

Today we talk to two historians and an anthropologist about the legal structures, policies, and ideologies that shaped our nation, from laws that forbade teaching enslaved people to read, to the war on poverty. Welcome to episode two, Embedded in History.

Heather Williams :

My name's Heather Williams and I'm a professor of Africana Studies at Penn.

Alex Schein :

Professor Williams is also Geraldine R. Segal Professor in American Social Thought. She's a historian specializing in African-American history with a particular emphasis on the South in the 18th and 19th centuries. Her background in law gives her a unique perspective.

Heather Williams :

Before I got my PhD, I went to law school, I actually went to law school right after college. And I practiced law for almost 10 years, and then taught for a little bit at my old high school, and went into the PhD.

Alex Schein :

Slavery in what we now know as the United States, lasted from about 1619 to 1865. Professor Williams traces the legal mechanisms that supported slavery, and how they changed over time.

Heather Williams :

One of the pieces of this that really fascinates me is to look at the laws that were passed early in the Virginia colony as they were putting slavery into place. So the English had no history of slavery, people can talk about what maybe they had done in Ireland, but there were no laws about slavery. And so in America they were using common law, which is what the English had used, but then they have to create these new laws for this new institution that they were developing. And so at first Africans who arrived in Virginia, let's use Virginia as an example, were not necessarily enslaved. There's some confusion about

what their status was exactly. And I think what we've come to is that they were in some status of unfreeness, as were the indentured servants who came from England, or Ireland, or Scotland, or Holland.

So white indentured servants would come, they have to repay the cost of their passage. They were indentured to some master, usually for a term of seven years, sometimes five years. At the end of that term, they became fully free, and were supposed to be given clothing and possibly land. And so it seems that in the very early years, Africans occupied some of that position in Virginia.

Alex Schein :

Professor Williams says that the status of Africans changed when Virginia became a thriving tobacco colony. She can see the change in the 1640 court case of John Punch, a Black man living in Virginia. Punch worked on a tobacco plantation and ran away with two white men. They were captured in Maryland and returned.

Heather Williams :

They went to court, the two white men had their time extended. So if they had still owed four years of service, the court added to that time. So maybe another two years. John Punch, they sentenced to life as a slave. So the white men got time added to their service, John Punch was sentenced to life, to serve the rest of his life as a slave. And then you see legislation coming in that says, we can no longer punish Black people by adding time because they're already serving for life. So John Punch was not unique in that this is what the legislation, this is all happening in the mid 1600s.

Alex Schein :

Laws about slavery, motherhood, and children come up in her research, and in the undergraduate research seminar she teaches on slavery and the law. While English law stated that children follow the status of their fathers, Virginia and the colonies instituted rules that guaranteed all children of enslaved women would be enslaved themselves. Professor Williams recalls a student in a recent seminar who was interested in reproductive labor, and in particular, breastfeeding.

Heather Williams :

And so enslaved women who were forced really to nurse white women's children, sometimes to the detriment of their own children. Because as you can imagine people listening know that sometimes a woman can barely feed her own child, right? And so there's an ad that we work with where the family's looking for a wet nurse, which is what they called people who were going to breastfeed, looking for a wet nurse without a child, which raises the question, where is her child? She can't be a wet nurse unless she's recently had a child. So what about her child?

Alex Schein :

Laws were put in place to restrict enslaved people's movement, access to education and literacy, and rights to legal marriages. Williams points out how all of these things were entwined. An enslaved person who considered themselves married to someone who lived elsewhere needed a written ticket, or a pass, in order to visit the other location. If they knew how to read and write, they could forge a pass and visit their families, or even escape to freedom. So in many states it became illegal to teach enslaved people to read or write. Enslaved people who did learn to read or write did so in secret, and under the threat of punishment. The most famous example is perhaps Frederick Douglas, who became a leading abolitionist, orator, and writer. But there are other stories that show the power of literacy.

Heather Williams :

Elijah Marrs, who was on a farm, he called it in Kentucky, and he learned from an old black man, he said, on the plantation. And he would walk around writing his letters on the walls, not realizing as a child that if he had been caught doing that, there could have been consequences. He called himself a scribe. So he became a scribe for the people on the plantation. If somebody wanted to write a letter to send to a family member, or letters came in, often it was an enslaved man, or boy, who would go to the post office to collect the mail. And so he would read the letters to these people. He enlisted in the union army during the Civil War, he taught other soldiers when they were in camp. And then he ended up teaching school for years afterwards, almost to the 20th century.

Alex Schein :

After the Civil War, slavery was illegal, but legal systems that restricted black people's rights to movement, education, and marriage did not go away, they simply evolved. Professor Williams says these laws were about preserving power.

Heather Williams :

After the Civil War, the states wanted to keep as much of that as possible. So it's about white supremacy, it's also about the use and exploitation of black labor. So, the country had been built, and I don't think it's an exaggeration, on the labor of Black people. And so, after the war, both the North and the South wanted to keep Black people working because what's going to happen now? Where will the cotton come from? Where will the corn come from? Where will the oats, where will the wheat, who will cut down the pine trees to make the, whatever it is they make with pine trees? In North Carolina, who's going to do this work? So there was really tremendous interest in maintaining this labor, and for as little cost as possible. And so right after the war, these states put in place Black codes meant to restrict the freedom that these people thought they had just gotten.

Alex Schein :

The legacy of slavery in the United States goes far beyond the law.

Heather Williams :

The main legacy is, again, the ideology, the belief that I think is, it's hard to explain it and describe it. We often think about people like those people who went to those rallies that some of us disapprove of, that call themselves white supremacists, or would not deny being white supremacists, who run around with the Confederate flag and have some excuse for why they're doing that. And then you've got the masses of white people, including good white people, nice white people, some white people I know and are friends with, who have embedded in them an idea that they are better than other people.

And I think that is the most pervasive, and the most damaging legacy. That more and more, especially young people are trying to throw that off, or trying to question that, or trying to challenge it, but it's not so easy to do. And people talk about privilege. It's not so easy to give up privilege. It's just not, even when you recognize it, and a lot of people don't recognize it. They don't even look for it. They don't think about it. But even once you do, when the rubber hits the road, do you really stand by that?

Alex Schein :

Professor Williams reflects on her career as a lawyer and historian in a nation where the ideology of white supremacy is pervasive.

Heather Williams :

Part of why I do the work that I do, and I didn't go into it saying this is why I want to study slavery, but upon reflection after years of my keen interest in slavery, I realized my family moved from Jamaica to Brooklyn, New York, when I was 11. And so I started going to school in America. And I'll just say for anybody who doesn't know, Jamaica's population at the time, and probably still, is 90 something percent people of African descent. And as an 11 year old, I had not been aware of prejudice or racism, probably some adults were, but I had not encountered that. I get to school in Brooklyn, I went to a junior high school that had been recently integrated. And I was in the special progress class, I was in the smart class. Some very few Black kids, couple Black kids, couple of Puerto Rican kids.

And very early on, I started to realize that the top level of white boys in that class thought they were better than me because they were white, and because I was Black, and this was baffling to me. I remember going home telling my mother, crying, and she said, "Oh, they're just jealous of you," because that was always her, I don't know where she got that from, that was what she always said. And I think from then to this day, I have been curious about the origins of that idea, and curious about how those boys came to think, or in their minds, to know that they were better? And so we would compete in class, we would compete on exams. And I think that has really propelled my interest in going as far back as I can in the history of America to figure out where this comes from, and how it got to me in Brooklyn in the 1970s.

Alex Schein :

Brent Cebul is a professor of history. Like Professor Williams, he's interested in the connections between the past and the present. He says the events of the past year have made those connections particularly visible.

Brent Cebul:

The events of last summer, and defunding the police, and the uprisings, have brought a level of urgency and focus to my work that was there before, but I think it really makes live for students so many of the issues that we're talking about in class. So in my urban history class, we talk about the urban uprisings of the late 1960s, and we talk about how the notion of what constitutes a race riot changed over the course of the 20th century from an earlier 20th century, late 19th century model, which was white people pillaging black communities and killing black people to the more recent version, which is frustrated and put upon African-American communities responding to police violence and other forms of inequality. And so all of these events, I think have just underscored the necessity of understanding these issues from historical perspectives.

Alex Schein :

We heard Professor Williams talk about laws that reinforce white supremacy by restricting movement and access to education, both during and after slavery. Professor Cebul studies 20th century policies and practices that had similar effects.

Brent Cebul:

We often talk about redlining, the practice of government providing insurance to particular neighborhoods for mortgages, right? And so the classic understanding of redlining is that it denied the benefits of mortgage and lending to black neighborhoods and cities disproportionately, but also Jewish neighborhoods in some Southern Eastern European immigrant neighborhoods. But what we often forget is that the white neighborhoods and the aspirationally white neighborhoods and suburbs were given

favorable status by those same programs. And so not only are they starving poor communities and cities of access to that capital, they're creating new markets for white families to move out to suburbs. So there's both a stick in cities and a carrot that's pulling white people out. And that it would not be an underestimation to say that that nest egg that a mortgage offers really creates the white middle-class.

Alex Schein :

Cebul also studies urban renewal, the state sponsored raising and redevelopment of supposedly blighted neighbors.

Brent Cebul:

So very often the same disproportionately African-American neighborhoods that had been denied access to mortgage than other forms of government insured private lending now become the target of what some people call the federal bulldozer in the urban renewal programs, whereby city elites, planners, mayors, chambers of commerce, hungrily target these disproportionately African-American neighborhoods. And so over the course of the late forties and into the early 1970s, which is the length of time that this program ran, a quarter of a century, federal subsidies to clear out blighted neighborhoods went to 400 cities and towns, supported more than 1200 projects, it displaced a minimum of 300,000 families. So we're talking well over a million individuals.

And to underscore the point, while black Americans around 1960 were about 13% of the population, they constituted 55% of those displaced through these projects and these programs. And so these are entire neighborhoods, these are businesses that are being displaced. Often homeowners are being turned into renters, or public housing residents through these programs. And so, even cases where you have a family business, that might be cleared, and a little bit of relocation assistance, but it takes a whole lot more than a couple thousand dollars to start up a new business. And sure enough, by the mid 1960s more than 33,000 businesses had been cleared out and displaced by the renewal program as well.

Speaker 4:

Skilled planners, engineers, and other technicians lay out the step-by-step elimination, or rehabilitation of a city unit. Here, coli charted on graphs and maps, is the timetable of destruction. But once the old has been torn down, the builders come in to make a better St. Louis by rehabilitating and rebuilding.

Alex Schein:

Professor Cebul's current research details how the effects of policies like these ended up being different than planned.

Brent Cebul:

So the title of my current book project, which is "Illusions of Progress," refers to the ways in which liberals over the course of the 20th century set very high social justice goals for big federal policies. And what I argue in the book is that those policies, because of the structure of federalism and constitutional constraints on the federal government, necessarily relied on state and local administration. And so what ends up happening in programs like urban renewal, programs like the Community Development Block Grant program, which was begun in the 1970s and continues today, are framed in these ways that are all about fighting poverty, but when the money arrives in the local level, local administration say, "Oh, we're going to fight poverty by spurring growth." Well fighting poverty and spurring growth aren't at all the same things, right? You can have lots of growth sitting right next to poverty.

Lyndon Johnson:

And this administration today, here, and now, declares unconditional war on poverty in America.

Alex Schein :

What about Lyndon Johnson's war on poverty? Professor Seibel says welfare and benefits like food stamps and Head Start programs were not meant to lift people out of poverty, but to make poverty more tolerable.

Brent Cebul:

The program in the war on poverty that was designed to actually solve poverty was the Community Action Program, in which the federal government actually sent money into local communities and said, Hey, organize the poor to actually create the new political factions at the local level so that they can actually fight for the kinds of economic development programs, and poverty programs, and social services that they need. And this was the first time that the federal government had actually allowed poor people to administer their own programs. And this was utterly controversial immediately, and mayors and local chambers of commerce immediately went to war over these funds. It wasn't simply that they didn't want the funds in their community, it's that they wanted to control them. It's that they wanted to determine the use of poverty funding.

And so within 18 months of the Community Action Programs rolling out, the Johnson administration itself, my research shows, is actually moving to take control of that funding out of poor people's hands and give it back to mayors, and give it back to their allies, and chambers of commerce. And so this idea that we fought a war on poverty, we fought a bit of a skirmish in 1966, and then just decided that the politics of actually empowering poor people to run their own programs were too hot to touch, and liberals, not conservatives, were the ones who backed away from that.

Alex Schein :

Cebul says that understanding this history will be important for future legislation.

Brent Cebul:

As we move towards thinking about a green new deal and other types of big, bold policy ideas like that, it'll be very important to carefully think through what the actual structure of the administration of those programs are going to be. Are we going to rely on businesses to regulate themselves that are getting contracts to develop green technology? Who is actually going to oversee hiring quotas and those types of things on these programs, right? Because policy design is destiny. And so you can call it very progressive, but how things play out in the nitty gritty is really how the results will play out in the long run.

Alex Schein :

Like Professor Williams, Deborah Thomas had a circuitous route to academia that informs her research and teaching.

Deborah Thomas :

My name is Deborah Thomas. I'm the R. Jean Brownlee Professor of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania, and I also direct the Center for Experimental Ethnography. I often tell people I'm an

accidental anthropologist. I landed in the field after a very circuitous set of perambulations and meanderings. Prior to going to graduate school, I was a professional dancer in New York, and I performed with the company, Urban Bush Women. And one of the things that we developed within the company during the time that I was dancing with them was this program of community work that we called Community Engagement Projects. And these were projects through which we would work with different grassroots organizations within communities at the invitation of these communities to achieve whatever goals it was that they had on their radar through using artistic practices.

So eventually I applied to different graduate programs after canvassing all of my friends to see if anybody knew anybody in grad school, and what that's like, and where should I apply? And these kinds of things. I eventually found my way to a Latin American and Caribbean Studies master's program. And one of my first courses through that was an anthropology course. And I just fell in love, and I found a space that already had a set of methodological tools that sounded like what I had already been doing.

Alex Schein :

Professor Williams talked about the legacy of slavery and the white supremacist ideology that persists. Though she was drawn to anthropology, Professor Thomas recognizes that same legacy in the field.

Deborah Thomas :

You asked if anthropology has colonial origins, right? So all disciplines have colonial origins. Humanism as a Western philosophy, of course emerges outside of the scientific revolution, and in the wake of the Renaissance from the 14th to 17th centuries. And central to the emergence of humanism was an attempt to reckon with reason and rationality by developing a new universalism that would dislodge theological conceptualizations of causality in favor of a new idea of man as a secular political subject. And in the process of developing this new secular idea of man, it also located European views of the world as superior to all other possible views.

Alex Schein :

As humanism emerged, Christian churches in European nations engaged in the twin projects of evangelism and colonialism. Thomas points to the expulsion of the Moors from Spain, and the growth of the transatlantic slave trade as projects that established racial and cultural hierarchies. The views that classified humanity and placed Western white culture at the top allowed people to justify slavery and dismiss indigenous forms of knowledge. Anthropology pushes back against this dismissal while at the same time reinforcing hierarchies.

Deborah Thomas :

So at the core of humanism is a secular imperialism that's grounded in white supremacy. So anthropology now comes into this field and it offers us a way to gain insight into, and respect for the diverse practices of people around the world, and to understand from the ground up how non-Western people have organized their lives. This is what happens within anthropology after the 19th century period of scientific racism, right? So despite the fact that anthropologists in the early decades of the 20th century are trying to learn about people around the world from the ground up, the discipline has nevertheless perpetuated the idea that a comparative scientific approach will produce generalizable knowledge about humans that will then be legible to Western audiences. And as a result, it has circumvented other ways of knowing, being, and claiming humanity, right?

So, this is what prompts us as anthropologists today to continually question our practice. And it's what has generated calls to decolonize the disciplines over the years among Black and Indigenous

anthropologists, as well as others. And so we've called for anthropology to become accountable to a past and a present in which the discipline has enabled, and really in many cases solidified processes of dispossession, racism, and other forms of exclusion.

Alex Schein :

There are models for this kind of work, people who professor Thomas calls, anthropological ancestors. She places thinkers like Zora Neale Hurston, Eslanda Robeson, Ella Deloria, and Anténor Firmin, in this group.

Deborah Thomas :

And all of these are folks who really existed at the margins of the discipline, in part, because they were pursuing other professional paths, but also because their methods and the theoretical interventions that emerged from them were really out of sync with their moment in the field, which was more empirical, more oriented toward a liberal formulation of knowledge and research. And at the same time, I think they really did pose significant challenges to the theoretical and methodological norms in the anthropological spaces that they occupied. And so they really do provide inspiration for us today.

Alex Schein :

Like these anthropological ancestors, Professor Thomas uses a variety of methodologies as part of her research. Early in her career, she became interested in how artists were involved in social change, especially the anti-colonial movement in Jamaica, where her father is from, and where she spent her early childhood. As a dancer, Thomas saw how artists could elevate forms of music and dance that had been devalued under British colonial rule.

Deborah Thomas :

So I ended up doing my dissertation research in Jamaica with dancers, with theater artists, with communities that had no connection to these dancers and theater artists, to see not only what they were trying to do, but also how people were receiving it, and whether they thought it was important, and when they thought it was important to really value this kind of nationalist cultural heritage. And if they didn't think it was important, what else they did think was important, and how that compared to what the nationalist cultural producers were trying to do.

Alex Schein :

She has continued to explore the role and value of arts in anti-colonial spaces. In addition to her academic writing, she is the producer of two films, *Four Days in May*, and *Bad Friday: Rastafari After Coral Gardens*.

Speaker 6:

We have a responsibility.

Speaker 8:

Yes.

Speaker 6:

And we have to make sure that this government is answerable to what happened to Rasta in 1963. And we say this without any apology.

Deborah Thomas :

I find that art and music, and other forms of creative production, are forms through which one can create space for different forms of repair and healing. My own work has really been focused on creating and assembling archives of both violence and responses to violence, so of both violence and life. And that practice has really been generated toward creating spaces for difficult conversations, toward opening new spaces where people can connect with each other across both time and space, and by space I mean geographic space, generational space, political space, class position space, in order to think about their own relationships to these archives, and perhaps also to elaborate new foundations for the imagination of a different future, and a more liberatory future.

Alex Schein :

For a liberatory future, all people must reckon with colonialism. Professor Thomas points to Aimé Césaire, a social theorist from Martinique, and his mid 20th century text, "Discourse on Colonialism."

Deborah Thomas :

In *Discourse*, Césaire re-casted the history of Western civilization in order to locate the origins of fascism within colonialism, and as a result, again, within the very traditions of humanism that scholars believed that fascism threatened, right? So the big question after World War II in Europe, of course, is how could this have happened here? How could this have happened in the center of the liberal enlightenment? And what Césaire is writing about in this text is you really have to look at your own long history of imperialism because this that you just experienced is really the chickens coming home to roost, right? And I just pulled a few quotes from that text, which if you don't mind, I'll read because I think they're so beautiful and so powerful. He argues, "No one colonizes innocently, and no one colonizes with impunity either. A nation which colonizes, a civilization which justifies colonization, and therefore force, is already a sick civilization, a civilization which is morally diseased, which irresistibly progressing from one consequence to another."

And later he writes, "Colonization dehumanizes even the most civilized man. Colonial activity, colonial enterprise, colonial conquest, which is based on contempt for the native, and justified by that contempt, inevitably tends to change him who undertakes it. The colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as an animal, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, and tends objectively to transform himself into an animal." Right? So what he's saying here, and saying so eloquently, is that we live in one world. And processes like imperialism, colonialism, dispossession, and racism, don't merely affect those who are colonized, or were colonized, but the society and indeed the world as a whole. And I think if we accept this, then we understand that if we live in societies that were founded upon violence, then these histories always live in the present and they permeate all our institutions and forms of understanding, right? So not just the institutions, but also the ways that we think about them.

Alex Schein :

This wraps up episode two, *Embedded in History*. Join us in two weeks for episode three, *Institutionalizing Racism*, where we'll hear from a sociologist about residential segregation, and drop in on a conversation between two criminologists about police reform.

In These Times is a production of Penn Arts and Sciences. A special thanks to professors, Heather Williams, Brent Cebul, and Deborah Thomas. I'm, Alex Schein. Thanks for listening. Be sure to subscribe to the OMNIA Podcast by Penn Arts and Sciences on Apple iTunes, or wherever you find your podcasts. To listen to all six episodes of season two of, In These Times: Black Lives and the Call for Justice.