

[Postdoctoral Interview -- Dr. Alexandra E. Stern and Native Reconstruction](#)

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Hello H-CivWar subscribers,

We're back again with another installment of our graduate student, postdoc, and early career historian interview series. Today we welcome [Dr. Alexandra E. Stern](#), a recent graduate from Stanford University and ACLS Postdoctoral Fellow & Substitute Assistant Professor of History at The City College of New York. Dr. Stern specializes in United States and Native American history, focusing on the intersecting histories of race, law, federal power, land, and violence in nineteenth-century America. Our conversation with Dr. Stern today will cover material from her manuscript project, *Native Reconstruction: The Making of the Modern American State in Indian Territory*.

John Legg: Welcome, Dr. Stern! Before we dig into your project, I wanted to ask what inspired you to write on Native American history during Reconstruction?

Alexandra Stern: Thanks so much for the opportunity to talk about my research, John.

My focus on Native American history during Reconstruction grew out of my interest in the historical development of a large and powerful federal government. When I began my history major, I intended to study the Founding era because that's where I thought the action was in the history of American government and power. But it was the demands of the Civil War that prompted the expansion of federal power and prerogative and gave birth to the modern American nation-state we know today.

Historians have often interpreted this as a positive development. After all, the Union's victory brought about the end of slavery and a new set of expanded political rights of Black Americans. But as I looked at the history of the American West in this period, the growth of federal power most obviously manifested in a series of increasingly violent "Indian wars." In trying to understand how government actors were concurrent liberators in the South and oppressors in the West, I found my way into the history of Native nations. Reading in the archive, I discovered that Native American people and governments directly connected federal intervention in the South and West in ways historians infrequently discussed. Native history offered a fresh perspective from which to interrogate the full meaning and impact of federal power in the mid-nineteenth century and I've been doing research work in this vein ever since.

JL: After reading through your dissertation introduction, I wonder if you could explain to our readers why Indian Territory is important to the study of Reconstruction?

AS: Indian Territory is very important to the history of Reconstruction for a number of reasons. Even if only a small group of historians have clearly and explicitly articulated the territory's relevance to the history of the Civil War and Reconstruction, many more "traditional" histories of the period make at least a passing mention of Indian Territory. This is in part because Indian Territory has very clear

historical connections with the traditional focus of Reconstruction (the C.S.A) and the Civil War. The Confederacy claimed Indian Territory as a military district in 1861, members of the Five “Civilized” Tribes (the Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Seminole nations, which the U.S. government forcibly relocated to I.T. in the 1830s) were slaveholders and formally fought for both Union and Confederate armies. And proportionally, residents of Indian Territory endured more property damage and a higher casualty rate than residents of any other state or territory during the war. Since some members of all Five Tribes fought for the Confederacy, the federal government forced each nation to sign new treaties in 1866, which are literally called their “Reconstruction Treaties.”

But as my research shows, Indian Territory isn’t just connected to the traditional history of Reconstruction in the South. It was on its own a central site of Reconstruction. As I argue in my manuscript, in the 1860s and 70s Indian Territory served as an experimental laboratory for the development of Reconstruction policy and the creation of a multiracial democracy. Before Congress ever voted on Reconstruction legislation for the South, it debated what the post-war period would look like—especially for four million newly emancipated freedpeople—in a bill for reconstructing Indian Territory. In federal legislation targeting Indian Territory starting in 1865, historians can discover the antecedents to Reconstruction policy in the South.

Indian Territory is also a space in which a unique version of the possibilities of Reconstruction unfolded. Unlike in the rest of the Confederate South, the Five Tribes’ Reconstruction treaties required major land cessions. Thus, Indian Territory offers a one-of-a-kind look into the power of land reform abandoned in the South. Meanwhile, freedpeople’s presence and in some cases acquisition of tribal citizenship gave them access to land like nowhere else in the U.S. after emancipation. While only briefly realized in the South, the essence of Sherman’s “forty acres and a mule” policy was most substantially realized in Indian Territory after 1866.

JL: How are historians developing the study of Reconstruction that focus on places that generally are not included in the standard North/South debates after the Civil War?

AS: Although the traditional geographical and temporal bounds of Reconstruction (the former Confederate states, 1865-1877) still stand, established and early career scholars alike have been rethinking the definition and meaning of Reconstruction in recent decades. Elliott West’s concept of a “Greater Reconstruction,” which offered a continental perspective to the history of race-making and nineteenth century state-building, prompted many reevaluations. This includes the work of leading historians like Richard White, who uses the concept of “Greater Reconstruction” in his masterful Oxford history of Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, and Steven Hahn, who suggests an even more international process of “imperial Reconstruction.” It has also inspired a new generation of historians’ expanded work on the post-war period. Taken together, this growing body of scholarship shows that Reconstruction is perhaps best defined by its ideological commitments—free labor, private property ownership, nuclear families, and universal citizenship—rather than a set geography or chronology.

Indian Territory is definitely an important focal point for this new turn in the scholarship. Bradley R. Clampitt edited a dedicated anthology to the *Civil War & Reconstruction in Indian Territory* that is already a classic. Meanwhile, new work by early career scholars including Alaina Roberts, whose important first book *I’ve Been Here All the While* just came out, Nakia Parker, Cori Simon, and myself

reveal Indian Territory's power in helping us rethink the contours, history, and meaning of Reconstruction, as well as the history of slavery, emancipation, and settler colonialism in the United States.

Native American history's integration into the history of Reconstruction is only just beginning. The work of scholars like Megan Kate Nelson, Jen Andrella, and others points to the many places in Indian Country that offer insight into this period. It is my hope that we are seeing the rise of a new conceptualization within Greater Reconstruction: Native Reconstruction. Native American history is American history and we will not be able to fully account for the successes and failures of this central period in our history without it.

JL: I'm curious, how have the legacies of Reconstruction (its potentials, shortcomings, or failures) impacted Native people today?

AS: My work reveals the impact of Reconstruction in Indian Country by recontextualizing federal Indian policy in terms of concurrent policy debates and developments. American politicians never created Indian policy in a political or intellectual vacuum. Although policy history fell to the wayside after the rise of New Indian History, there's still a lot of important work to be done in this vein. For example, the devastating impact of allotment policy on Native nations and people is well documented, but allotment is rarely discussed or taught outside of Native history. Based on my examination of the writing of Henry L. Dawes, I argue the General Allotment Act, also known as the "Indian Emancipation Act," was conceived of as a Reconstruction policy tied to the era's reinterpretation of legitimate (private, individually-held land) and illegitimate property (communally-held land and chattel slavery).

Additionally, the Five Tribes of Indian Territory, much like the United States, have long struggled to acknowledge and address their histories of slavery and anti-Blackness. The descendants of freedpeople are still fighting for what was promised to them during Reconstruction—recognition as full tribal citizens with unabridged rights. Recent attention to this history has brought about some promising new developments; this year the Cherokee Nation removed the phrase "by blood" from its constitution, language that had been used to deny the rights of freedpeople's descendants to hold elected office.

Identifying and analyzing the legacies of Reconstruction in Indian Country is definitely one of the most promising areas for new work connected to Native Reconstruction.

JL: Thank you for joining us, Dr. Stern. I wish you best of luck with your manuscript and future work.

Thank you so much, John. I am always eager to connect with other historical thinkers interested in Reconstruction in Indian Country and can be reached at nativereconstruction@gmail.com.

This concludes another installment of our H-CivWar Graduate Student, Postdoc, or Early Career Scholar interview series. If you're interested in participating in these interviews, send proposals to John R. Legg <jlegg5@gmu.edu>.