

Enrolling as Cherokee Freedmen: Social Networks of Rejected Applicants

REBECCA HANKINS AND HAI IN JO

Abstract

This presentation explores a collaborative research project that began in 2021 between Professor Rebecca Hankins and Ms. Hai In Jo, a Ph.D. candidate in English at Texas A&M University. Our work centers on the Cherokee Freedman Collection (1900–1907), housed at the Texas A&M University Archives. This archival collection features interviews, testimonies, and affidavits of Black people submitted to the Department of the Interior’s Commission to the Five Civilized Tribes, specifically relating to applications for Cherokee Freedmen status that were denied under the Dawes Commission. In response to this underexplored archive, Ms. Jo developed a digital project titled *Enrolling as Cherokee Freedmen: Social Networks of Rejected Applicants*, hosted by the Illinois Open Publishing Network. Her work employs digital humanities methodologies to visualize the social and familial networks of applicants, while also foregrounding ethical data practices.

This project highlights the significance of archival recovery and ethical digital storytelling in addressing gaps in the historical record. It also reflects a broader commitment to using digital tools to elevate and amplify marginalized voices and histories, while challenging extractive or dehumanizing uses of data, even in its archived format. I bring to this collaboration my expertise as an archivist and Distinguished Fellow of the Society of American Archivists. Together, our work demonstrates the power of cross-disciplinary partnerships in reimagining the archive as a space for justice and restoration.

About the authors:

Rebecca Hankins is a professor and a certified archivist, and she received her (terminal) degree from Louisiana State University. She has been at Texas A&M University since 2003, receiving tenure in 2010 and being promoted to Full Professor in 2019. She is housed in the Department of Global Languages and Cultures within the College of Arts and Sciences, where she conducts research and teaches courses in Africana and Religious Studies. In December 2016, U.S. President Barack Obama appointed her to the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC) of the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) for a term from 2017 to 2020. She has presented widely on topics including Islam, science fiction and fantasy, archives, diversity, inclusion, cultural competency, social justice, and academic equity. Her publications have appeared in science fiction, libraries/archives, other peer-reviewed journals, and book chapters. She has presented nationally and internationally, including recent talks in Doha, Qatar, Barcelona, Spain, Berlin, Germany, and Dakar, Senegal.

Hai In Jo is a Ph.D candidate in the Department of English at Texas A&M University. Her research interests are 19th-20th century American literature, African American literature, and digital humanities, with a focus on slavery and the archive of slavery. She is finishing up her dissertation that examines how African American literature offers ways of creating, collecting, presenting, and reading racial data in an ethical way by looking at the scenes of Black lives being represented as mathematical equations, objects, and data. She is also a Fulbright student from South Korea.