

– Today, we are pleased to introduce Christy Clark-Pujara as part of the Wisconsin Historical Museum’s History Sandwiched In lecture series. The opinions expressed today are those of the presenter, and are not necessarily those of the Wisconsin Historical Society or the museum’s employees. Christy Clark-Pujara is an associate professor of history in the department of Afro-American studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Her research focuses on the experiences of black people in British and French North America in the 17th, 18th, and early 19th centuries. She is particularly interested in retrieving the hidden and unexplored histories of African Americans in the areas that historians have not sufficiently examined, small towns and cities in the North and Midwest. Her first book, “Dark Work: The Business of Slavery in Rhode Island,” was printed by NYU Press in 2016. In addition to her scholarly research, she serves as a public historian, writing editorials and participating in interviews for podcasts for a variety of media including NPR, Time, History News Network, Ben Franklin’s World, The Way of Improvement, and Teaching Tolerance. Here today to discuss the history of black suffrage in Wisconsin, please join me in welcoming Christy Clark-Pujara. [audience applauds] – Good afternoon, and thank you all for coming and braving the rain.

I’d like to thank Katie for reaching out for me to speak today. And the Wisconsin Historical Museum for hosting these events, so thank you, I appreciate it. I thought today was particularly fitting, as an election day, to be talking about suffrage in the state of Wisconsin. First, I’m gonna begin with a little bit of background. I’m not just gonna jump into suffrage, the suffrage debates that really began in earnest in 1846. I wanna tell a little bit of backstory about the experiences of black people in what we now refer to as Wisconsin, and how they came to be in this place. The story of black people and black suffrage in Wisconsin is recent history and plays out amidst European invasion, colonization, and the removal of indigenous populations that have inhabited this region for hundreds and thousands of years. One of the things I have appreciated most about my new project on black people in Wisconsin is the opportunity to study indigenous history. To learn about the Ho-Chunk, the Dakota, the Meskwaki, and the Ojibwa, and other indigenous people that have called this place home and continue to call this place home.

Native people and their experiences are central to understanding the history of African Americans in this place and the state as a whole. Black people have been in what we refer to as the Midwest. I’m sorry, I meant to have this up ahead of time, but I just wanna recenter us for a minute. We’re used to thinking that we know what North America looks like, but this is what North America looked like before European colonization and invasion. And I think it’s important for us to recognize that the places that we think we know looked very different, and that history doesn’t begin with European colonization and invasion. That there was a history to those places before white people were ever there. Black people have been in what we refer to as the Midwest since the French colonial period. The first black people came into the region in the 1720s with French fur traders. Some were free, but most lived in bondage.

Free and enslaved people of African descent and Native descent were instrumental in the Midwestern transformation from mission centers and fur trading posts to grain production. By 1732, enslaved people made up a quarter of the population. And by 1752, 446 enslaved black people lived in the region, and 41% of white heads of households owned a person. Like in the North, slave ownership in the Midwest was more widespread than it ever was in the South. Let me take a minute to explain. In the North, you would often get 40-42% of white heads of households owning people. They usually owned one or two. In the South, you had about 24% of the population holding slaves, and they usually held five or more, planters 20 or more. So the patterns of slave ownership were different, but slave ownership was more widespread in the North than it was in the South, even though you have higher concentrations of enslaved people in the South.

The Northwest Ordinance is probably one of the most misunderstood articles of the Constitution. Most people think of the Northwest Ordinance, and they think of the ban on slavery. I wanna give some general detail of the Northwest Ordinance and then go into some stories of how people actually lived their life in the Northwest Territories, because there is law, and then there is law in practice. In 1787, the Northwest Ordinance forbade slaveholding in the territories, but the ban was not enforced. Race-based slavery was practiced in the Upper Midwest until the late 1840s, neither territorial officials nor Congress moved to emancipate those held in bondage, and pro-slavery residents soon stopped petitioning for explicit legal protection when they realized that Article IV of the Northwest Ordinance would not be enforced. And so we have these petitions that say things like, "I held people in bondage before this place was claimed "by the US as a territory." And the government would respond, "Yes, you can continue to hold those people in bondage." They were, kind of a grandfather clause. It's like now, when you have an old building, it might not have to have the same handicap accessibility as a new building. But when they realized that there was no enforcement mechanism, people stopped even doing that. Statehood forced the issue of slavery in most places.

In 1803, Ohio entered the Union as a free state. When Illinois became a state in 1818, those held in slavery and servitude were held to contract, but no new slaves could come to the region, no new indentured contracts could come to the region. And so those held before 1818 had to live out their contract. And some of these indentures, most historians of slavery in the Midwest just talk about them as being a form of slavery. Because some were 30 years, some were 60 years, and there were 99-year indentures. If you are indentured for 99 years in the 1830s, that is slavery, right? And the rules and regulations that applied to people, things like, you couldn't go more than a mile from where you were bound without a pass. It very mimicked slavery. Michigan entered the Union as a free state in 1837, followed by Iowa in 1846. In 1848, the Illinois state constitution banned slavery and extended indentureships, and in 1848, Wisconsin entered the union as a free state.

Now I'm gonna roll it back a little bit and tell you about some experiences. When significant numbers of white Americans from the Northeast and the Upper South begin

to move to the Midwest after the American Revolution, the numbers of enslaved Native Americans dwindled as the US Army forcefully removed them from the land, and some American Indian tribes entered into treaties with the US government. African Americans who were enslaved remained. More enslaved black people came with white settlers who also brought their racist attitudes. Enslaved people were present in every facet of the economy. They labored on farms, in the skilled trades, as domestics, and miners. It was a fluid institution, excuse me. In the Midwest, slavery was openly practiced, but it was rarely acknowledged. It was a fluid institution, taking on a variety of forms including open and legally sanctioned slavery, long-term indentured servitude, adoptions that were intended to mask child slavery, and outright illegal slaveholding.

And so you have this composite of bound labor existing in the Northwest territories. In the 1820s, Southern military officers brought more enslaved African Americans into the region. These officers included those who took advantage of the army's special allowance to lease or hire servants and enslaved people. Throughout the 1840s, black Americans performed a wide range of labor at Fort Snelling in St. Paul, Minnesota, Fort Crawford in Prairie du Chien, Fort Armstrong in Rock Island. Bound black American men, women, and children were also held by officers posted at Fort Winnebago in Columbia County, and Fort Des Moines in Montrose. But it was the lead boom that brought more enslaved African Americans to the Wisconsin Territory. In 1827, Henry Dodge moved to the territory from the slaveholding state of Missouri and set up a lead mine. He held Toby, Tom, Lear, Jim, and Joe in bondage. They labored as smelters at Henry's furnace.

Henry had promised to free Toby, Tom, Lear, Jim, and Joe after six months, but he held them in captivity for 12 years, despite the prohibition against slaveholding in the Northwest Territories. Toby, Tom, Lear, Jim, and Joe were finally freed on April 11, 1838, two years after Dodge became the first territorial governor of Wisconsin. If you noticed, I said their names a lot. Toby, Tom, Lear, Jim, and Joe. And I referred to Henry Dodge as just Henry. This is intentional. We know who Henry Dodge is. We don't know about the bound laborers that created his wealth, that built that mine, that worked that mine. And we don't have surnames for them.

And so when I can't speak their surname, I will not speak his surname. In 1846, Paul Jones, an enslaved lead worker in Sinsinawa, sued his enslaver George W. Jones for \$1,133 for "trespassing on a promise," a promise to pay him wages. Paul Jones lost his case and continued to labor for George Jones's benefit until 1842 when he was emancipated. Slavery was openly practiced in the Northwest Territories, but rarely has it been acknowledged. And someone like Paul Jones is forgotten to history because a man by the name of Dred Scott is going to sue for his freedom, and his family's freedom, a few years later, and so we forget about Paul Jones, who sued in 1842, and the courts basically said, "You're right, but it doesn't matter, because you're black." This is gonna get reiterated by the US Supreme Court in the Dred Scott case. Many emancipated black Wisconsinites found their way to Pleasant Ridge, a free black community outside of Lancaster. Founded in 1848, it was populated by free black migrants, fugitive slaves, and emancipated Wisconsinites like Paul Jones. Overall,

Wisconsinites held very few slaves. By 1840, only 11 of the 196 black people in the Wisconsin Territory were enslaved.

Nevertheless, the existence and the practice of race-based slavery in Wisconsin shaped white attitudes about African Americans, because they, like the rest of white Americans, associated slavery with blackness, the antithesis of citizenship. Race informed evolving definitions of citizenship and worthy settlement. Who belonged in this place? Who had a right to this place? Who should homestead in this place? And many white Wisconsinites wanted a region free of all black people, free or enslaved. And although most white Wisconsinites were free labor advocates, they were not abolitionists, those who actively worked to dismantle the institution of slavery. These are two of those terms that preciseness is necessary. So Wisconsin was populated by whites that were anti-slavery, they opposed slavery, they don't want it existing where they live. But they were not abolitionist. An abolitionist is somebody who was actively working to destroy the institution of slavery. There were many people who were anti-slavery.

There were some people who were abolitionist. Fears of black migrants led white Wisconsinites to dispute abolition and the rights of black residents. So while the state served as a safe haven for fugitive slaves like Joshua Glover, black men were barred from voting until 1866, a few years before the 14th and 15th Amendment declared birthright citizenship and universal male suffrage. And so many times, the history of black people in Wisconsin has been a history that has focused on abolition, the Underground Railroad, the rescue of Joshua Glover, and all of those things happened, and all of those things matter and tell us a lot about the past and the people who live here, but at the same time, Wisconsin was a place that denied black men suffrage. And so it's understanding the complexities of racism in a place like this. It wasn't black or white. It is not surprising that black male suffrage was contested in the free Northern states, of course it was. Because the nation as a whole sanctioned and protected race-based slavery. We're very used to thinking about slavery as being a Southern institution.

It was not, it was a national institution sanctioned and protected by the entire country. Moreover, white Americans, North and South, were deeply invested in the business of slavery. The buying and selling of people and goods that sustained the plantation economy. For example, the Lowell mills and the shipyards of Philadelphia and New York profited from black bondage. The Industrial Revolution, the textile revolution is dependent on slave-grown cotton. We built the railroads to get cotton out of the South. Before it was the New York Stock Exchange, it was the New York Cotton Exchange. Why is there a shipbuilding industry in the Northeast? They're transporting that cotton throughout the world. By the middle of the 19th century, cotton accounted for 58% of all US exports.

That's everything combined, and then some. Slavery was a national institution, not a regional one. And because slavery was race-based, free black people were an anomaly, because you justify race-based slavery because that's where those people

belong. But if there's free black people, where do they belong? Are they citizens? Where do they fit in? They are a living, breathing reminder of the hypocrisy of the nation. The status of free black people in the antebellum years was ambiguous at best. In 1830, Northeastern states with small black populations did not bar black men from voting, while Northeastern states with larger black populations restricted or disenfranchised black men. All Midwestern states initially barred or restricted black men from voting, although some restrictions were lifted in the years before the American Civil War. Now we're gonna get to suffrage in Wisconsin. But for me, the story doesn't make sense if you don't know how people got here in the first place.

In Wisconsin, black suffrage was affirmed and denied by early settlers and citizens. The 1846 constitution would have put black male suffrage on the state's first ballot, but the constitution was not approved, so it became a moot point. So the 1846 constitution is never approved. And historians have laid out a few reasons why the 1846 constitution doesn't fly. There was a clause in there about married women retaining their property. And that seemed insane, right? [audience laughs] How do you control them after marriage if they retain their property, right? This is debated. Remember, we're in the middle of the 19th century here. Women are property. So how does your property retain their property? There's also some pushback against this referendum that's tacked onto the end of the 1846 constitution that just puts black male suffrage up for vote.

So it doesn't say there will be black male suffrage, it just says there's gonna be a vote on it. Whether or not it should exist. That was controversial, and also there's this fight over paper money. Is it gonna be paper money, is it gonna be metal money? Money always matters, right? And so these three things really torpedo the 1846 constitution, so Wisconsin doesn't become a state in 1846. It's gonna become a state two years later in 1848. But what really got me interested in this project was when I began to read the debates about suffrage. The 1846 suffrage debates. The debate over black suffrage during the 1846 constitutional convention revealed overt racism among some leaders in the territorial government. They claimed that God sanctioned the separation of races and describe black men as "thieves" and black women as "far worse" than thieves.

These are direct quotes. They also argued that the people of Wisconsin would not accept black male suffrage, and I quote, "The people would deem it an infringement upon their natural rights thus to place them on an equality with the colored race." First, who are you determining to be people? People and whiteness are being equated. This is not a reference to Native people. This is not a reference to black people. But people and whiteness is being equated. And the idea that it is an infringement on the natural rights of white people to set them with equality. That is very telling of how white Wisconsinites are thinking about citizenship and who belongs, and who does not belong. They also argued that, excuse me. Other delegates highlighted the hypocrisy and the prejudice of these assertions.

So these did not go un-critiqued. These did not go unchallenged. They noted that black men voted in New York without incident, and that the denial of the vote was paramount

to social and political alienation, an affront to all people. The state's second constitution agreed with those who found black equality an affront to white natural rights. The state's second constitution explicitly excluded black men from the electorate. Approved in 1848, Wisconsin's founding document stated that adult white men, even non-citizens, could vote, as well as Native men who were citizens and denounced all tribal affiliation. So Native men who ceased to be Native. They can vote. But if you read 2d on Article III on Suffrage, "White persons of foreign birth, "who shall have declared their intention "to become citizens conformably to the laws "of the United States on the subject of naturalization." Whiteness supersedes citizenship.

Because whiteness and citizenship were seen as the same thing. To be a citizen meant to be white. To be white meant to be a citizen. So you could be two months in the nation from Germany or Norway or Sweden, and your whiteness immediately bought you privilege and power. Because you didn't need citizenship, you just needed whiteness. Suffrage in a new state meant more than political power. It provided an opportunity to shape state institutions and society at large. Including the University of Wisconsin that is founded in the same year. In 1849, the first state legislature held a referendum on black male suffrage.

It was approved by a vote of 5,265 to 4,075; however, 31,759 voters did not vote on the referendum at all, and the State Board of Canvassers treated those abstentions as no votes, banning black men from the ballot box. The apathy of tens of thousands of voters had serious consequences for free black people in the state of Wisconsin. This is also gonna have consequences for free Asian people in the state of Wisconsin. And free Mexicans in the state of Wisconsin. Because whiteness is the bar, and Natives who cease to be Natives. In 1855, the Wisconsin Republican Party adopted universal male suffrage as part of its party platform. African Americans quickly responded to the party's progressive position and circulated a petition in support. They held a meeting in Milwaukee on November 6, 1855. They adopted a resolution in support of the Republican Party and universal male suffrage.

They had their proceedings published in the Milwaukee Daily Free Democrat and Sentinel. So the first time I saw this, and it was referred to in an article that was written by Mike McManus, and I went and I wanted to see it in its print, I felt like they left it for me. They wanted a record that we cared about our suffrage. They took up a collection in order to get their proceedings printed in the paper. They wanted record that they were concerned about their rights. That they understood that they were being denied citizenship. That they understood that they were being pushed to the margins of society. The response of African Americans was not passive. They were seeking their rights, and they left us record of seeking those rights.

Two years later, in 1857, unable to build a consensus and widespread support, Wisconsin Republicans drop universal male suffrage from their party platform. The Democrats adopted a resolution stating that they were, and I quote, "unalterably opposed to the extension "of the right of suffrage to Negro race, "and will never consent

that the odious doctrine “of Negro equality shall find a place “upon the statute books of Wisconsin.” A referendum later that year confirmed that most white Wisconsin voters agreed with the Democratic Party. Black male suffrage was defeated by a vote of 45,157 to 31,964. Black Wisconsinites petitioned the state for the right to vote, and some even presented themselves on election day. On October 1865, they held a mass meeting for suffrage that drew black people from around the state. Ezekiel Gillespie was one of them. Later that month, Gillespie attempted to vote, and he was turned away. After he was turned away from the polls, Gillespie sued. His case made its way to the state supreme court.

African Americans were searching for their rights. They were in pursuit of their rights as citizens. An 1865 referendum on black male suffrage again reaffirmed white Wisconsinites opposition to black men voting. They voted the referendum down again by a vote of 55,591 to 46,588. That would have been the end of it, not for Gillespie’s suit, which was scheduled for review by the Wisconsin Supreme Court. The court agreed that Gillespie had indeed had the right to vote, as the 1849 referendum had been wrongly interpreted by the State Board of Canvassers. The court’s decision invalidated the ban on black voting and confirmed that suffrage had been legally extended to black men in the state of Wisconsin in 1849. For 17 years, black men in Wisconsin were barred from the ballot box, and their disenfranchisement excluded them from shaping the state’s public institutions, including the campus I work on. But black Wisconsinites refused to accept their political marginality, and their efforts, alongside those of white advocates, made Wisconsin the first state in the Midwest to enfranchise black men without restriction.

That didn’t mean anything for black women, who can’t vote, right along with white women, who can’t vote. Right? So a little bit about women’s suffrage. Women don’t get the right to vote in Wisconsin until the passage of the 19th amendment. There was a suffrage movement that was active throughout the state. They are often tied to temperance and property rights movements as well. The acknowledgement of humanity. One thing I found kind of interesting while I was thinking through this is that women in 1884 convinced the state to let them vote in any vote that had to do with schools. So they used this proper spear argument. “We are the caretakers of the children, “so if it’s a vote about schools, “we should be allowed to vote on that.” And the state bought it, but then the supreme court’s like, “No, because this is just gonna snowball into other things. “Then you’re gonna start saying “that you care about society at large, “and you should be able to vote on everything.” So it gets rescinded.

So for a little bit, you have women voting on school matters, but then that gets rescinded. There’s a referendum on women’s suffrage in 1911, and that’s voted down 63% to 37%. And so women do not vote in the state of Wisconsin until the 19th Amendment is passed. Black Americans were a tiny minority in the Wisconsin territory and later the state; nevertheless, the practice of race-based slavery and anxieties about black migrants led white Wisconsinites to dispute abolition and the rights of black residents. In the mid-19th century, fugitive slaves passing through Wisconsin were often met with assistance, while black permanent residents were marginalized. Much of the

historiography concerning the experiences of black Americans has focused on the South and on large Northern and Midwestern cities, yet the full dimensions of the African American experience cannot be appreciated without reference to how black people managed their lives in places where they were few. An absence of a large black populace did not mean that ideas of blackness and whiteness were not central to the social, political, and economic development of these places. This is especially relevant in the territories, when many white Northerners and Midwesterners claimed that their given locales were bastions of freedom because there were few or no black people. Enslaved and freed African Americans lived, labored, and raised families on the Wisconsin frontier.

They called Prairie du Chien, Racine, Green Bay, Lancaster, Milwaukee, Madison, and Menominee home. Yet their stories remain largely untold. The history of the state and the region remains incomplete without a full accounting of the African American experience and influence. History is the means whereby we assert the continuity of human life. It is a fundamental part of what makes us human. It is a social necessity that meets basic human needs. It gives us personal identity, a collective mortality. History legitimizes our culture, explains our world, how and why things are the way they are. I give a lecture in every class that I teach, and the first lecture I give is why history matters.

Because unless you're willing to say, "I am a mass of cells," history matters to you. It matters to our personal identities. I often describe myself as a Midwesterner. That doesn't mean anything if you don't know anything about the construction of the Midwest. If you call yourself a Christian, a Muslim, a Hindu, that doesn't mean anything out of historical context. If you call yourself a German or Irish, that doesn't mean anything outside of historical context. History is personal, and it's with us every day. It is one of the things that makes us human. We are the only species that care about, argue about, write about, debate our history.

So to deny a people their history is to do a great violence. The history of suffrage in Wisconsin is a history fraught with racism and sexism. Access to the ballot box has been a contentious issue in this state from its founding. We need understand the regulations of voting within historical context. Which begs the questions. Why did we implement a voter ID law, and who is affected by these laws? Our history must inform and illuminate our presence. Thank you for your attention. [audience applauds]