

BLACK on the WISCONSIN FRONTIER

Note: *Voyageur* Editor-in-Chief David J. Voelker conducted this interview (via Skype) with Christy Clark-Pujara, Associate Professor of History in the department of Afro-American Studies at UW-Madison, on January 14, 2019. What appears below is a lightly edited transcript of the interview, with a few small additions inserted in brackets for clarification or context. Occasionally, italics are used for emphasis.

AN INTERVIEW WITH CHRISTY CLARK-PUJARA

DAVID VOELKER (DV): Can you tell me about your current research project on African Americans in Wisconsin? What are the parameters of your research?

CHRISTY CLARK-PUJARA (CCP): Yes, I can tell you about that, but I think it'll make more sense if you understand why I even am interested in it. I am a historian of the early American republic. I'm particularly interested in how race-based slavery shaped societies, and my first book looked at that [issue] in Rhode Island. I got interested in Wisconsin because I'm here, and one of the things I always try to do in my courses ... is bring in local history. So, I went to the Wisconsin Historical Society, after I'd been here a year, and thought, "What are some of the stories I can bring into the classroom from right here in the historical society?" And that wasn't just purely out of interest in bringing my students in. As an African American who moved to Wisconsin, I was also very cognizant of the fact that Wisconsin had the dubious title of being one of the worst places to raise a black child.¹ I didn't have children at the time, but I do now, and that increased my interest as well. So, when I went to the historical society, I was pleasantly surprised that there was a history of black people in this region that dated back to the eighteenth century. I started to try to look for books about it, and the things that came up were things like *Negro Suffrage in Wisconsin* [by John Goadby Gregory] and *Negro Slavery in Wisconsin and the Underground Railroad* [by John Nelson Davidson], which were published in 1896 and 1897. I was thinking, "You know, that probably could do with a revision or two by now." Or, books that were just about abolitionism, which I found interesting—the rescue of Joshua Glover, political abolitionism—that kind of thing. But then I started thinking about the flip side of it. *Not everybody was an abolitionist*. What else was happening in this space? As I started thinking about that question—and in the context that Wisconsin is known to be one of the worst places to raise a black child, and considering black-white racial disparities today when it comes to health, education, and all of those things—I began wondering, "How can history inform that?" I just started doing some very pre-

liminary digging—the historical society has these short essays and little teasers about black people in Wisconsin. One of the things that I noticed was that during the French colonial period, black people found themselves in conflict with Native peoples in service of their French enslavers who were invading and colonizing the region that would later become Wisconsin. I also just got sucked into the history of the suffrage debate, because there was so much discussion about black people, even though there were very few black people there. And then, when I thought about the first constitution in 1846, I saw that one of the reasons it failed is because there was a referendum about black male suffrage. That's not the only reason [ratification of the 1846 constitution failed], but it was one of the reasons. And then just the very explicit ban on black people voting in Wisconsin [from 1848 to 1865]—and thinking about that in light of voter restrictions currently in the state.

So I was always thinking about the present. I wasn't terribly shocked that they had blocked black voting, but what really shocked me was how harsh the dialogue had been during the suffrage debate. If every black person in the state—man, woman, and child—had voted ten times, it still wouldn't have mattered politically, meaning they did not pose a threat as a separate interest group.

That got me thinking about how, for white Wisconsinites in that period, blackness as a concept was central to how they saw themselves and how they saw the formation of the state. Because I knew that there were these instances of black people being in this space during the French colonial period well into statehood, I really started thinking, "Is there a story to be told here?" So, I started doing a little more digging, looking at places like UW-Platteville [in their special collections], where there were African-American lead miners, both enslaved and free; taking a closer look at people like Henry Dodge and really not seeing a fully fleshed-out version of the enslaved people he brought into the state, and then their story—you know, who ends up in Pleasant Ridge [a free black community in Grant County starting in the late 1840s and 1850s]. It just got me to thinking that

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Courtesy of Wisconsin Historical Society, #33364

Ezekiel Gillespie, a former slave and free African American in Milwaukee. He successfully sued in 1865–66 for the right to vote in the landmark case of *Gillespie v. Palmer*.

there is a story to be told here and I've done this kind of thing before—looked at a very small population of black people and how they shaped the space in which they were in. And so that's how it started forming in my mind as a book project.

For the project as a whole, I'm looking at the period from the French fur trade—starting in about 1725, when I see the first documents of a black person being in this region—going through the American Civil War. The reason why I see that trajectory, from about 1725 to about 1868, is I'm looking at [the period] from slavery through freedom. In the region, there were always free and enslaved black people at different instances over time. What I've been doing the last few months is really trying to get ahold of how I tell this story with paying attention to all of its complexity, because I'm talking about three different empires: the French empire, the British empire, the American empire. And not telling a story that is just black and white, but telling a story that is black, white, and Native—because black people were entering a conflict.

The first records we have of black people in this region are in places like Green Bay, and they are in conflict with the Fox Indians because they are owned and being utilized by white Frenchmen. It's not just a story of black and white. It's not a story of white and Native—but of all three.

I'm really seeing the project as beginning with the fur trade, furs, and lead mines, and telling the story of slavery in the

colonies and the territory, and then the book really starts to focus on state formation and the place of black people in that process. So, what role does race and gender and voting rights play in the creation of the state? And then thinking about black people also building separate, autonomous communities. They weren't always [acting] just in reaction to white people; they were also doing things themselves. What does it look like to build a free black community in a space where you are so outnumbered and politically marginalized? So, I am looking at places like the town of Forest and Pleasant Ridge, where black people were grouping.

I find it very interesting that you have both urban populations and rural populations [of black people], but they find each other. And then, thinking through what it means to be in a place that's oppressive and progressive at the same time—that it wasn't either/or. So, the same place that is denying black men the vote and has really vicious things to say about black people around the suffrage debates and denies them the vote repeatedly is also the same place that refuses to enforce the 1850 Fugitive Slave Law, [and] is also the same place that breaks Joshua Glover out of prison and spirits him away. It wasn't a racially oppressive Wisconsin or a racially progressive Wisconsin—it was both. So, what does it mean to be a fugitive and a citizen in a place that is in some ways progressive and in other ways oppressive? And, then, thinking about the Civil War and civil rights, between 1861 and 1868—looking at the support and opposition for the Union cause. I think there's been a lot of work on the support but not a lot of work on the opposition, but those two things existed together.

DV: In terms of opposition, are you thinking about opposition to the draft? I know in other places, draft protests often took on an anti-black racist component.

CCP: Yes, because black people become a symbol of the war and “this is all your fault” kind of thing. I haven't gotten into it enough to know that [for certain], but you know there just hasn't been enough work on thinking about the opposition. I have five books on my shelf right now about abolitionism in Wisconsin. Where's the book on anti-abolitionism? Anti-abolitionism existed. But it's not a part of how people tend to think about the Midwest.

DV: You mentioned the importance of race and African Americans, white and black identity, and so forth to state formation. I wonder if you can say a little bit more about that? I would imagine that a lot of folks, especially if they're not academics, when they hear the phrase “state formation,” might think of it in narrow logistical terms. I'm just curious how you understand the parameters of state formation.

CCP: I'm understanding “state formation” very broadly, in the sense that I'm sitting in part of that state formation at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. The UW System itself exists as part of that state-making process. How are we going to set up our towns and communities? What constitutes a town versus a city? What constitutes a county, [and] what are the responsibilities of that county? How is the school system going to be set up in relationship to the state?

DV: And also, of course, who and what is a citizen, and who has what capabilities?

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Courtesy of Wisconsin Historical Society, #129500

These maps show how each county voted in the Wisconsin gubernatorial election of 1865 (left) and in the referendum on black suffrage (right). About 54% voted against black suffrage in 1865.

CCP: And who can participate in setting up that state? Who has a say-so?

DV: Right, because it's very clear who gets to decide whether participation is opened up or is restricted. There's no question about that.

CCP: For me, it's also really key to stress the point . . . that this language of race and racism is brought by the state. If we read the suffrage article [in the state constitution], the term "white" is used. It is the state that introduces racism and that writes it down and acts on it. This [racial language] isn't something that's coming later, this isn't a label that I have been putting on from the twenty-first century. This is something that was instituted by state actors, and it wasn't really controversial—it was just kind of accepted. But if we understand it that way, the shock that people have [today] is that whiteness in and of itself, whiteness and maleness, bought access to the vote—not citizenship. If you read the suffrage article very closely, it's very clear that white men who were born elsewhere and just had an intention of becoming citizens could vote. Whiteness and maleness was what got you access to power, and, most importantly, opportunity. That's what opens up opportunity. It isn't citizenship, it isn't where you were born: it's whiteness and maleness. We need to understand how that is baked into the foundation of Wisconsin.

DV: So [reading from the 1848 Wisconsin Constitution, Article III, Section 1] "white persons of foreign birth, who shall have declared their intentions to become citizens . . ."

CCP: —just to declare an intention. You could have gotten off a boat from Europe, or have come overland from the East, and had never pledged any kind of allegiance to the United States, you could be incredibly poor, but you had privilege—you had the privilege of the vote [after one year of residency] if you didn't have a cent in you pocket, if you didn't know anybody, because you were white and male. It was access.

DV: Whereas, an African-American person . . .

CCP: —could be five generations deep, and not have access to the vote, not have access to opportunity. Because it wasn't just being restricted from the vote. If you're restricted from the vote, you're restricted from all participation, right? So, you can't run for office. And, when you're setting up towns and governments, you're restricted socially, and understanding that that's in the foundation of the state of Wisconsin. When people hear the terms that are commonly used now among academics like "institutional racism," and that kind of thing, I think sometimes people think it's like a liberal catchphrase, and don't understand that it's something that was just baked into who we are. Once you understand something like that, the white and black disparities [today] in a place like Wisconsin don't seem that shocking.

DV: And all of that is part of the "state formation." . . . By your own account, there were not very many African Americans in Wisconsin in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Why do you think it's important to study this history?

CCP: Understanding how black people continue to be marginalized in this period in the West is, I think, really important. Are you familiar with Anna-Lisa Cox's *The Bone and the Sinew of the Land*?² I really love her work and had an opportunity to talk with her. I think her book shows a longer trajectory. We have a little bit of historiography on blacks in the Midwest in the twentieth century. We have very little in the nineteenth century and

almost none in the period that I am dealing with. But, I think that we can see a trajectory of continued discrimination. I think part of the problem with places like Wisconsin, Iowa, and Minnesota is their inability to even understand why there is such black/white racial disparity. For most people that is shocking. That is something that they were expecting from Mississippi, Louisiana, or Alabama—not from Wisconsin, Illinois, Iowa, and Minnesota. And it is because we have a myth about the Midwest and race relations—that the Midwest has no history of racism to overcome and, if there is one, it just happened in the twentieth century because a bunch of black people came to work in factories. We don't understand the longer trajectory of how many black people first entered the Midwest in bondage. Those who weren't in bondage still encountered discrimination and this manifested itself in state formation throughout the late-nineteenth century and into the twentieth century. We need to see all of this, instead of beginning the conversation with "there was a bunch of black people that came during the Great Migration and that caused conflict"—not understanding that there is a history before that.

DV: I am thinking about the history of the Reconstruction period. You have already alluded to this, but most of the research there focuses on the former Confederate states and maybe some border states. There is very little on what happened during that period regarding African Americans in the northern states (especially the Midwest). I really appreciate what you are saying—that the relationships between African Americans and white Americans in Wisconsin in the twentieth century didn't just come out of nowhere.

CCP: My former advisor, Leslie Schwalm, is one of the few people that has written about this in the 19th century. She wrote *Emancipation's Diaspora: Race and Reconstruction Upper Midwest*.³ One of the things that she does is track free black people out of the South and into the Midwest. And really along the same lines as Anna-Lisa Cox, she makes an argument for the fact that we have forgotten the first migration—that there were migrations before the Great Migration.

DV: Not as large, but still important.

ARTICLE III.

SUFFRAGE.

SECTION 1. Every male person of the age of twenty-one years or upwards, belonging to either of the following classes, who shall have resided in the State for one year next preceding any election, shall be deemed a qualified elector at such election:

First.—White citizens of the United States.

Second.—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.

Third.—Persons of Indian blood who have once been declared by law of Congress to be citizens of the United States, any subsequent law of Congress to the contrary notwithstanding.

Fourth.—Civilized persons of Indian descent, not members of any tribe: PROVIDED, that the legislature may at any time extend, by law, the right of suffrage to persons not herein enumerated, but no such law shall be in force until the same shall have been submitted to a vote of the people at a general election, and approved by a majority of all the votes cast at such election.

CCP: Not as large, but you get [black] communities that were set up in these places, and, like you said before, what happens in the 20th century does not just come out of nowhere. It does not just happen out of context. There were already histories of race and racism in those places.

DV: You know the Northwest Territory, of course when it was created in 1787, explicitly forbade slavery. I wonder if you could say a little bit on how you came to understand the reality that there were enslaved African Americans throughout the territory—granted, in relatively small numbers. I am just curious to hear how you understand the presence of slaves in a place where slavery was not supposed to exist.

CCP: I think that that has hindered some of a lot of very serious inquiry into slavery in the Midwest. The assumption is that the Americans take over in 1787 and slavery just disappeared, which is just untrue. If you actually take time to think about it, of course that's untrue. The Americans who were already [in Wisconsin], along with the French and the British who were already here and who had slave property, were not just going to give it up. And in 1787, holding people as property was normative throughout the nation. So, it's not like it was this notorious activity that nobody would have been engaged in.

The people that they put in charge to enforce the law let them have slaves that the government paid for. So, at these forts officers were allowed to bring enslaved people and the government paid an allowance. And so, there was this idea that there was the law and there was reality. Initially, you have people, these are Americans, British, and French, who are petitioning the government asking, "What about the slave property?" The government allowed them to keep their human property and did not enforce the ban on bringing more enslaved people into the region. And this, even as their own officers are bringing in enslaved people to places like Fort Snelling and Fort Crawford. So, there was the law and the reality of the practice.

How I am understanding the 1787 Northwest Ordinance and its prohibition on slavery is the idea that it wasn't a region that was going to become a slave society. Not that slavery was not going to exist there at all, because there is just all this evidence to the contrary. Enforcement wasn't just lax but was ignored entirely. Tiya Miles's book *The Dawn of Detroit* really helped me understand that.⁴ She traces slavery in Detroit, the oldest town in the Midwest. The Northwest Ordinance had little to no effect.

For example, Henry Dodge ended up giving up his slaves not because he thought slavery was wrong but because he was under political pressure to do so, because everyone knew Wisconsin was going to come in [to the Union] as a free state. So, the 1787 prohibition against slavery was more of a warning. If you read the 1787 Northwest Ordinance, it did not free anyone.

DV: Your article in the *Wisconsin Magazine of History* is an excellent piece; thank you for sharing that.⁵ Looking at how African American men did come to have the right to vote in Wisconsin

Constitution of the State of Wisconsin (Madison: Democrat Printing Company, 1898)

Article 3, section 1 of the 1848 Wisconsin Constitution explicitly granted voting rights to adult white males, even if they were not yet citizens. African Americans and most American Indians were excluded.



ONE OF THE CODE WORDS THAT IS OFTEN USED IN THE MEDIA FOR 'WHITE' IS 'THE MIDWEST,' AS IF THE MIDWEST IS ONLY WHITE. THAT IS A PERCEPTION THAT I THINK A LOT OF MIDWESTERNERS HAVE OF THE MIDWEST— THIS RACELESS PLACE.

sin, I don't know quite what to make of it. It was the Court that stepped in and said, "We're going back to this 1849 referendum and can see that the people who voted on this question voted in favor." We're talking about fewer than ten thousand people casting votes here. But there was a relatively small percentage more in favor of allowing black [male] suffrage.

CCP: But most of the people didn't even vote on the question.

DV: What do you make of the fact that in the end it was the Wisconsin Supreme Court that decided to honor that referendum from almost twenty years prior?

CCP: It was about seventeen years. For me, it's really telling. One, the vast majority of white men of voting age in Wisconsin in 1865 [in the second state referendum on black voting] did not see black people as being equal or as citizens, and that's why they were voting against it. The Court was not moved for any moral or political reason; as I read through the decision, it is a technicality. They overturned on a technicality. The State Board of Canvassers was naughty. They did it wrong [in 1849]. They were only supposed to count the votes that came in. And it's surprising because it's 1866. This is the close to the Civil War. This is after black people are emancipated. This is after the participation of black men in the war, including a black regiment from Wisconsin. And what's really interesting to me is the 1865 referendum. Right before the Supreme Court does this, after

the experience of the Civil War, after the dismantlement of slavery; they're saying, "Still not good enough to be citizens; you can be free, but you can't be a citizen."

DV: You've spoken very clearly about why you think it's important to study this history. Even if we're talking about a relatively small number of African Americans in Wisconsin at this time, it's still very important to understand this history.

CCP: Yes, and I think in our current moment it's important to understand. Because, one of the code words that is often used in the media for "white" is "the Midwest," as if the Midwest is only white. That is a perception that I think a lot of Midwesterners have of the Midwest—this raceless place. There's the South—there's Jim Crow and all that. In Northeast, there were large populations of black people in New York, Philadelphia, places like that. And thinking of the Midwest as being raceless, which is, you know, really absurd, because not only are there the people who have been here for thousands of years—Native folks—but, you know, African Americans, Mexican Americans, [and so forth].

DV: I know we have to wrap up, but is there anything you want to speak to before finish?

CCP: One of the reasons why I wanted to write this book is so that people—especially white Wisconsinites—understand that Wisconsin has always been racially complex and that there is not one narrative, and the idea of Wisconsin as racially progressive isn't wrong—it just isn't completely true because it can be both [progressive and oppressive]. It's this place that has been racially progressive and oppressive, and it happened at the same time. And, if we continue to only tell a story of progress, we'll never understand why we have the deficits that we have.

DV: And so, for that progressive history, you're thinking especially about the founding of the Republican party, the Joshua Glover incident, and the resistance to the Fugitive Slave law—those events in the 1850s, because it's so easy to just focus on these progressive examples.

CCP: Yes. Because that makes it into all the textbooks. The other [side] doesn't. And so, people seem to be bewildered as to our current state.



Notes

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1. Mike Ivey, "No State Worse than Wisconsin for Black Children Says National Study," *Capital Times* (April 1, 2014), https://madison.com/ct/news/local/writers/mike_ivey/no-state-worse-than-wisconsin-for-black-children-says-new/article_7ec1a1fc-b923-11e3-828c-0019bb2963f4.html.
2. Anna-Lisa Cox, *The Bone and the Sinew of the Land: American's Forgotten Black Pioneers & the Struggle for Equality* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2017).
3. Leslie Schwalm, *Emancipation's Diaspora: Race and Reconstruction in the Upper Midwest* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).
4. Tiya Miles, *The Dawn of Detroit: A Chronicle of Slavery and Freedom in the City of the Straits* (New York: New Press, 2017).
5. Christy Clark-Pujara, "Contested: Black Suffrage in Early Wisconsin," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Summer 2017, 21–27.