

### Interview: Organizing Freedom: Black Emancipation Activism in the Civil War Midwest

Jennifer Harbour

*University of Nebraska Omaha*, [jharbour@unomaha.edu](mailto:jharbour@unomaha.edu)

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## Interview

### Organizing Freedom: Black Emancipation Activism in the Civil War Midwest

Harbour, Jennifer R.

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Interview by: Jeffery Hardin Hobson

Civil War Book Review (CWBR): Hello fellow Civil-War-Era enthusiasts, my name is Jeffrey Hardin Hobson and today I'm joined by Dr. Jennifer Harbour, associate professor of Black Studies and Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Nebraska, Omaha. We will be discussing her book *Organizing Freedom: Black Emancipation Activism in the Civil War Midwest*, which was published by the Southern Illinois University Press in 2020. Dr. Harbour welcome and thank you for joining us today!

(JH): Hi! Thank you for having me.

(CWBR): I'd like to start by asking you first how you came to study this topic.

(JH): It's sort of like any other dissertation, it's years in the making. I was trying to figure out a good dissertation topic that was researchable, and at the same time would become a good monograph. It really is, for me, centering on women, because I was trained in both African American history and women's and gender history, so I was looking for a topic in that area. But I also loved the Civil War. So, kind of, those three topics were appropriate for me. And my advisor was Leslie Schwalm, so.

I was kind of looking around, and I had a question one day about Black women. And so I went looking in the historiography, and just in the history books—this is back when we used actual books—in the library about what Black women did during the Civil War. And by that, I meant, what did they actually do—like, where did they live, and what did they cook and what did they dress like. I mean it was kind of almost like a *museum-y* kind of question—like I want to know the specifics—because I realized I didn't know that. And— I did my master's degree in

Washington D.C. at George Washington University, and there's so much there in Northern Virginia and surround about the Civil War and about what people look like, right, because I mean, there is a big reenactors community there. But I wasn't getting anything about Black women at all. And so I came across a book that said, "Black women sat on the sidelines" And I thought— And the author was talking about a parade, I think. And in his defense, I know what he meant, right, he's talking, especially for a book that was written in the '80s, he was really talking about that Black women didn't get to be soldiers, and Black women weren't on the stage at these huge abolitionist conventions. And of course, Black women were so limited by what they could do, socially and culturally, at least to white people, that that really meant that they sat on the sidelines. And I kept thinking, *Okay, nobody sits on the sidelines of their own life that's impossible like that just doesn't make any sense to me.*

So, then, I kind of got after it after that, and, I was, at the time, at the University of Iowa, and I went to a couple of the archives in Missouri and some of the other places, and really kind of went after those pieces and found that maybe it was a decently viable topic. So that's kind of how it started.

(CWBR): So it was a synthesis of three areas of history that interested you, and you synthesize them very well in this book—African American history, women's history and Civil War history. And I feel like this is an important intervention in Civil War-era history in general.

Now you mentioned going through the archives when you first started, and you talk about, in your acknowledgments, that you had trouble finding sources. And, in fact, you had an archivist who said, well, "we don't have those sources, we don't have Black women here."

(JH): "We don't have Black women here!" I don't, I won't name them, the archive, but it was a pretty big state archive. I think that, archivists are notoriously proprietary, for good reasons. But part of what has happened is that, or at least when following the Civil War, through different stages of historiography, that the files and the boxes, and all this stuff was put together in such a way that it didn't reflect Black women's experiences, like, at all. So when it came to the Southern Freedmen Society Project [Freedmen and Southern Society Project] at [the University of] Maryland, I think they of course went about it in a very different way, and so that opened up a whole new avenue. Because there's all this wonderful stuff at the National Archives, and, of

course, I found stuff everywhere, you know, from the smallest little church to the smallest historical society. But I think one of the things that sort of, was a problem was that, you're kind of not allowed in archives, to ask these questions—these huge questions—that seem almost offensive. So, like, *Why don't you have this stuff, this was a slave state*, so they're naturally kind of defensive and I kind of had to learn to sweet talk some of the archivists and work through that, because these are real people, just like historians, and they have their own truth with a capital “T” and what happened in history and some southern states as well. I mean that's something that you really have to cope with, right, is what is the culture of a particular place in how they memorialize the Civil War. And especially in places like Indiana, and Illinois, and Michigan where, of course the Civil War happened, right but, people don't generally think of it as you know, a battlefield kind of place right; I mean, it's not the same as they Gettysburg.

I really had to struggle, how to learn how to ask the right questions when it came to sources. And I also had to figure out that a lot of my sources, this prior Black history, would be in churches, would be in attics, would be oral histories from people who are still alive. Probably one of my favorite things that I did in terms of sources was that I interviewed a lot of the historians at the Black churches that are still standing, maybe not in the same building, in Chicago because they have all these rich sources, and they're not really sure what to do with them, and they sure as heck don't want to give them up right. And there's a suspicion among Black community leaders and Black church members about, *Why would I want this white lady messing around in the church attic?* So there's a certain degree of trust that had to take place. Once I sort of figured out how to do that, things went better (*laughs*).

(CWBR): Well, they obviously did, because this is a well source book. But, just real quick, what you just said, reminds me of the importance of representation in general. I think a lot of people think that representation often just for representation's sake, but having a diverse staff means that you would have a diverse collection in the archives.

(JH): Yeah, that's, that's an excellent point. And it's fair to say that a place, like the National Archives, the people who work there are experts on the history and what is there in the archives, but they too need to figure out how to best disseminate that information to people. And

it's not an easy job, so I certainly have a lot of appreciation for archivists, and amateur historians everywhere.

(CWBR): Indeed. Now you use a Maya Angelou quote as your epigraph and it reads in part, if you'll allow me: "You have been paid for. Each of you, Black, White, Brown, [Yellow,] Red. But for the sacrifices made by some of your ancestors, you would not be here; they have paid for you. So, when you enter a challenging situation, bring them on the stage with you; let their distant voices add timbre and strength to your words. For it is your job to pay for those who are yet to come." Now this quote holds personal importance for you as your acknowledgments or your dedication makes clear, but my gut tells me that it probably applies to your research as well. How might that quote apply to how you pursue history.

(JH): Well, I mean my job as a historian, is to give a voice to people who no longer have one. At the stage of my career that I decided— I tell people, it's not that I necessarily decided, I was going to start the African Americans, but that I wasn't going to study white people, right. So that there was a point in graduate school where I went, *Well, I don't want to study white people because so much of that's been done before; I want to study something that's exciting and new, has all these fresh directions and stuff.* But the truth is, is that I have a lot of homage for my own ancestors—I was raised by my grandparents. And also, since I've been in Black studies—I've been here, eight years—there's a lot of discussion in Black studies about the ancestors, the elders, what they thought. So a lot of the work that you do, and I'm sure this is part of what Maya was thinking when she wrote that, that what you do is is that homage, but you have to do it well, and you have to work hard at it. And I think it's a really important conversation in African American history, because, and I talk about this with students all the time, because they feel very disempowered, and they kind of feel hopeless—obviously right now is a really good time feel hopeless. But with the elders in my department, many of whom who did march in the Civil Rights Movement, they are constantly reminding younger people, me and kids that are the age of my own kids, that there were strides made, that things have improved, that things have changed. But that it's important that we also try to see what seems so hopeless to us, for example, the murder of George Floyd, through a historical lens so we kind of understand, we've been here before. How did we handle it? What was the reaction? What was— How did society move on

after that? Because it feels, I think, too, especially with COVID of course, to a lot of students that society is not going to move on, right, we're just gonna fall off the flat end of the earth. So, Maya reminds me all the time to do the work really well, even when it's incredibly difficult, especially studying Black women. And it used to be that people said, *Well, you can't study Black women because of the paucity of sources*. Well, it's not really that, it's that the sources present themselves in very different ways, so you have to struggle through a lot of, say, Civil War letters, whether it's in a smaller archive or in DC to find the Black women. So they still aren't going to be necessarily in a file that says "Here's what happened to Black women in this state for 100 years." So, it requires a certain degree of finesse and, I think Maya really had a lot of finesse that way.

(CWBR): She certainly did. Now you just mentioned this idea that people can be discouraged because change is difficult to come by, but we have historical evidence that change happens, when people affect change. And one of the ways that people affected change was by self-liberation, they would run away from their enslavement to the Midwest quite often. Now, as W. E. B. DuBois and Eric Foner and plenty of others have shown us, "nothing but freedom" was a big deal, so just achieving their self-emancipation was important. However, your subjects, once they made their way to the Midwest, wanted more. What did freedom or the term emancipation, which you use primarily in your book, look like for these people?

(JH): Freedom means so many things to them. I mean freedom— You know as a scholar you try not to even write about that word, because what does "freedom" even mean, right, it is this humongous word that has so many different, sort of, definitions of what it means, as an individual. But when you're doing a group community study like this, you really do want to hone in on [sic], you know, if I'm looking at a group of 400 people who started a church in Illinois somewhere, and looking at their records and what they tell us what is freedom to them.

And I think it's really two things right. Freedom to them means the eradication of slavery. So this whole group of people, and it constantly amazes me because people ask me about the book, and I say the thing that really gets me about them is their selflessness but also their attitude toward the destruction of slavery. It's almost like they can see into the future, right. They really understood that until all of us are free, none of us are free. And they didn't necessarily say it in

those ways, but when you look very closely at their long-term goals and change over time, you really see them focusing on— I mean, these are people in South Carolina they don't even know. So some of them have been slaves, some of them are very aware of family members that are still enslaved.

But then they really kind of pull back from that as well, and also focus on the regional sort of occurrences, where they're living. So freedom, then, is defined in a way similar to what they want for the enslaved which is the freedom to self determine their own way of life. And that kind of goes back to the question about what are they doing. *So, what do you want to do? You're going to get up, and then what?* Well, they want to have schools, they want to have churches, they— Sunday schools are very big deal right. This is a heavily Christianized culture; religiosity is very important to them. And really, kind of all along the way, they want to be able to, it sounds kind of cliché, but they want to be able to decide for themselves what those communities are going to look like. Now that can be very different than from a group in Chicago as a small group in rural Indiana. They understand they're being encroached on constantly, so once they get to the Midwest, they get the fact that people aren't exactly welcoming with open arms, because this is a deeply ingrained white supremacist society. But at the same time, they're kind of thinking, *Well, yeah and that's now occurring, but what are we doing in our group?* They're not constantly thinking about the white supremacy or the racism. So they're constantly trying to move their lives forward. And I think, obviously, there are many different ways that they define freedom. But I would say, those two things, that the destruction of slavery and emancipation, to them is really self-definition, and certainly self-identity.

(CWBR): Right. Now, you mentioned geography just then, that they had specific needs based on their locality. And geography is essential to your book—it's in the title in it and, it is, is a constant theme throughout the work. So what was it about the Midwest first that, if you'll tell me, what drew refugees there? And then what geographically specific or Midwestern-specific obstacles they faced once they arrived in the Midwest.

(JH): So what draws them there is obviously, it's not a slave state. They know that. They know that there are constitutions occurring in various states that were once territories. They're getting their state constitutions put together, but they're throwing a bunch of other stuff in there

called Black codes, so they're kind of aware of that. But at the at the most basic level, they want out of a slave state. So John and Mary Jones, who are really important in my book, she's leaving Tennessee. So it's a state where driving along the road, walking along town, walking along the river, wherever you're going to see slaves at work. And in Indiana, Illinois though they still have people who are enslaved, it's a very different look, it's a very different feel. And of course, they know that politically right, so they got to work on those state constitutions, they're going to have their colored conventions. But it goes back to that old adage about the slave crossing the river into freedom. So that's definitely something that is on their mind. Related to that of course is the fact that these places are becoming states. So you know, this is a place where, as you know, this is a place where the Civil War is going to be fought before the war ever starts, the question of whether or not there's going to be slavery in these states, in a technical sense.

It kind of depends on the people, right. Because some people really are escaping to freedom, and this is the literal stepping off the river and onto the landing going, "Here I am." So there are people who traveled underground railroad, there are people who are illiterate, who are less likely to know about the convention movements and about the constitutions and, say, the Northwest Ordinance. But then there are also people who are very savvy and understand that if they can post the bond when they get to places like Illinois, Iowa, Indiana that kind of thing, then they can live there. So many of them have— They save up enough money, whether they were enslaved previously and are now free, they save up the money to post bond, so then they can go live in that particular state. And the geography, obviously, is important because it's still close enough to the South to make a difference, right. I mean they're not in Canada, and they know that right. So they know that, hey you know the— *What's the border of Tennessee? Well, there's Kentucky right, where there's a lot of enslavement.* They're well aware of all that, but I think that they think, that they thought, that emancipation could occur more regularly when they got out of the South, right. So duh. You know what I mean? They're really smart that way. But they also know that their networks are going to have to increase in time. And those states, if you can get land and if you can start a farm, you can do that, right, you can bring more and more people into those places, and all of a sudden, you start having neighborhoods and communities and towns and cities, so they're aware of that as well.

(CWBR): So then, helping refugees was altruistic, it was an attempt to help eradicate slavery that they knew was intrinsically tied to their own freedom to a degree, but it was also about strengthening communities and building new communities that they could then agitate for their own rights is that accurate?

(JH): Yeah. I mean, and they really see themselves as Black people, right. Just because the guy next door isn't enslaved doesn't mean that guy three doors down isn't enslaved. So you get into the whole Dred Scott situation where slavery is so well protected (that was one of the other reasons why I wanted to write about this area), that slavery is so well protected, all across the United States, and of course in the Midwest as well, that you might as well have some kind of slavery, right. And we're getting there, I mean, I think that the slavery studies, right now there's a lot of really great stuff about the economy and about, obviously, political movements and stuff like that.

But I think when we look closely at this kind of grassroots, on the ground activism, you see people who really understand things like the Dred Scott case and know what that really means. So then, when the Fugitive Slave Law comes along— And you and I may look back and go, *Okay Dred Scott, and you know bleeding Kansas, and all these things that are supposed to lead up to the Civil War that we have studied for all these years*— But they know it, too. They don't necessarily know that a war is coming, but they certainly know that Dred Scott is a very big deal, right. So when they're looking at citizenship rights, and when the court says, you know the Black man has no rights that the white man is bound to protect, they hear that loud and clear, especially in their newspapers. I always tell my students, even for people who are illiterate, they know that the stakes are very, very high.

(CWBR): Exactly. Now something I found interesting about your book is that you show how while white supremacy was a constant and Black efforts to counteract white supremacy is a constant, that it differed from community to community. So even within the state of Illinois, you know, a Black person's experience in Chicago would be markedly different from a Black person's experience on the southern border.

(JH): And the Southern Poverty Law Center might agree with me and the ADL and the people who trace hate groups, because some of these groups have their antecedents in 17<sup>th</sup>-and 18<sup>th</sup>-century-southern Illinois and Indiana where long before they're a state they have really good ties to slavery, slavery as an institution. Especially since you have all these people who are proslavery, but don't own slaves, right. And you and I know that that is a big deal during the Civil War, but it's also the big deal in the creation of whiteness, right, in that sort of white bribe that probably starts with Bacon's Rebellion, that says, "*Come join our side, even though you're poor, you don't want to be treated as an enslaved person.*" So there's all kinds of issues with different kinds of slavery there. But the idea being that there are these enclaves of very serious committed racism and white supremacy, that are not going to be the same as a little town that has the underground railroad, you know as you get closer to (I'm a Detroit girl) so as you get closer to Canada, all these great works about the things that were happening in terms of activism in Detroit and getting people to Canada and Mary Ann Shadd Cary and all these folks. So those are places that are really more free than a place that is right across the border from Kentucky, so, and we want to draw the subtleties and nuances of what it's like to live in these places. And, of course, if you make it to a big place like Chicago, you're in luck, because even though it's not perfect, Chicago has literary societies, and neighborhood watches, and vigilance committees, and the Black community there is really bursting with stuff. So it is a safer place, right so, especially if you don't have to encroach upon any white person's world when you're out in your own, going about your business every day. And there are Black barbers, there are Black banks, there are all these wonderful things that really allow Black people and emigrants to land in a place that is much safer because, especially after the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act, these folks really have to stop and think long and hard about what is their approach to possible racialized violence, because, they've dealt with that their whole life, but they've had this sort of degree or bubble of safety, but of course the Fugitive Slave Act changes all that in many ways.

(CWBR): Right and you do a good job of pointing out how, although a lot of their activism is geographically specific to the Midwest, they're dealing with Black codes, they're dealing with their proximity to slave states and people that are sympathetic to the slave societies. You also show that national politics matter, that these activists are attuned to what's going on in Washington D.C. and how that affects their lives, and Black people everywhere. So you talked

about the Fugitive Slave Law, how did that and other national issues change their activism or influence their activism?

(JH): I don't know that it changes it that much because you know other people have pointed out, and that sort of long 19th century, when we are looking at emancipation, which I define in very broad ways, when we're looking at emancipation in the in the long sense, that Fugitive Slave Act means different things to them because now it means that any person with Black skin can just be stolen off the street and sold south. So I don't think that they're imagining the worst, but still they have this insistence that they are going to have a say in what this new nation looks like. And of course they're not there yet, so they're not using the language that I am, but they still— We're twenty years before the amendments, but still they think of themselves, especially in the Midwest, they think of themselves as (I don't like to use the word “pioneer” because there's all kinds of associations with that that are really uncomfortable, especially for indigenous populations) but they do see themselves as kind of pioneers, as settling these new cities and towns or even building up Black Chicago. And what would that mean for the Fugitive Slave Act, that all this could be crushed, right. So they've been building all this stuff up. And when I talked to my students about what do people do when they get free, whether their manumitted, or whether they run away, or whether, talking about the end of the Civil War, they first want to put their families back together. So the family is really that nucleus, and that includes extended kin for Black families in Black communities. They put these families together now, and there's eight families in this church right, and they have a Sunday school and they have maybe a freemason society, or whatever they built, and so they understand that there's a very real threat to their way of life that they have been working so hard to build from something like the fact that things are really starting to heat up. And like I said they don't have crystal balls, and not looking into the future, but they really understand that they want to have a say in how things emerge in terms of citizenship rights. So they think of citizenship, as, of course, obviously all the big ones right: sitting on juries, and serving their country as soldiers, and that kind of thing. But they also want to keep their families intact and they would really prefer, especially the people who had been formerly enslaved, they really prefer not to be returned to the South. So there are very practical approaches to that, right.

(CWBR): So the approaches that you've talked about, or at least hinted at so far, especially the church, what other institutions did they endeavor to build to try and counteract the oppression that they encountered in the Midwest.

(JH): I mentioned a couple of them, so it kind of depends on how you define the word institution, but I would say absolutely the Black church, both as an institution and something that you can go drink coffee at. But also certainly the Black Conventions Movement is probably the one that is most impressive to me. And I talked about it somewhat through my book, and then there's this whole project about the Black Convention movement, which is really impressive because there's kind of this huge umbrella that we call you know "Black people in America," and it's like well what— You've got class you've got gender you've got enslavement or formerly enslavement, I mean, you have people wanting a working wage, you know. So what does that really mean, right? So when you say institution, I'm thinking about something like Black newspapers. And they have a certain malleability over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, which is they change as circumstances change. They know that they constantly need to report out to what is happening in the community, so that's really important. But each town and, even if it's just a little sort of town, but not very many people in it, they have, like I said, they have literary societies that women work, especially for mutual aid societies. Of course, all that changes, when the war comes, because then they focus on the war, but those institutions have to be things that can stand the test of time, which is why I said that you know, to some degree, they need to be malleable, which is what is changing. So, for instance, when there are instances of racialized violence in their town, they might talk more about, a fair and speedy trial, they might talk more about voting rights, they might talk more about— So even if you look at the modern Civil Rights Movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, you see people reacting to say James Meredith or something. What are the four speeches that occur in the week following James Meredith's entry, or him being shot on the side of the road. So there is a feeling of reactionary-ness.

But I would also say that they're also very creationary, which is probably the biggest concern of my book, which is that *We're not just reacting to the dangers from white people, but we have to create these institutions that are gonna remain with us for a long time.* And they have kind of this funny language of patriotism, right. So they get the Founding Fathers, they get the Constitution, they understand all of that stuff. But they want it to not ignore them any longer, and

they want to have a say in that. So it's so, it sounds weird, but it's so sweet how they try to use the same language of the Constitution, of the Bill of Rights, of some of the Founding Fathers, because they want that to apply to them. And so they know how that's gonna work is the destruction of slavery and then, while all that is going along (this destruction of slavery) also really building up these institutions so they're there for us when that occurs.

(CWBR): Well and beyond, you know institutions like Masonic lodges and mutual aid societies, they create very robust networks. What I found fascinating was how they communicated across disparate communities and created and shared ideas, and promoted their cause among across long distances. So what were some of the ways that they helped build kind of a cohesion despite, maybe, distance between communities?

(JH): I think one of the answers—that's a really good question—one of the answers, for that is, they don't rely on white allyship. That is *not* the story here and it's not that they don't have white friends, or that there is no Quaker presence, or that they don't know that white people help on the Underground Railroad, but that that cohesion has to be what they would call a Black one, right; in many ways they would call it a Christian one. So, if you look closely at the language from, I mentioned the Convention Movement, much of that is funneled through a lens on God, right, a lens on helping other people, on what it means to have standards for your society and Black-led institutions, mean (and I was talking about this a couple minutes ago) that the political is certainly personal, but it also is something that is ordained, right. So if you look closely at their language, whether you believe in God or not, they certainly did, right. They certainly know that (and this is one things, of course, that Martin Luther King talks about a lot) is that, they know the struggle is real, but they don't, many of them, I would say, probably 90% of them, really don't think they have a choice in this activism, right. And so, because the activism becomes so innately cultural to the way that they live their lives, that is the Black church, right.

And a lot of books prior to kind of books that we're seeing now about Black activism really kind of focus on that and, of course, white abolitionism, right. But even white abolitionism is not the same as Black abolitionism. And Manisha Sinha talks a lot about this in her own book that, what are the different flavors, what are the different— Because you're asking me about, what is really important to them, and I think what is really important to them is continuity, and

respect for one another, as an uplift strategy, right. They may not be using the words uplift, and that may be a language that is later in the 19th Century, but, *We have to be the bigger people*. That's not easy to do right. So they have to look for kind of activism that will allow them to confront that white supremacy, while at the same time not being nasty about it. And they have to blend a legitimacy to their Black institutions without, how do I say this, without acting like Black— white people expect them to act. That that makes sense? So white people are saying, *Well you're always more violent*. Well, of course, then they can't be violent. And so they're responding to racism on this level that is so unfair. They always have to try to be, you know, the bigger person in the relationship. And it's, to me, it's remarkable how resilient they are in the face of enormous brutality and enormous hostility, right. So if you're in the South, Black people describe obviously you know, a life of enslavement and a life of where you're not really considered to be a human being. But the people in the Midwest, and even in California, they talk about if you're in a place where slavery is protected, but not legal, technically, this hostility that you feel from, the shopkeeper, or the guy who helps fix the horses, or whatever, is so palpable and they still have to hold their head up high, which is why they really prize Black institutions and their stay-ability.

(CWBR): Well, and also too—well, talk about contours through history—but beyond that, what I found fascinating was, they basically established circuits with circuit riders that would go from town-to-town church-to-church to spread ideas and try for their letter writing campaigns and so forth. And also, we are featuring a review of a book about the Colored Conventions Movement in this same issue, so that shows up in your book prevalently, and it's going to be a book that's reviewed and this issue as well, so it's nice to see the similarities there.

(JH): [illegible] oral culture. I mean I was I'm always telling my students about it because I think they like to think that all Black people in the 19th century are illiterate, and it's like *No, most people in the 19th Century are illiterate*. But like my own grandfather, there's a thing called functional literacy, like you can read the STOP signs and you can read, you know, the signs in the store about how much apples cost and that kind of thing. And they share that culture with one another. So there might be one person in the whole church group in the Bible study who can read the newspaper, or even the Bible, as my grandfather did, and you then disseminate that

information out to everybody else, which is tremendously important, as a way of bringing everybody together, and that is something that they have in just oodles and oodles and oodles of that kind of thing going on.

(CWBR): One of the major themes, and you've touched on this, is this idea, or this fact that Black Americans knew that they could not rely on white allyship, that they understood that, even if the government were to grant them some kind of rights that it would ultimately be up to themselves to guarantee their emancipation. And you've also talked about how this was intimately tied to the institution of slavery. Now once the Civil War began, how did their activism relate to the war itself and its changing purpose over the course of the war. And, you know, we'll talk a little bit about, surely physical soldiering, but you also talk about soldiering in a literal and a metaphorical sense. So what is what is a metaphorical or symbolic dimension of Soldiering?

(JH): It's game to play the game right, I mean, especially for men. I mean Black men white men alike see this war *thing* as something in which men participate. They are the protectors, and women and children and the old people are the protected. So I mean that's a theory that has been an important part of patriotism in America, has been important, I mean indeed in world history, right. And there are parts of world history where you do want a great big tall, you know, Scottish Highlander to protect you because you know he's going to beat off the dinosaurs, so you don't get eaten, (I'm making a joke, obviously).

But it is very metaphorical in the sense that, when you look closely at, of course Lincoln, and his decision to finally allow the Colored Troops to proceed, they've been asking to be soldiers all along, you know, since Fort Sumter. So, one of the questions is always, for us, well, *Why weren't they allowed to?* It's like well, *If you allow them to do their responsibility*—Linda Kerber, has written very eloquently about this for a long time—*if you allow men to do their responsibility, then you may have to give them the rights that are supposed to go along with it.* So they know that, and of course, also they have all these other issues about segregation in the troops and paying them and all that and stuff but, then putting up these militias. And the switch you were talking about, what changes when the war breaks out, is that the actual rhetoric does a turn, over a period of a month or two that says, *Okay, now we're going to go bodily in person to*

*help destroy slavery.* And, of course, you know, who knows that, and how the confederates are feeling, and you know the President, I mean Obviously there are 6 million pages written on this topic. But here in Indiana and Illinois they're like, *Yeah we can finally be part of the whole get together,* right. Especially since they see it as a way of indicating their manhood. So yes, it's absolutely really a metaphorical tie to having those citizenship rights that they have been longing for for so for so long. And it's very kind of classic, right, it's a very kind of classic way of serving your country, you're offering up your life. But they also look at it as offering up my life for the destruction slavery and for the people that that, unbeknownst to everyone else at this point, that we're fighting for. So, I mean, it always makes me laugh about the, the question of was the war fought over slavery and like, *Well for Black people it sure, was.* It depends on who you're talking about right so.

(CWBR): Well, and also, too, this idea that it would help them, possibly or hopefully attain citizenship. But also that you know, this, they were using this language of republicanism that white people had used throughout American history. This is this is part of my American-ness. You know, to help do this.

(JH): And get paid to do it. Right. *It'd be really nice If I got paid for my labor, isn't that wonderful.*

(CWBR): Now, you also talk a lot about gender dynamics. We talked a little bit about how this is, Soldiering during the Civil War was an aspect of manhood or masculinity. But you talk about how activism in the Midwest was gendered in and of itself, and that continued during the Civil War. So what were some of the ways that, you know, prior to the war and during the war that that activism was gendered. And how women, maybe gender allowed opportunities for women to participate within their activism, both before and during the war itself.

(JH): Yeah, I mean, well activism has always been gendered right. I mean Rosa Parks wanted to give a speech and they wouldn't let her right and then— But yet, also in that same scenario, there are also all of these women in the kitchen cooking food for Martin Luther King and this crew, right. So there's always been the women's participatory role, which is really

important. And I don't think anybody in the Black community has denied that. I mean there were women going to the Highlander Folk School with Rosa Parks, right. And it's very similar in the 19th Century, which, well of course, yeah women are still going to be sewing, and they're still going to be cooking, and they're still going to be doing these other things. But then women also, Black women, do this amazing thing where they're like, *Well, I've got an education, I want to give a speech*. Which is kind of amazing, because of course white abolitionist women aren't really giving many speeches at that point. And I think it's hard, thank goodness, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, for some people to understand how gendered society really was, right, in terms of— And it's not just that women wear skirts, it's that women have, when you're talking about, republicanism, women had that republican motherhood duty, and I think that Black women buy into that a lot.

But also, once their husbands march off to war—brothers fathers, whatever—the duty ceases to become less symbolic and way more pragmatic, which is like, *Okay, so now, I have to support these kids and feed, you know, the kin at the same time that I'm working a job and maybe trying to help out the cause*.

So, a lot of the gendered participation in wartime, and this is throughout American history, comes down to class. So if you have the money, and if you have the time, then yes, you can go work on raising funds for the troops or putting together baskets of food. You have to have the time away from a paid job in order to do that, whereas with the working-poor women, again white and Black, you're pretty limited by what you can do, depending on how many jobs do you have, whether you do piecework or take-in work at home. But I haven't met a woman yet in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, who is really interested in sort of reproducing that hetero-patriarchy in the sense that I think all women know that there are limitations, because it is very common in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, for people to talk about women like they're stupid, right, like that they are replaceable. It's couched in this whole discussion of maternalism, and how women are great mothers, and women are even mothers to the country (that comes from the Revolutionary War).

But reproducing that sort of, or normalizing men always being in charge of everything means that women don't get to have their say and, in many ways, they put it in terms of their children, right. So I mean Black women especially, I mean this is different for Black women and white women, but Black women, especially in my book, really want to get the point across that they are going to participate in all things that they possibly can, because, A) You need all the

working adults to participate in this; whether it's making money, or whether it's you printing out things for people to read. So the women very much are aware of those gender conventions.

But they also kind of throw them out the window, at the same time, too, which is that a lot of Black women talk about wanting to have a nuclear family like white middle class women do; in many ways they know that is not possible. But it's also a good thing to maybe focus on and concentrate on, so that by the time we get to the end of the 19th century, you have a lot of Black women in the clubs, and in the bigger towns. There are burgeoning Black communities in Philadelphia and Boston, so all kinds of different ways that the women in my book, in particular, can view stepping out of traditional gender roles as a really good thing, not just for them, because it's not like they're calling themselves feminists but they're saying, *We need to expand the idea of what women can do because that's better for everybody involved. So all this stuff, it's just keeping us all down.*

(CWBR): Well, and also too, you talk about how, again, to go back to this idea that white allyship only goes so far, and they understand that white organizations would be less likely to help Black civilians and Black soldiers alike, so I'm thinking of their creation of parallel institutions, like the Sanitary Commissions and so forth, where they want to make sure that their community is being served so they understand that necessitates them creating their own infrastructure.

(JH): Right. And, to be fair, the White women in the Sanitary Commission, almost without fail, are like, *No, sorry you can't be in our group, 'cause you're Black.* So they're not very good about that—not all of them. But the Sanitary Commission is this sort of unsung women's huge group that Frederick Law Olmsted always gets the credit for putting together, but it's definitely the women who are the foot soldiers of that organization. And when Black women see that they're like, *Well, yeah, we can do that, we've been doing that all through this, that's not that hard for us to do.* When you're talking about sanitation and cooking for large groups of people and so many of the things that women, Black women, in their communities have been doing for a long time that the white women working in the Sanitary Commission have sort of a steep learning curve to figure out how to do that: taking care of lots of people and nursing them

and feeding them. At the same time, Black women are naturally very good at it because they've been doing it for so long.

(CWBR): Right well and you've talked also about the importance of kinship networks. But at the same time, the reliance on those kinship networks during war, they become more fragile during wartime. So what special or different experiences did Black women face when their husbands sons, brothers, fathers go off to the fight the war that maybe white women did not experience, or what was a universal experience, even, if you have any examples.

(JH): It reminds me of that movie *Cold Mountain*, (I mean, there's the book *Cold Mountain*, and there's a movie that came out—you're way too young for it). But there's this great scene, where one of the white women left behind in the town says, *You know it drives me crazy* (I'm paraphrasing) *it drives me crazy that men create all this rain and then they stop, and go, 'Oh my God it's raining.* So women really have to then cope with, you know, if men are the ones making war and making politics and making states, now women have to cope with what has been made at Fort Sumter, what has been made with seceding states that kind of thing. So their first reaction is like, *Oh okay.* So women so men are going to be soldiers, and that means you know you needed a uniform— I mean a lot of their concerns are really very pragmatic. But then over time— Because we were talking about its symbolic gesture right, and women are supportive of men going to war because, especially the ones who are really activists, because they know that plays a really major role in emancipation.

On the other hand, for large groups of women, it also means extreme poverty. And so, when you go to the National Archives, and you look to these letters, they're really heartbreaking because, yeah, *My husband my brother, my father, whomever, my son went to war, but A) We haven't heard from him, or B)* (and they're really mad about this) *We had this promise of X number of dollars, and we got half.* Sometimes, women are really mad about this situation; it depends on what part of that the— As you get to the close of the war, nobody's happy. I mean everybody is absolutely miserable because you have deaths, you have wounded people. You have a lot of people in the Black community thinking that maybe Black soldiering was a failure, because even though they're now getting paid better, it's taking lives at such an alarming rate that

they're not sure you're ever going to get to that part where you get to sit on a jury or vote or hold office or that kind of thing. So there's still a lot of discussion about citizenship rights.

But when you read women's letters in particular— I swear this is going to be my next book. I was thinking, I want to write a book about Black women writing letters to government officials, because it's just fascinating how these women sit down to write letters to like Stanton, and Lincoln, and all these people and they're like, *Here are all the ways I am really mad at you. And here are all the ways that I think you screwed up. And here're all the ways that I think you can help me.* And some of them are— Obviously there are varying degrees of articulation in what women say. But I think it just takes such tremendous courage for Black women to sit down to write all these letters to Abe Lincoln and say, you know, *This experiment was just that, it was kind of an experiment. We weren't sure how it was going to go, and now I don't have enough clothes, we don't have any shoes, we don't have enough food. And I can work hard, working is fine, I've always done that. But if I can't get a job or there are no crops left,* (depending of course where you are). And there are women, there are formerly enslaved women who write these letters too, but the women in my book, in particular, feel very sort of deeply let down by how soldiering plays out, right. Because it's again, it's that combination of rights and responsibilities: *I do my responsibility, and I gain rights from that.* And, honestly, they really thought that a soldier should get decent pay, that a soldier should get some degree of honor, right. And they're not getting that (and they still don't).

But they're so thoughtful, and they're so thoughtful about— You were talking— That's how you get to those kinship networks, right. So they're so thoughtful about what is happening to grandparents and what is happening to children and aunts, and they talked at length about wanting to bring someone who is enslaved or is going to become emancipated to the places where they live; again they're putting the families back together. But those letters, I think speak directly to the value of Black lives, and how they— I'm so impressed with them because I'm not sure I would have thought about that, you know. That's kind of what, and today, that's kind of what Black Lives Matter does, which is, *I want to talk to you about humanity, and the value of one individual life—just one—and then we'll go from there. But here are the ways that I think you aren't responding to what your responsibilities are,* and I just love that about them.

(CWBR): Well, and the word you use, “responsibility,” I think is important because, as you show in your book, the Civil War change their relationship to the state. And, they’re now, you know just like white women and Black women have been able to say, since the revolutionary War, *You owe us, because we have sacrificed.*

(JH): Yes. And you asked about things being geographically specific, and again, now that those states have statehood, right. They get statehood in the early 1800s, so statehood is firmer now, they have constitutions, they have constitutions that are changing. So the longer they remain in a place that is Illinois, or that is Indiana— And, of course, this is the stage where people associate themselves with their, you know, the state that they live in. The more that they— That when we look at change over time, we see their disenfranchisement making them even more angry right. *Well now we're a real estate will not just a territory. We have constitutions, and we have all the things that go into making a state. And why aren't we part of it?*

(CWBR): Exactly. Now, as far as the kinship ties, something that you pointed out that I found fascinating was, I think you've used an specific example where maybe it was a “what if,” but within these kinship networks, how important and how intimate they were, when you have a family, where a brother, his cousin, and you know, an uncle all go off to the war, that entire little tightly knit community has lost a tremendous amount. And then, if they die, they've lost that permanently.

(JH): Yeah, I mean it's a serious thing *Hello*. But if you don’t listen to women ever, how would you know that, right. If there's no *Ms. Magazine*, if there is not an avenue for women to voice their concerns and what their lives are like, then nobody knows what it's like to all the sudden become a widow. *Gone With the Wind* ain’t cuttin’ it, right. So, this is why we're still really trying to get that story out from both individual women and women in groups.

(CWBR): So, then, that that leads me to a question I meant to ask earlier so I'll ask it now: Do you see your book as a corrective of sorts on previous histories?

(JH): If it's a corrective it's only a corrective to the nonsense about women, Black women, sitting on, on the sidelines of their own lives. I think it's more an additive. But I will say that if there's anything that I would like to correct, or at least really start the conversation going, is this idea that emancipation is a process. I mean we know that emancipation is gradual, and we know that emancipation looks different to different people. But we sort of still insist that emancipation is about becoming free from enslavement.

But emancipation, if you look very closely at how Black people define it, they might define it in a million different ways. But not all those people are enslaved. So while we still want the treatment of enslaved people to be highly specialized and very thoughtful, we also need the treatment of freed or free people to be more than just class consciousness, to be more than just gender consciousness, to really focus on not only their fight for emancipation, even if they've never been a slave themselves, but also how they see the trajectory of change for Black people in the United States. Because they not only, like I said, they know not only are thinking about their own street corner and their own church house, but also— And this is where the colored conventions, that book is so amazing. Because so many of the people— They might get up and talk about what's happening in my state, but also as a group, as all these conventions are occurring *What is our goal? What do we want to see?* So cancer doctors go to conventions all the time and they talk about science, but the whole group wants to eradicate cancer right. And that is very much what is happening here. And I think we need to pay more attention to, it could be a group in Arizona that we don't know about yet. But I think if we get after it, we will find more of that and that will help us understand Black history all the better.

(CWBR): Well, on a similar note, I was able to collect enough books to review to do a special issue on 19th century Black activism. Why do you think that's possible now? Do you have any ideas of why that might be? And do you think that it's an anomaly—a blip—or do you think that it may be a sign of change more permanently.

(JH): I don't think it's an anomaly, I think, obviously, I think it's a wonderful thing. And I think what, I mean, we're still doing social history from the bottom up, right. We still, we haven't— If we're ever going to get out of that field, it's not any time soon. We're still really

looking to trace people's lives from what we used to consider just the sort of dregs of society right, so that's really important to us.

But the activism, I think, really comes out of that idea that, like I said, that it is creationary rather than just reactionary. And actually I had to think about this in new and different ways, and a lot of my book reviewers recommended that I look at theories about resistance, and I'm like *I know very little about theoretical resistance*. So it's really eye opening to me to understand there are strategies and tactics in activism and resistance that they're not all the same. And part of, I think part of what happened to me was I was born in 1971 so, if I'm raised on Martin Luther King and sort of a nonviolent response for a long time, until I got to graduate school, I thought that was the response of everybody. And now I'm teaching about, you know say the Black Panthers, or Robert F. Williams, or different people and there are different ideas about tactics and strategies. So I don't know which came first, the chicken or the egg, but both of those fields really inform one another for an activism that is constant, and an activism that is not necessarily just something that pops up when somebody is murdered, right. And so, we're learning about that now, which is so many of those communities were already there, and then they have to change their messages as things change over time, but they've always been there. It's just that, how you put together a “activist group” has a lot to do with, like we talked about, it has a lot to do with geography, it has a lot to do with class, it has a lot to do with gender. But it also has something to be said for, you know, *What are our stated goals, and how are we going to convene large groups of people to make that happen?* You mentioned earlier the sort of “nothing but freedom” theme, I guess, and thinking about that, and it's just as important to talk about the obstacles that they had as much as whatever creation they had to sort of— So, in other words, that the defensiveness is just as important as the offensiveness.

But I also think it's sort of the big movement in activism is also we don't really want to talk about white people that much, we don't actually need to. So we have documented white supremacy, we have documented white racism, and yeah we're going to keep doing that, but I think, if you pick up all these books, you will find that we don't need to hear *Notes on the State of Virginia* one more time from Thomas Jefferson. We get it, we know. Moving on, now. Right? So this is— And you know, I'm obviously not I'm just building out what other historians have said, which is that, *Yeah great, anyway*. So we don't need to keep hammering at what we already know, but what we need to keep hammering at is, its subtleties, its nuances, how it plays out in

different places at different periods of time. And, eventually, we need to connect the 19th and the 20th centuries in better ways, because I don't think we've done that. You know, there's a Black women's club movement at the end of the 19th Century. I think that club movement has a lot of antecedents in the women in my book, right, so their clubs. But we haven't connected those things, yet, and I think we'll get there, it's just more work to be done.

(CWBR): Now, before I let you go, I wanted to ask, do you have any research you'd like to tell us about?

(JH): Oh yeah— So there's two things I want to write about. The first thing I want to write about is, like I said, Black women's letters. I think I could just spend the next year in the National Archives reading all these letters. Of course, you'd have to go around to all the different presidential libraries. But that's kind of my dream, is that I get to go to all around to the presidential libraries and come up with this book about you know, letters to the “boss.” Because I think it would tell us so much about what Black women are thinking. I came across some— I want to write an article, the next one, of the Black women who are writing to Eleanor Roosevelt. So it doesn't just have to be the President, but people in positions of power, because we very often like to think of Black women as being so weak and un-democratized, right, disenfranchised to the extent that they are almost voiceless. And I don't think that's really true, and I think those letters would show a lot of that.

And I'm still insisting that I'm going to write a history of toilet segregation, because if there's one thing that gets white women upset throughout history is using facilities, regardless of what it is, with Black women. And I keep coming across it all the time. and it's like., *What is it about the toilet that is making them*— During World War Two in Baltimore, there are white women going on strike and refusing to work at the power company because Black women have been hired as part of the war effort, and they're like, *Nope sorry, I'm not gonna work here anymore*— So I think there are really some more really good questions to be asked of white women. So there's some really great work now about white women as slaveholders that make us go, *Oh so they weren't totally innocent in all of this*. Those are the kinds of things I'm thinking about.

(CWBR): Excellent! That sounds interesting, and I look forward to reading that in the future. Listeners and Dr. Jennifer Harbour, thank you for joining me today it's been a great pleasure.

(JH): Thank you so much. What fun!

(CWBR): I agree. Listeners, thank you for joining me and Dr. Jennifer Harbour, associate professor of Black Studies and Women's and Gender Studies at the University of Nebraska, Omaha, and author of *Organizing Freedom: Black Emancipation Activism in the Civil War Midwest*, published by Southern Illinois University Press in 2020.