

## S2E01 Transcript

# What does it mean to reckon with the history of racism at the University of Wisconsin—Madison?

Ask a  
Historian

 Department of History  
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN—MADISON

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**Emily Tran:** From the University of Wisconsin—Madison, this is *Ask a Historian*. I'm Emily Tran.

Today on the show: what does it mean to reckon with the history of racism at the University of Wisconsin—Madison? I'll talk to Kacie Lucchini Butcher, who is Director of the Public History Project here at UW-Madison. The project is a multi-year effort to recover and acknowledge the histories of exclusion and resistance at this university.

We'll talk about how the Public History Project fits into the process of confronting racism and exclusion at UW-Madison. Kacie's team has been at work for one year now. And Kacie will share some major themes and patterns they've discovered so far. Finally, we'll talk about the hard work that we all must do to enact historical justice and repair the harms of the past.

[MUSICAL INTERLUDE]

**Emily Tran:** Early this summer, the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and others ignited mass protests in all corners of the United States and across the globe. These protests against white supremacy, systemic racism, and anti-Black violence have persisted for months now in cities and towns all over the country.

Many have described our current moment as an unprecedented racial reckoning that has touched all aspects of American society: neighborhoods and communities, workplaces and schools, powerful corporations and media organizations, the worlds of sport and entertainment, even the brands that we see on our grocery store shelves.

Today on the show, we look at how the University of Wisconsin—Madison is reckoning with its own history of racism here on campus. My guest is Kacie Lucchini Butcher. Kacie is a public historian who serves as the Director of the UW-Madison Public History Project.

Kacie Lucchini Butcher, welcome to *Ask a Historian*. Thanks so much for being here with us today.

**Kacie Lucchini Butcher:** Thank you for having me.

**Emily Tran:** So, you describe yourself as a public historian. What does that mean, and how is a public historian's work different from, say, the work of historians who are professors in the Department of History?

**Kacie Lucchini Butcher:** I think there's a couple main differences.

One of the most obvious is audience. When you look at professors and academics, their audience is normally for the field. It's not always for the field, but they're trying to contribute to, like, this great canon of history, right? And often they're speaking in the language that speaks to other scholars. For the audience for public historians, it's the public. And so, the audience shapes what we do.

We're always looking at what audiences this project for, and how is that going to shape the research that we do? And how is it going to shape the format of what we put out? So, academics will often work with pretty traditional academic formats, like books, journal articles. Public history really runs the gamut. It can be exhibits, documentaries, podcasts, art, spoken word, anything that gets this history out to the public in a way that's engaging.

Another core difference is collaboration. So, academics, it's a pretty solitary art form, right? You *can* work with other people, but it's not usually what happens. For public historians, we're collaborators. So, we work with lots of people. So, in this project that I work on, we have many different stakeholders. So, we have the campus community, and that's broad, right? We're talking students, faculty, staff, alumni, administrators. But then we also have this larger Madison community, because so much of Madison has some kind of connection to UW-Madison. And so, in the public history process, collaboration is kind of the center. So, all of these stakeholders, all these collaborators have a spot at the table, and they help us shape and control the projects. And you don't see that happening often in academic work.

The other thing I would say is that public history is a reflective practice. So, in academic work, you know, often people will reflect on their work and say, 'Hmm, you know, I wish if I would have had this source, I would have written it differently.' Or, you know, 'Now that more time has passed, I think I would add this.' And so, they reflect on their personal work.

But public historians reflect on our practice and what we've accomplished, and then we change what we do in the future. So, for example, a previous project that I worked on—the "Owning Up: Racism and Housing in Minneapolis" exhibit—looked at the history of racial housing segregation in Minneapolis. There are many things I would love to change about, like, the exhibit text, or about the conclusions, right, because we found more sources or more photos.

But we go beyond that in the practice. So, I'm also reflective about some of the ways that we engaged community, we didn't do in-depth enough at the time, we hadn't made the right connections. So now I book more time into my process to make sure that we're really engaging the audience very broadly and making sure that we're not going missing any stakeholders.

Or, in the exhibit, we didn't have any policy proposals, right? We just kind of laid out the history and said, 'Hey, here's the history of racial housing discrimination.' And many people said, 'Well, what do we do about it?' And so, in reflection, I would have brought in people who maybe wouldn't naturally be considered stakeholders, right? But policymakers are definitely stakeholders when we talk about racial housing segregation. But at the time, I viewed our stakeholders too limited, right? I looked at it as just community members affected, you know, people in the neighborhoods that we were researching, people who were victims of discrimination, and not this wider, broader lens of who's connected to this history.

So, I would say the audience, the emphasis on collaboration, and then this kind of reflection at the end are some things that really set public history apart from academic history.

**Emily Tran:** So, you came to UW-Madison to work on the Public History Project. Can you briefly describe what the Public History Project is, and then how it came to be?

**Kacie Lucchini Butcher:** So, yeah. The Public History came out of a 2018 report that was requested by the Chancellor about the history of two groups on campus, two student organizations that were named for the Ku Klux Klan. And the Chancellor requested this report after Charlottesville, and after the #TheRealUW protests at UW-Madison. And she wanted people to understand the history of this specific group, and maybe what that could tell us about the history of racism at UW.

So, the report came out in 2018. And it details these two Klan groups on campus. And while there's lots of details about these two groups, one of the kind of broad conclusions was: while it's great to have this information, it's not enough, right? These two groups weren't the only racist groups on campus, they weren't the only people participating in discrimination. And so, they kind of shifted and said, 'What if we did this public history project that really got us to look at discrimination more broadly on campus?' And that's how I'm here. That was the seed that grew into this project.

So, the Public History Project is a multi-year effort to uncover and give voice to histories of discrimination and resistance at UW. So, we look at the history of racism and discrimination broadly. So, we're looking at 150 years of history. We're looking at all social and ethnic identities. We're looking at LGBT people, disabled people, because we want to understand what discrimination looks like in different phases at the University, in different time periods, to really get this idea of how widespread is it? What's the scale? And once we know that, what are we going to do about it?

**Emily Tran:** So, I've noticed that in a lot of the Public History Project documents and in the description that you just gave, the Public History Project is often described as an effort to uncover "histories of discrimination and resistance on campus." Discrimination and resistance. And if we look at that call to action in the initial KKK Report that led to the creation of the Public History Project, it reads, "What we propose a project to recover the voices of campus community members, in the era of the Klan and since, who struggled and endured in a climate of hostility and who sought to change it."

Why is it important for the Public History Project to uncover not just the history of exclusion at UW-Madison, but also the history of those who pressed hard against hostility and discrimination?

**Kacie Lucchini Butcher:** I think generally, just as, like, a historical practice, we always want more information, right? Like, we're always trying to figure out: what did multiple people think of this historical moment or this historical incident?

But for our project, I think it's important for a couple of reasons. To only focus on the history of discrimination paints this one-sided kind of story that people of color, or you know, disabled people, or queer people are the victims, and that they passively took what they were given without pushing back, without resisting, without fighting these systems. And it's just not an accurate story. So, there's that.

But I also think it paints this kind of narrative that people just passively take what they're given, and that they never push back. And that's just not the case.

And so, at UW-Madison, what you see is that people rarely just took it and took this discrimination and let it happen to them. People were always organizing, whether that's organizing through administrative channels and trying to get policy changes, or whether that's trying to get culture change, right, trying to get other undergraduate students to realize, 'Hey, you all are creating an atmosphere that makes me feel unsafe or unwelcome.' And so, I think it's important to show that this isn't just this one-sided kind of narrative of people who are just always the victims, but who aren't also organizing to push back.

And I think for UW, it also shows more voice to the people who are the victims. We struggle with that in the project. And we struggle to find archival materials that really give the perspective of those who are the victims of discrimination. And focusing on resistance allows us to do that because normally at the center of these resistance movements, we actually get to hear the voices of those who organized and see kind of not only how they were organizing but what their thought process was about how they were going to get change.

**Emily Tran:** I want to talk about now the Public History Project sort of in broader context. So, in recent years, several universities have commissioned reports to unearth the history of racism and white supremacy at their institution. Brown, I think, set this all off. They appointed a committee in 2003. Georgetown has been in the news more recently for its efforts. How does this project at UW-Madison fit into this context of institutions of higher education examining their own histories of racism?

**Kacie Lucchini Butcher:** Our project clearly fits into those, and it's also different. So the projects at Brown and Georgetown, I think, started the movement of institutions realizing that they have been complicit in these histories, and that the actions not only of their administration, of their students, of their staff, but of everything as a structure also contributes to these systems of inequality and to oppression. And so, it's this kind of reflective practice of making sure you're also looking inward, right? And I think they started this trend. And so, we are clearly in that context of institutions doing history work that looks at their own institution and looks internally.

Our project is a little different from theirs only because UW-Madison doesn't have a direct history of slavery. So, in some of the projects, like at Brown and Georgetown, there's an emphasis on finding descendants on figuring out, you know, how many enslaved people were sold and figuring out who their descendants are, and then talking about reparations, right? So, for many of these universities, the only reason that they exist today is because they sold other human beings. And so, the weight of that requires reparations, and it's a really serious conversation about how they're going to make amends for what they've done.

At UW-Madison, we don't have that direct history of slavery. And so, our mission is a little different. It's also a challenge for us. We can't necessarily look to Georgetown and to Brown and say, 'Oh, well, that's the path we should take,' because our histories are different, our investments are different. And so, it's kind of exciting because we get to forge a new path here, we get to try something different. And it's also a challenge, because, you know, we would like to look to others for inspiration. And there's just not many public universities doing this institutional history work and putting out products yet. A lot of universities that are like UW-Madison are just in the beginning of starting this work. So, we're kind of forging a new path at this point.

**Emily Tran:** So, I can imagine that in your time here at UW working on the Public History Project, you've probably received quite a bit of pushback. Maybe some defensiveness on the part of those who think that we need not dwell on the past, that unearthing this history is about making white people feel guilty. And I imagine there are those, especially students and alumni of color who experienced exclusion and pain during their time at UW, they might think that the project is too closely tied to an institution that they already distrust. How do you respond to these critiques?

**Kacie Lucchini Butcher:** Work like this is inherently political and so there's always going to be lots of questions about how we're doing the work and who we're engaging, and what our final products are. And so, we're always kind of answering some of these questions.

So, on the defensive side, you know, what I try and tell people is that understanding our history more fully, more broadly, is never a bad thing. And also, that we are allowed to critique the things that we love. And that critiquing the things that we love in an effort to make them better is part of the process of loving and caring for them. So, just because we find a lot of bad history at UW doesn't mean that we hate the institution or that it changes the way that we feel about it. It's more about, what do we do once we know, right? How can we use our history to make UW a better place, a more equitable place, a more just place?

And for some people, I think that that's hard. You know, we have—as many people, I'm a Wisconsinite, I love the Badgers—we have this attachment to this university. And we think about its greatness, right? We think about all of these things that have made it wonderful, whether that's academics, whether that's athletics. And so, when you challenge those things, it's going to make people uneasy. But what I try and do is adjust the framing. Just because we're finding these histories, just because we're having these tough conversations doesn't take away from that love that we feel. If anything, it creates a better institution in the end. And so, it's a worthwhile conversation to have.

On the other side, we get this issue a lot. We as a public history project, and myself as an employee of UW-Madison, we represent this institution. And to be frank, the institution has harmed people. And so, a lot of people sit with this generational harm, with personal harm either from the institution itself or from experiences they had while they were students or while they were staff. And so, we do struggle with that. People are distrustful of the project, they're distrustful of the work that we do, and I think sometimes people worry it's going to be a rubber stamp. That we're going to do a really watered-down history of discrimination just so the university can stamp it and say, 'Well, we did it. And now we don't have to talk about racism anymore.'

And so, what I try and do is really build trust with these communities about how we're doing the project. And this is a kind of fundamental core of public history, as I was saying, is this collaboration effort. So, I try when I work with community to show them that they are active stakeholders in the project, and that they have the power to shape the project. So, it's not about the histories that *I* think are interesting or cool. It's about the histories that the *community* thinks is interesting.

So, we have these community listening sessions where I lay out the project and its goals, and I just state over and over again, 'But all of this can change.' You know, if you're saying, 'Hey, I like the idea of having exhibit, but also, we should have this documentary, right, like, my community would totally watch a documentary,' or actually, you know, 'Maybe we should get a scholarship fund out of this.' But they have the opportunity to use this history and to guide our research. And then when it's

over, we can all together shape what those final products are, and what some of the outcomes are that we want.

And so, in that sense, I really try and show that yes, I'm a part of the institution. But also, this is different. This isn't the institution coming and saying, 'This is the project. This is the outcome. Take it, give us your rubber stamp, or we're gonna rubber stamp as an institution.' It's really this community process. It's a give and a take where I view my position really as a service position to these communities and to these people. I have a skill set, and that skill set is public history, so let me serve you in making sure that this history serves your interests, serves your needs as you fight for justice.

**Emily Tran:** On the Public History Project's website, you write, "The broad intent of the project is to build a more inclusive university community through an honest reckoning with the institution's past." Let's talk a little more about that. What does it mean to reckon with the past? And how does the public history project fit into the process of reckoning about the past and present of racism and other forms of exclusion at UW-Madison?

**Kacie Lucchini Butcher:** Yeah, I think reckoning, as you know, it says on our website, is really at the center of this project, and it's one of those words and one of those processes that's really hard to nail down for people. I always tell people though that I think it's important to note, that doing history work, like doing all this, doing the research and presenting it, is not a reckoning in and of itself. Displaying a racist history does not dispel racism. And so, for me, this project and the research we're doing is the first step in the reckoning.

We, as a community, need to understand the history of racism and discrimination, what has happened, the scale of what has happened, the ways that it functions and how it's embedded into our community, so that we can truly begin the work of reckoning.

And so, if you look up the dictionary definition of reckoning—I often bring this up in presentations and in conversations—there's three kind of different definitions and two of them deal with really taking scale and really taking account for what has happened. And so, we're kind of in that process.

The next stage is figuring out what's the cost, right? Or what do we do about it? And so, I think that that is where the true reckoning work will happen in this project. It's about what do we do once we know this racist history? How do we begin to change our institution? And how do we really begin to build the equitable university that we want to be?

And you know, the process is going to look different for different people. I think that's another important thing is, the educational piece will be the first piece, but the action items are going to look different for different individuals, different departments, different units. Everybody is going to have to have this kind of reflective practice of, 'Okay, now that I know this, what do I want to change in my realm, in my sphere of influence?'

I would also add that I think reckoning is an active process. It's something that continues. It's not something where, well, you know, we're going to reckon for a year, and then we're going to be done, and then all the problems will be solved. We need to constantly be reckoning. We need to always be understanding our history, how it's affecting our present, and what we're gonna keep changing, right, and keep adjusting. Many of the things that come out of this project—things that we realize we need

to change, or we want to alter—we kind of have to watch those things. Like, if we make these changes, do these policy changes work? Do they actually give us the outcomes that we desire?

And so, reckoning is this continual and active process where we're trying new things, we're being reflective about how they're working and if they're working, and then we're changing and understanding new ways that we can begin to build this equitable future that we're working towards.

**Emily Tran:** Let's dig in a bit into that first step of this process of reckoning, which is understanding what has happened in the past, which is sort of the task of the Public History Project. In your research so far, what are some of the themes that you and your student researchers have noticed in the history of discrimination and resistance at UW?

**Kacie Lucchini Butcher:** We've been doing research for a year now so we're finally getting to the point where I feel like I can speak to themes and so that's really, really exciting for us. Because when I first started here, I was like, 'Wow, this is a monumental task and I hope we can find the histories that we're seeking to find.' And what I can report is that we've found so much. There is such a rich historical record for what is going on at UW, particularly in the 20th century.

One of the major themes that has come out to me is that discrimination and racism are just a constant at the university. And so, every year, there is some kind of issue going on around discrimination, and it's students and it's administrators and it's alumni really trying to figure out: what is happening at the university? How is discrimination playing out? And where can we fix it? And where do we want to fix it? And if we don't want to fix it, how are we going to make sure that people don't know? Just quite frankly.

So, I think one of the clearest examples of that is housing discrimination. So, prior to there being a University Housing Bureau, the University Housing would put out a list of approved landlords that students could live at, because the university didn't have a robust dorm system. And those people were private landlords, and so they had the right to discriminate against students. So, they could say, 'I don't, I don't want a Black student living here.'

Well, that obviously posed problems for the university students, particularly students of color—who either were from Wisconsin or were international students—when they tried to find housing in Madison. And students rang the alarm bells right away. And they said, you know, 'We know this problem is going on, and we want you to do something about it.'

But the administration really struggled to figure out, what is our intervention here? We can't tell private landlords what to do. But at the same time, we have an anti-discrimination policy at UW that we need to uphold. So how do we work within that system? And then you have, you know, state legislators who are getting involved and saying, 'Hey, we heard you're all discriminating. And you can't do that.'

So, you get this mix of: How do we fix this problem? Do we want to fix this problem? Or do we just want students to stop, you know, banging down our doors? And so, it's this really rich kind of interesting display of how these processes get mediated out.

But across the history, there's just this really kind of current through line, that discrimination is happening all the time, it's happening at different levels, and lots of people are participating in it.

And at the same time, lots of people are fighting back against it. From about 1947 until, like, 1968, students, every single year, are pushing the housing discrimination issue really hard. They're meeting with administrators, they're signing petitions, they're putting articles into the *Daily Cardinal* discussing the issues. Like, they will not give up until housing discrimination is eliminated. And so even when you see discrimination, you also see this current of real organization on the part of students or alumni to say, 'Hey, we don't want this in our community, and we're gonna fight back against it every time.'

And so, I think, you know, some of the broad themes are that discrimination is happening, but we also really get to see these organizational issues, right? Where does our desire to be a better culture as students or to be a better university, where does that run up against our administrative limits and our state legislature limits and our funding limits? So, you get to see not only the cultural aspects of discrimination, but the structural institutional aspects of discrimination and how those often are the biggest barriers to change.

**Emily Tran:** So, if we understand racism as prejudice plus power, historically, who has wielded the power to discriminate in the history of UW-Madison? Is it sort of always top-down from administrators to students, professors against students?

**Kacie Lucchini Butcher:** No, actually. That's the most shocking discovery, I think, about this. The misconception is that the university, the administration, as a body, as leadership, has the most power. And let me be clear, the administration does discriminate, right? They make policies that, whether they intend to or not, the impact of those policies is discrimination.

But what you're actually seeing is, in the kind of social cultural realm of UW, discrimination is happening all the time. So, you have administrators discriminating down, but you also have students discriminating against their fellow students, you have students discriminating against professors and professors discriminating against students, professors against leadership. You have, you know, all these outside bodies in Madison as a community coming into the mix. So, you have the Madison Police Department, you have the state legislature, you have local businesses, landlords. You have discrimination happening all around and by lots of people with different levels of power. And that was one of the most surprising takeaways is that you really see it all the time.

I think what you do see is that there is your run-of-the-mill daily social discrimination, right? So, students discriminating against students. And then there's clearly structural discrimination issues that come out of policy, and that come out of administrative policy of the institution. And those are different subsets of power, I would say.

So, like those administrative discriminatory policies—like I said, they may not be intended for discrimination, but the impact is that they are—those are the ones where you really see power butt up against students who want change. Because the students come in and say, 'Hey, we don't want housing discrimination anymore.' And the university says, 'Well, we would make a policy, but we don't think it would work,' or, 'We don't want to,' or, 'I don't know, we don't want to make landlords mad.' And you see them just take a firm stance to not do anything, even though students are kind of clamoring for it.

And in this period, especially with housing discrimination, I think it's interesting that students are saying, 'Hey, we really want you to handle housing discrimination.' And one of the arguments from the university is, well, 'We can confront landlords and tell them, we don't want them to discriminate, but they're going to come back and say, 'Why don't you clean up your own house first?' And we know that students discriminate against other students. And so maybe you all need to focus on ridding discrimination culturally and socially, in the student body before we confront these structural systems, you know, like homeownership.'

And so, they actually use students discriminating against each other as an excuse to not make structural change, which I think is interesting way to use that power and to wield that power. Because, yeah, you know, students should probably clean up their own house first, but to use it as an excuse to not do administrative policy changes was really interesting to me.

**Emily Tran:** Wow, I am astounded. In addition to this sort of like shifting responsibility to students, have you seen other patterns in the way that UW has responded to incidents of racism and discrimination on campus that are brought to their attention by student activists? Are there common excuses to not do something?

**Kacie Lucchini Butcher:** It's so interesting because the more things change, the more they stay the same, right, is kind of the old adage, or like, history repeats itself. And what you see is a couple different kind of main themes.

So, you have what I just said, right, where it's, you know, 'Clean up your own house. Students discriminate against students, so why don't you work on that first, and then we'll work on these big structural issues.'

But also, in like the 80s and 90s, when you start seeing these, kind of, really publicized racist incidents on campus—so for example, in the, you know, mid- to late-80s, there were a string of very racist fraternity parties. And they got a lot of publicity, including, like, ending up in the *New York Times*. And what you see the university saying is, 'Well, these students have the right to free speech. So, they have the right to have these racist parties, and there's nothing we can do.' They condemn them and no uncertain terms. They say, 'This isn't the university we want, or we don't believe in these actions.' But they say, 'We're really limited by the First Amendment and they have free speech. And so, there's nothing we can do.'

And people push back on that right away, right? Like, the Law School is like, 'Well, I don't know if that's how we should read the First Amendment.' But that's their initial thought is, okay, we have the First Amendment.

Another thing you see is, again, this kind of juxtaposition of the administration running up against larger institutional structures like state law, like federal law. So, often students will come and say, 'Hey, we want this change.' For example, in the 1990s, the ROTC had a discriminatory policy against gays and lesbians. And the student body said, 'We shouldn't have the ROTC on campus then because they go against our anti-discrimination policy that we have.'

And the university comes back and says, 'Well, because of the Morrill Act, we have to have military training on campus. And so, if we get rid of the ROTC, we could lose federal funding.'

Now, possibly, yes. But there was no proof that the federal government would have come after them and would have taken away this funding. But they use that threat of federal law as a way to not have to make this change on campus.

And they do that in other instances as well, you know, that's clearly using the Constitution and saying, 'Well, it's a First Amendment issue.' That's a federal guideline. And so, they say, 'Well, we actually can't do that.' And so they use not only these, like social and cultural mechanisms to stop change, but they also, you know, lean on, 'Well, there's nothing we can do cause it's federal law,' or, 'Actually, state law prohibits us from, you know, making change in that way.'

And then I think there's kind of this, this general run-of-the-mill attitude that you can't policy change your way out of discrimination, which, on the front end, I truly believe right? You can make as many laws and policies that say, 'Racism is illegal.' But that's not going to change racist beliefs or attitudes.

But I think the problem when administrators say that to students is they say, 'Well, listen. We could make 100 policy changes, but students would still be racist.' The problem is that students see that as inaction. And they want something to show that the university is dedicated to making this change and is dedicated to at least trying. And so, oftentimes, you know, I think it's really disheartening for students to see that kind of lack of response, and that lack of urgency, when students are saying, 'Hey, like, we are miserable right now, like, we're struggling to find housing, or we're struggling in our classes, or we're struggling socially,' to hear, 'Well, you know, policy change won't help.' And many students think, 'Well, hey, that's at least something you could do, and you're not doing it.'

So, I think those are kind of like the broad issues. And then of course, you just have these specific incidents that really highlight how, you know, change runs up against power.

**Emily Tran:** So, I know that oral history is a really large part of the Public History Project. You've hired undergraduate and graduate student researchers to record oral histories with alumni, for instance. Why are oral histories so key to the project?

**Kacie Lucchini Butcher:** Yeah, so I'm very proud to announce that we've done over 100 oral histories this year, which is great. I think there's a couple reasons why oral history is very powerful.

So, first of all, unsurprising to any historians who are listening, the archive is not an endless source of knowledge. I think, you know, when I talk to students, they assume, 'Hey, if there's an answer, it's in the archive, like the archive has to have something.' And often what you find is the archive doesn't have what you need, and you have to think about different ways to get at that history.

Particularly for the histories that we're uncovering—histories that center the voices of people of color—those narratives are missing from the archive. And so, there's no way to go get those back, right? We don't have the documentation we need to tell these histories.

And so, oral history is a great intervention to make up for these archival gaps. It not only fills in the blanks of things that the archive doesn't have, but it also allows us to actually get the voices of people of color. Because you know, for example, in the 1950s, there's many housing discrimination incidents where people were turned away from housing or were kicked out of housing for being an interracial relationship.

And we don't have the voices of those people. The newspaper articles don't say, 'Hey, how did it feel to be kicked out of your house because you're Black?' or, 'How did it feel to be kicked out because you brought a Black man home with you on a date?' And so, we've lost that and many of those people aren't with us anymore.

But we *can* start to rectify that situation by interviewing people who are still with us. And so, when we do these oral histories, part of it as a fact-finding mission to say, 'Hey, let's build back some of the archival knowledge base that's missing.' And the other part of it is, 'What was your experience of these incidents? How did you feel being discriminated against and how did that shape your experiences for the rest of your life and so it works on two fronts in that way.

I also think, as far as like a strategy for how you do work that deals with racism and discrimination, we, as human beings, like hearing other people's stories. There is a real power to empathy and to understanding other people's perspectives. And individual experiences get at that in a way that the history just couldn't possibly illuminate. Even if you have 100 newspaper articles about a racist incident, it's not as powerful as hearing about how it felt in the moment, hearing about the person who was the victim, hearing about how students felt at the moment.

And so, I think the, you know, broader kind of power of oral history besides just making sure that we're documenting experiences and feelings, is that it allows people to really empathize with those in the past and to say, 'Wow, like that must have been a terrible experience' and it opens up that conversation in a way that I think is a little less threatening than a historian coming in, you know, capital H historian coming in and saying, 'Here are the facts, here's the racism and here's how you should feel about it.'

Instead, it's this really human interaction of listening to someone else's story, empathizing with their experience, and then really starting to understand how experiences like that can really damage people and can hold trauma for people.

**Emily Tran:** So, in the oral histories that you've recorded so far, have you found any evidence of a deeply ingrained collective memory or historical memory of racist incidents or of anti-racist activism? But which I mean, like, are there certain events that a lot of people recall?

**Kacie Lucchini Butcher:** Yes. That was one of the most interesting parts about this. So, I've done oral histories about certain, you know, moments in history, so everybody has this kind of collective memory of it. But at UW, we interview lots of different people who were here for lots of different years and who have lots of different connections to the university.

But one period that really sticks out is this mid- to late 1980s. So, we talked to people who were students at the time who were on campus, but we've also talked to people who weren't students in the mid- to late 80s, but who were here maybe in the early 90s or in the early 2000s. And they know about these incidents in the 80s. So, it kind of became this, like, passing down the line of 'Hey, don't you remember that this happened?'

So, a lot of those incidents that I talked about earlier are these racist parties that are going on on Langdon Street. And they just have this deeply ingrained memory for people not only in what the parties were about—so one of the parties was a slave auction party where fraternity brothers dressed

up in blackface and then they sold their services to other people. That party really sticks out for people, not only in, they wore blackface, they were selling, you know, their fraternity brothers, but also in the effect of it, which is that students kind of use that incident as like, 'We're not doing this anymore and we're really going to take a stand.'

So, you see after that party, this huge wave of activism where students are saying, 'How are we actually going to be an anti-racist university? How are we actually going to make structural change? Because these parties are happening every year and to be quite frank, we're sick of it. Like we're not going to take it anymore. We're not going to do it.' And so, you really see this movement of students saying, 'Let's make some real change on campus. Otherwise, you know, what's going to happen to all of us and are we just gonna keep putting up with all of this?'

And what comes out of that is, first of all, UW-Madison's first diversity plan, that's called the Madison Plan in 1988. So that does spur change. But also, this great kind of organizing mechanism that starts in the Multicultural Student Center, which started in 1988, as well, so you see not only an administrative policy change that works towards anti-discrimination, but you also see a system pop up, which is a gathering space for students of color to start making this organizational change themselves and to really start organizing and agitating for more change.

**Emily Tran:** As people were recalling these frat parties and the student organizing that resulted or that came out of a student's anger at these frat parties, did white alumni recall these incidents in a different way than students of color?

**Kacie Lucchini Butcher:** Yes, yeah. I think that's kind of like a natural output of this, right? So, when we talk to Black students who were there during the time, or even employees who were there during the time, they talk a lot about the emotional weight. So, you know, we talked to people who were either grad students or, like, administrators at the time, *and* they really recall just how devastated they felt for their Black students to have to see this dehumanization on such a scale, and to have to hear some of the arguments against why the university shouldn't have to do anything. So, it was first the dehumanization, and then second, the kind of apologizing or the inaction that created another layer of harm.

And then you have the students at the time who just remember feeling, you know, kind of devastated that another incident had happened, and also angry, just, 'Hey, I've been here for a couple years, and this keeps happening and nothing is changing. What are we actually going to do to make this place better for me and for my friends and for people who come after me?' And so, I think that you see that kind of like harm and the real emotional weight. And clearly, we're interviewing them in 2019 and in 2020, and they remember this. So, this isn't something that they kind of just, 'Oh, I forgot about this.'

We contacted a lot of these people because they came to us first and said, 'Hey, I have some information for you about the late 1980s, and I'd love to talk to you about it.' So they haven't forgotten these incidents. They really have staying power, not only in their memory, but I think in, in the emotional weight of what it's been to carry around these histories and how it's affected their relationship to the institution, right, because it has affected how they think about UW and what their connection is to this place.

And on the other side, from white students, you know, it depends on who you talk to. Some people, this really started them on a different path to understanding their own inherent racism, and to understanding maybe how they had been feeding into these systems even unknowingly. But at the same time, a lot of them didn't have that same emotional response. So, they give us a lot of details about the party or what people were saying about the party. They give us a lot of details about the protest and about going to organizing meetings, and about hearing you know what the Wisconsin Student Association was doing about it. But they don't have that same emotional connection to it, they don't talk about the dehumanization, they don't talk about the trauma. It's really just this kind of a memory of the time period because it was so central in the conversations about what was going on at UW and it was so central to student life.

And so, they're very different experiences and they're both useful, right, because they give us different sides of the story, but they definitely have a different emotional weight.

**Emily Tran:** So, once we've built a shared knowledge of this past once we've sort of checked off that first step in the process of reckoning, what does the second step look like, which is what you described as the actual work of reckoning? How do we as students, teachers, staff, alumni community members, how do we enact historical justice and repair the harms and trauma of the past?

**Kacie Lucchini Butcher:** Yeah, I think there's going to be this period between, 'Okay, here's the history and we know it,' and then, 'Here's the action,' where I think people will need to really sit with the emotional weight of all this history. And I think that's going to hit people really differently, because the emotional response and that immediate emotional phase is not the time to try and make change. It's instead, I think, it's the time to really reflect on like, why this all happened and what is our complicity in all of it, and how are we maybe perpetuating these systems today when we don't mean to or that's not our goal.

But after that I think we are going to, like you said, we're looking to enact historical forms of justice. So, this gets to me to the question of why do we do history, why do I do public history? And it's because hopefully we can make change. There are hopefully lessons in the past. The famous saying: if you don't know your history, you're doomed to repeat it. And I'm hoping that we can use this project and our research as a way to really break these kinds of repetitions that are going on.

And to say, 'Hey, listen. We have all these diversity policies from 1988 to now and we're not seeing the changes that we want to see.' So maybe we should totally re-alter how we do these plans, because we can look at the historical plans and say, 'They're not serving us and we're seeing that they're not serving us. So, let's make sure that we don't use those same policies anymore.'

And I think that that will happen on many layers besides administrative policy, but my goal and my hope is that we can look at the history and there will be very critical lessons in there for us about how we've operated as a university, how we've operated as a student body, how we've operated as, you know, Madison community members, and how we can begin to really disrupt and interrupt these repetitions that keep happening.

That's another clear take away for me in the research is that many of the conversations going on in history, we're still having. And so, I hope that we can use the history as a way to enlighten and to

really shine a light on the ways that these systems keep repeating, so that we can begin to disrupt them.

**Emily Tran:** And do you think that, based on the research that you've done, do you think this task of reckoning is something that can be accomplished primarily through university policy changes or is there sort of another dimension to making UW the kind of place that we want it to be?

**Kacie Lucchini Butcher:** As I said earlier, I think that, you know, the administration historically has used social and cultural systems as a way to kind of block change because they say, 'Hey, you know, we can we can policy change all you want but that's not going to change people's viewpoints.' And I agree with them to a point. I think that policy change is going to be a key aspect of figuring out our history and how we're kind of responsible to it and how we reckon with it.

But that can't be the only thing, right? There's no way we're going to legislate or make new policies and get ourselves out of racism. I think that that is only one piece of the kind of puzzle.

The other part and the part I think that's harder to get at is how we create social and cultural change at UW. We have a lot of students, and we have a lot of students who are at different parts in this journey of anti-racism work, and we need to serve and meet all of those students where they're at. And that is a big task for the project but it is our responsibility to do that.

And I think the social cultural aspects of racism are what continues at UW more than even policy change. It's the kinds of things that I think—microaggressions for example—so small, and yet so damaging to students' experience of this place. And they're normally just these kind of side comments that people don't see as harmful, but people say things all the time that they mean in good faith. So, for example, they might give a compliment on someone's language or on the way that someone writes. They might give a compliment on somebody's hair or their way of dress. And it's kind of like a backhanded compliment because it often has something to do with the way that they understand this person's racial identity or their social identity. And it's meant to be something nice, right, or it's meant to be, like, a fun conversation starter. And instead, how it's perceived is as derogatory and aggressive. And there's a long history of microaggressions here.

And so one of these outcomes may be, 'Hey, we really need to start thinking about how we confront microaggressions in the classroom, in our boardrooms,' but also 'How do we teach students what microaggressions are at the outset of when they become students so we have less students doing these microaggressions.'

So, I think that there's ways that we can use the history, hopefully in an effort to make some of the social and cultural change. But that's really the bigger challenge, right, is that we as a country and as a nation and as a culture are racist, and that doesn't stop at the boundaries of our university. Just because students, you know, step onto campus doesn't mean that they aren't still in a racist society, that they weren't still brought up in really racist systems and really racist culture. And so, it's going to be a constant struggle, I think, for the university to always be combating this social and cultural racism that's so, you know, persistent at UW.

**Emily Tran:** What kind of plans are in place to share the Public History Project's findings with the campus, and to engage students, faculty and staff in these tough conversations?

**Kacie Lucchini Butcher:** So, we have a lot of outcomes and I'll preface like I tell all of our community members, these are flexible we don't have to do any of these. We're probably going to do some or most of these but we're also still figuring out with community members how they want this history to be shared.

But for right now our plan is to have a physical exhibit in the fall of 2022. So that will be a pretty traditional museum exhibit that people are used to seeing that will lay out these kinds of broad themes and some of the histories that we found.

Now, museum exhibits are of course limited in their size and scope and so we're also going to have a digital exhibit website. So, on the digital exhibit website people will get additional histories that we can't put in the physical exhibit, but they'll also have a chance to interact with our archival materials.

So, we're building an archival database of all the documents and photos and oral histories that we've uncovered and documented, so that people can interact with the archival materials themselves, which I think will be really powerful. And the website will serve as a kind of repository. Right now, if you want to figure out what's the racist history of UW, it's just scattered throughout so many documents and boxes and websites. It's really hard to get that kind of general picture and so this will be that place where people can start that process of uncovering.

We're also going to have a lecture series when the exhibit's on so that we can kind of work through some of these deeper issues that underlie these. So, we're hoping to bring some national-level speakers but we're also really going to focus on local speakers because so much of this knowledge lives in the community.

We're also going to have a more academic product, a 10,000-word kind of report or document that lays out this history in a more academic way.

And then a key part of this as we are an educational institution is curricular materials. How do we get this history that we've uncovered into the curriculum and into the classroom? And so, we're hoping to create some kind of teacher toolkit so people from different departments will be able to make this history really real for students. I think for a lot of students, there's a common misconception that oh, well, racism happens over there, it happens in that community and it's not happening here, or it didn't happen here. And so often, showing them the history of this place really illuminates this conversation for them and brings it home and makes it personal. So, we're hoping that the curriculum can do that.

And then we have what we're just loosely calling right now our legacy of the project. And that's really nebulous right now. Like, it could really turn into a lot of things but it's this question of, once the work's done, right, once all these educational tools are out there, what comes next? How do we really make sure that this history and this project doesn't just fade into obscurity or get forgotten, or is something that, you know, people talk about and say, 'Oh yeah they did that project ten years ago but nothing's happened since,' right?

How do we make sure that the lessons that we've learned in this work really get embedded into the university culture and into university policymaking and really into the fabric of the university, so that we're constantly re-evaluating, so that we're constantly working towards building a more equitable university?

**Emily Tran:** Right. Reckoning isn't something that happens in 2022 and then never again. It's not one and done.

**Kacie Lucchini Butcher:** Exactly.

**Emily Tran:** Okay. How can our listeners get involved in the Public History Project?

**Kacie Lucchini Butcher:** So, as I've talked about many times, we love community involvement and we want our community to feel empowered to help us shape this project and to participate in this project. So, there's a couple ways.

First of all, if you want to get involved, if you have a history from when you were at UW or since you've lived in the community or something, an issue that you think we just can't not cover, please reach out to us. We have an email address, [publichistoryproject@wisc.edu](mailto:publichistoryproject@wisc.edu), and you can reach out to us and send us those tips. People you think should we should interview, people you think have been overlooked, like any information you think this project can't miss, we want to know about it.

You can also visit our blog. So, we have a website that talks about the project and has the original KKK report if you'd like to read it. But on our website, we also have a blog and that blog is where we share new history. So, we try and publish about a blog article a month, sometimes more. And these are blog articles that are written by graduate and undergraduate students that really unpack some of this history that they found. And so, we share that history all the time and we're hoping that people can kind of access it and begin processing this history in advance of the exhibit. And our website is [publichistoryproject.wisc.edu](http://publichistoryproject.wisc.edu).

And we also have an Instagram account. So our Instagram account promotes our blog but it also shares fun things that we find in the archive: weird things, photos, videos, oral histories, and so it's kind of the lighter side of our project, and also the more visual side of our project because we find a lot of cool stuff in the archives. So you can follow us on Instagram: [@uwpublichistoryproject](https://www.instagram.com/uwpublichistoryproject).

So, those are a couple ways, and we really hope you do engage because for us, the community is really central to this work.

**Emily Tran:** All right, I'll make sure we put those links in the show notes. You've already started publishing stories for students, alumni and activists to engage with as you just said. What is your hope in making this history, accessible to the broader community?

**Kacie Lucchini Butcher:** I think that making the history accessible is one of the kind of core goals. So, as I said, there's nowhere that you can get this history right now in one place. Some of it's written in some journal articles or mentioned, some of it's in newspaper articles, but there's no one place where you can kind of see the size and the scope and the scale, and also get a narrative, right, like what are we supposed to start taking away from this? Why, why does this research even matter, what's it teaching us? And so, I hope that our project does that.

And the reason that we've decided to release research early is because we, there's really no ownership for us over this. This isn't my history project, it's not my students' history project. This is our

collective community project and so we really try and operate with transparency because we want people to know the history we've uncovered. We want to get it out there so people can access it.

But also, we want the conversations to start now. We don't have to wait until we have a full history of discrimination at UW to begin this conversation. Because if we wait for that moment, it's never going to come. We're never going to know every single history of racism at UW. And so instead, our hope is that if we get some of these issues out there now, we can really begin these conversations in earnest in advance of the exhibit, and start doing a lot of this work, right now. Because it does speak to this moment, right, and we need to start having these kinds of reckonings not only nationally, but in our own communities.

**Emily Tran:** Kacie, I really enjoyed talking with you today and I've learned so much. Thank you for being here.

**Kacie Lucchini Butcher:** Thank you so much for having me, this was great.

**Emily Tran:** That was Kacie Lucchini Butcher, Director of the University of Wisconsin—Madison Public History Project. You can check our show notes for links to the Public History Project's website and Instagram, as well as information on how to get in contact with the researchers.

[MUSICAL INTERLUDE]

Listeners, please send us your questions for a historian. Our email address is [outreach@history.wisc.edu](mailto:outreach@history.wisc.edu).

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Thank you for listening and be well.

[MUSIC ENDS]