

How Historical Narratives are Constructed

Interview Thread Transcript

Chris Bonner

I could see a way in which Lincoln being seen as the "Great Emancipator" and being celebrated as such is a suggestion that, and is sort of analogous to, this feeling that emancipation is the end, that all Black folks needed was freedom, that belief that freedom was the thing, that freedom was the only thing, that belief I think has been profoundly significant in terms of the limits of equality, the limits of justice, the limits of real and full liberation that African Americans have struggled against since the Civil War era. And so, the feeling that Lincoln is the architect of emancipation and ought to be celebrated for emancipation alone, I think, is parallel to this feeling that emancipation alone was enough. And we know that emancipation was not enough, that freedom and equality were different things, and one was secured during the war and one was left to be fought for decades.

To take this myth of Lincoln as the "Great Emancipator," if we think about Lincoln solely as that, as a person who freed the slaves, as the saying goes, what we lose is the reality of Lincoln as a thoughtful leader, as a person who was listening, who was reflecting, who was introspecting and trying to decide how he felt about emancipation and what he could do about emancipation. And so, when we see Lincoln as the "Great Emancipator" and suggest that, "Oh, he just freed the slaves because he could," we overlook all of the things that he did that we should want our leaders and we should want all of our people to do, which is to think and reflect and be considerate of other people and their ideas and their needs. And so, I think Lincoln looks better as a person who gradually came to embrace emancipation as a policy than he does as a person who just freed the slaves because he always hated slavery. It's much more impressive to me to see him as evolving.

Kerri Greenidge

So Frances Ellen Watkins Harper's critique really had to do with the fact that African American people had been in the country since the country's founding, that the country belonged to Black people as much as if not more than it did to white people, and that Black people could rebuild and reframe the country in a way that reflected the ideals that were in place in the 18th century, but never came to fruition. Harper was also somebody who really believed that education of the formerly enslaved was the way that you were going to build up African American communities. You were going to create an educated

populace that would then vote and be able to represent themselves in Congress and in the halls of government. So someone like a Frances Harper was very critical of colonization as were many abolitionist spokeswomen during the time.

One of the things that not just Frances Ellen Watkins Harper but other African Americans pointed to about Lincoln, is that they mistrusted this notion that he was somebody who took on the currents of whatever it was other white men were saying at the time, that there was a criticism that he didn't have really original thoughts about slavery and how to end it, that it was really something that, although he was anti-slavery, that's not to say that he wasn't, but he didn't have really any original ideas or takes on it. And that he was really, I think Harper's critique shows this, the idea of many African Americans was that he was merely rehashing arguments that had been made back in 1817, and not really realizing that the current had changed, that African American people themselves, the vast majority, were not going to relocate, and that this wasn't actually a plan.

Harper and others would argue, this is not a plan for rearranging American and revolutionizing American policy. It's an opinion, but it's not really a plan. So there was a lot of criticism for him for that, as Harper would point out. There was also a lot of criticism for him because the question of what were you going to do with all this land that Southerners abandoned and that Black people were still on, and that Black people were farming and in some cases were being paid to farm, and yet there's no policy enacted that puts that into law. And so when Harper is criticizing him for colonization, as when many African American abolitionists criticized Lincoln in 1862, they're not just talking and reflecting on his plan for colonization. They're really responding to the fact that the war is moving in a direction that up until early 1863 Lincoln didn't publicly acknowledge.

He didn't publicly note that the reality on the ground, Northerners, is that slavery is dissolving because Black people are fleeing and because the white South is collapsing. And so once the white South starts to collapse, the people who are running the economy, as they've always done, are the Black people who are doing the labor and continuing to produce the cotton and the rice and the sugar. So the criticism of Lincoln is not merely that he was a colonizationist in 1862, it was that he did not in many people's opinion, many radical abolitionists' opinion, did not have a foresight into what he was actually going to create once the Civil War ended.

Manisha Sinha

So I would argue that... At least that's the argument I make in my book *The Slave's Cause* where I say that we have to look of course at Black and white abolitionists as previous historians had done. But I argue that slave resistance is central to understanding the abolition movement. And that many times it is instances of slave resistance that propel the abolition movement forward, whether it's emancipation in Massachusetts or whether it's these famous instances of rebellion and resistance against the Fugitive Slave Law, or the emergence of an entire generation of leaders of the abolition movement. The fugitive slave abolitionists like Frederick Douglass, like Harriet Tubman, they were the most famous, but there was a whole generation of them that come to lead and personify the movement.

And so I would argue that slave resistance is not something that is completely separate from the history of abolition – that in fact it is central to it, and that holds true. Many British historians have argued even for British abolition. They look at famous slave rebellions that evoke the name of Wilberforce or looking at the ways in which slave rebellion propelled abolition in the British parliament. Same is true for the French. You can't talk about abolition at all without talking about the Haitian Revolution, which is of course the only instance of a successful slave rebellion in world history that established the first modern Black republic. Most abolitionists viewed the Haitian Revolution as an abolitionist revolution. And they praised it precisely for that reason. And the Haitians themselves, saw themselves as part of a broader movement. So for instance, in Haiti, when they gain their independence and they had to name some of the first mans of war, their ships, they call them Wilberforce and Clarkson after the British abolitionists. So they saw themselves as part of a broader abolition movement too. So that's the argument I make in my book, that we cannot understand the abolition movement without centering the history of slave resistance in it.

I think one of the ways in which the abolition movement was portrayed as mainly a movement of Northern whites or of the British, who were very far from slavery, was in fact the response of slaveholders. Slaveholders did not want to talk about Black abolitionists, sometimes would mention, I found in my own research, the Black Douglass versus the white Douglas, that is the Stephen Douglas who ran against Lincoln. But they tended to ignore African Americans because it did not really suit their purposes to recognize Black resistance. They portrayed the abolition movement as predominantly a movement of Northern whites who had no idea about slavery, who were hypocrites, shedding crocodile tears about slavery, blind to the injustices of their own society. They said that about the British abolitionists, they said that about Northern white abolitionists. If you recognize Afro-British abolitionists, like Olaudah Equiano or Black abolitionists

like Douglass, then you would be in fact engaged in a political contest with enslaved people. And that is not something they wanted to do. That would prove their entire theory of slavery or racial slavery wrong. Because clearly these were people who were fighting for their freedom and could well argue their case.

And that unfortunately, that view of abolitionists continued, especially in the American historical profession, in the mainstream American academia, because African Americans, who were writing history outside it and writing different views of abolitionists. In fact, some of the first complementary biographies of abolitionists were written by African Americans like Archibald Grimke, like W.E.B. Du Bois. They were the ones who rescued people like John Brown, who was portrayed as a madman by most American historians. This is the time when most American historians portrayed slavery as this benevolent paternalistic institution. And they portrayed abolitionists as these crazy white Northern fanatics who had caused a needless Civil War. And that was the dominant interpretation of slavery and abolition. It is not until the Civil Rights Movement, when civil rights activists start calling themselves the new abolitionists, that we start getting more sympathetic portraits of abolitionists. But as I said, African American writers and historians had always presented an alternative picture of both slavery and abolition.

Bryan Stevenson

I mean, I just think that the multiple ways that we demonized Blackness in this country – we differentiate it between people who are Black and white in ways that were designed to maintain racial hierarchy have never really been explored. We had a narrative of racial difference from Day One, and it's part of the reason why we haven't acknowledged the genocide of indigenous people. When Europeans came to this continent, we killed millions of indigenous people, and you couldn't reconcile the famine and the disease and the war and the death and the destruction and the despair of millions of tribal communities that were disrupted by this invasion by Europeans with this concept of freedom and justice for all. So you had to create a narrative. And the narrative that was created is that indigenous people, native people, they're different, they're racially different. Those Indians are savages. And because they're racially different, the values that we hold dear – equality and justice for all – they don't apply to that population.

That then laid the groundwork for the enslavement of African people. And when Black people came, that same narrative was crafted in an even more intense and virulent way because Black people were being enslaved. We said that Black people can't do this, and Black people can't do this. Black people aren't fully human.

HANDOUT FIVE, LESSON THREE

It was just interesting to me to note that in the state of Maryland, the first enslaved Africans don't get to Maryland until about 1642. And within 20 years, the state of Maryland has actually passed miscegenation laws that make it clear that white people cannot marry, cannot be in relationship with Black people. They were already creating a codified legal status to Blackness that made Black people less worthy, less valuable, something that could not be even loved in the way that we think about marriage and relationship, and that narrative played out throughout this country.

And so by the time Lincoln comes into power, we have a very clear idea about the inferiority of Black people. We have this very clear idea that Black people are not as good or not as worthy or not as... They're not equal to white people. And it's hard to navigate that unless you understand the wrongness of that and confront it. Being an abolitionist didn't require you to do that. So a lot of abolitionists bought into that same idea, and I think that's what we have never really contended with in this country.

We haven't contended with the problem of racial hierarchy, of white supremacy and these narratives. And that's because we didn't contend with that. Reconstruction fails. After the Civil War, these commitments to voting rights for Black people and equal protection, all are abandoned because this belief in racial hierarchy is greater than our belief in democracy, greater than our belief in equal justice under the law. And so the court stepped back and let thousands of Black people get beaten and tortured and traumatized and lynched on courthouse lawns. The court stepped back and allowed Black people to be disenfranchised. They allowed Black people to be exploited and abused, and that carries on throughout the 20th century.

By the time the 1960s come, 1950s come, where courageous Black folks are once again pushing this country to own up to its commitment to democracy, it's a struggle because, for a lot of people, they believe that America is a place that values white people over Black people. That's their belief system. It's the reason why we have segregation. It's the reason why we disenfranchise. And when that's challenged, people get really upset. And we passed the voting rights laws and the civil rights laws, but there was never a reckoning with this basic idea, which was what caused the division during Lincoln's era, that this presumption of dangerousness and guilt that got assigned to Black and Brown people when they came to this continent, it's still here. And because of that, we're still fighting to overcome that presumption. We're still trying to get people to reckon with this legacy of white supremacy, this ideology of white supremacy, these narratives of racial difference.

And until we do that, Black and Brown people are going to be menaced by police officers. They're going to be disproportionately victimized in various systems, in health systems, in educational systems. And it's why I think understanding this period in American history, when we thought we were dealing with the issue, needs to be re-evaluated.