Historical Agency and the Black Self-Emancipation Thesis: 
A Historiographical Approach to the Arguments of
"Who Freed Slaves"

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"[B]lack [women] were given straw and they made bricks."
Glenda Gilmore, Gender and Jim Crow

1. INTRODUCTION: Who Freed Slaves?

Ever since the racial slavery system in the English colonies had been legally established by the Virginia State Law of 1662, this system violated and used labor of enslaved people for roughly two centuries in order to produce social and economic gains for Southern white society which was centered around plantation masters. Who then, should we understand, freed slaves from this mammoth legal exploitation system in the mid-nineteenth century U.S. South? The knowledge on agency regarding the emancipation of slaves has been produced from many perspectives in the past. Generally speaking, contemporary American history textbooks posit the sixteenth U.S. President Abraham Lincoln as one of the most well known "emancipator" icons due to the fact that he issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 as well as the ratification of the thirteenth amendment of the U.S. constitution. The fact that Lincoln is the first president who codified the abolition of slavery on the written constitution is of course of great significance. In addition to the Lincoln-as-emancipator version of history, there also exists a historical attachment to the Union soldiers of the Civil War (today witnessed in the reenactments of the war battles). This narrative praises the Union army soldiers (and Lincoln, who was the commander of the Union army) as the heroes of the story of emancipation, since supposedly without the Union's victory over the Southern Confederacy, the emancipation of slaves would not have taken place.

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In the field of the Civil War studies, this war has been defined as one of the first "total wars" in the modern period. Based on the total war theory, a pioneer work on the home front *Divided Houses* was published in 1992. Additionally, in 2002, an edited volume *The War was You and Me*, written by sixteen scholars, dealt with the home front from various intriguing perspectives of the New Social History which was originally influenced by French *École des Annales*. The landmark synthesis examines the role of widows, children, deserters, orators, and school teachers for freedpeople—people who did not actually fight in the battles but nonetheless significantly contributed to the nature and the course of the war. These studies also vividly capture the sensual backgrounds, the sounds, and the smells of battles. Finally, they grapple with the ideologies of nationalism, memory, and manhood and the role these played in this historical moment.

Today, we can no longer credit only Northern forces and subjects for the Northern victory, and for Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. As historians clarified, Lincoln started the war for the Union neither for slaves nor the abolition of slavery. To be more specific, Lincoln prioritized the Union over anything. In his famous letter to Horace Greeley, Lincoln declared that if he could save the Union by freeing slaves he would free them, and if he could save the Union by keeping the slavery system, then he would keep them. For Lincoln, the issues of abolition of slavery and the emancipation of slaves were secondary.

However, the close contest at the Battle of Antietam and some other battles had forced changes of the Union army's strategies, which resulted in sending blacks (free blacks from North as well as ex-slaves or fugitives from South) into the Union army as their most reliable soldiers. For example, as early as November 27, 1862 at the Baptist church on St. Helena Island, S.C., in the area which the Union had already occupied and that slaves were freed, General Rufus Saxton announced an encouragement to black men to enlist in the army. According to a journal entry by Charlotte L. Forten who was an elite Northern black woman teaching at the freedpeople's school on the island, the General told freedpeople "what a victory the black troops had lately won on the Georgian coast, and what a great good they had done for their race in winning; they had proved to their enemies that the black man can and will fight for his freedom."

There are numerous other examples that show black people changed the war situation better for the Union. Thousands of both ex-slaves and free blacks (both men and women, in the North and South, and on the battleground as well as the home
front), while sacrificing their lives, shifted the war's cause toward emancipation. Thus, had we given enough credit to the costs paid by black people of that period, we would realize that it was not Lincoln, not the war itself, not sole Union soldiers, but ordinary blacks and their friends— whose freedom rested on the war's end — who freed slaves. This paper examines the "who freed slaves" debate within historiography from the black self-emancipationist viewpoint, and intends to see historical agency of black people for their emancipation during the American Civil War and Reconstruction period in the mid-nineteenth century.

2. Historiographical Backgrounds of the Black Self-Emancipation Thesis

This view has certainly emerged out of a strain of politically-driven historical statements which was called as "the (black) self-emancipation thesis." Influenced by Vincent Harding's account of black liberation history in 1981 (which stated that "self-liberated fugitives" and "self-freed men and women" took initiative in "this overwhelming human movement" and "took their freedom into their own hands"), Robert F. Engs had initiated the thesis in his article "the Great American Slave Rebellion" written in 1991. His main idea that slaves freed themselves ignited the argument over the agency and the subjects of the emancipation. Barbara Fields who also argues along this line stated that, "the slaves were able to turn their will to be free into a political problem that politicians had to deal with politically. Still, freedom did not come to the slaves from words on paper, either the words of Congress or those of the President. The slaves themselves had to make their freedom real. Thousands of slave men gained freedom for themselves and their families by enlisting for military service... The slaves decided at the time of Lincoln's election that their hour had come." Major historians of African Americans such as Ira Berlin and Steven Hahn also published works with a similar stance. Furthermore, recently, Heather Andrea Williams in her Self-Taught, claimed that freedpeople were not objects but subjects or agents (i.e., active participants) of freedpeople's educational project which took place after slaves were freed upon the Union's arrival to the Southern plantations during the war.

These scholars stood against Stanly Elkins' Sambo theory and Jon Butler's spiritual Holocaust theory that neglected and denied slaves' agency (i.e., slaves' autonomy, their own cultural formation, or their resistance). Elkin and Butler emphasized the cruelty of the slavery system so much that they also victimized slaves.
In other words, ironically, in focusing so heavily on the institution and structure of slavery, they ended up emphasizing the psychological damage done to an individual slave; this resulted in explaining how and why black people were historically denied their psychology and humanity. As is well known, their accounts were criticized as racist because they focused on the negative side of a slave's life, and missed both individual slave's and community's resilience and the process of empowerment.

Being from the earlier generation of American historians who were influenced by the New Social History school, John Blassingame introduced the lively voices and rich lives of the slave community despite their adversity. Being from later generation of this school, Berlin and other advocates of the black self-emancipation theory followed the New Social Historians (here represented by Blassingame who took a lead with his study of the slave community.) Most of these New Social Historians envisioned people as powerful and conscious actors (thus, agents) who made crucial changes in history. By so doing, they wanted to challenge previous accounts of “History” (history starting with capitalized H, i.e., top down historical narrative) that depicted slaves as powerless victims. In documenting agency among slaves, women, laborers, and other historical and social minorities, these historians offered a version of history that challenged dominant discourses of power and hegemonic society.

3. Arguments and Views by the Opponents of the Self-Emancipation Thesis: 1860’s and Present

There were some criticisms of this school, however, that one of its leaders, Ira Berlin, had to state that he had never argued that blacks were the only agents of the emancipation story. According to Berlin, slaves were the most important agents in the emancipation drama, but they could not realize their dream of freedom by themselves. In their scenario of emancipation that slaves took a lead, slaves first had to gain support of the Union soldiers who were “the slaves’ first students.” Then slaves themselves became the soldiers, finally gaining support of the powerful “partner” Lincoln.

Thus, Berlin included a component of the contingency of history into his analysis. Here historical contingency means that the original intention of subject does not necessarily influence the outcome. This perspective runs counter to the traditional cause and effect account of history. In this instance, Lincoln and some anti-slavery (but not abolitionist) Unionists who did not - in their heart - wish to free slaves,
consequently helped slaves who from the very beginning to the end fought the war for the purpose of emancipation. Hence Berlin claims it was slaves' own knowledge, wisdom, and power that enabled them to take advantage of any slight chances that came into their sights.\(^\text{16}\)

Berlin's argument also runs counter to the theory by James McPherson who is one of the most established scholars among academic professionals and popular historians among the general American public, and who positions Lincoln as the only hero of the emancipation.\(^\text{17}\) McPherson is persistent with the Lincoln-as-the-emancipator theory. He goes back to the causes of the war, and indicates that Lincoln's inauguration first psychologically pushed Southern leaders to take their own path. McPherson argues that even before his inauguration, Lincoln denied the continuance of the compromises over slavery and insisted on the anti-slavery position. It was right after Lincoln's inauguration that the Confederate States of America (the Southern Confederacy) had resigned from the Union, and announced the establishment of their new nation. McPherson also points out that common theme of Lincoln's speech was slavery, and that he gave the talk on slavery 175 times. Therefore, McPherson concludes that Lincoln is the true emancipator due to the fact that the President inspired the South to rebel against the Union, and that his careful leadership utilized "emancipation" as a strategy for the Union to win at the very crucial turning point through the course of the war. According to McPherson, thus "slaves did not emancipate themselves; they were liberated by Union armies. Freedom quite literally came from the barrel of a gun. And who was the commander in chief that called these armies into being, appointed their generals, and gave them direction and purpose? ... Abraham Lincoln freed the slaves."\(^\text{18}\) Perhaps we must simply accept the fact that this notion is still prevailing and popular among the general public.

We can also date back to the education of freedpeople to find one of the first lessons that taught ex-slaves that Lincoln freed slaves. In textbooks used for freedpeople's schools, the message (i.e., President Lincoln freed slaves and that freedpeople owe a lot to the government) was repeated. For example, in three of earlier-established schools (\(^\text{No. 1 and No. 2 Freedmen's schools on St. Helena Island as well as No. 4 freedmen's school in Port Royal}\)) in the Union-occupied South Carolina Sea Islands, one hundred fifteen students out of three hundred twenty seven student-enrollments had used a reading textbook \textit{the Third Reader};\(^\text{19}\) This textbook contains a picture of Lincoln, the Emancipation Proclamation, and Lincoln's short biography.
written and dedicated by Charles Sumner (one of the most notable abolitionist politicians). Similar messages were everywhere in textbooks of different levels. For example, advanced level classes used a reading called the Plain Counsels for Freedmen. In this book, Lincoln was portrayed as a figure head and freedpeople as laborers to follow leaders like Lincoln. “The soldiers do the fighting for the country, and President Lincoln and others in authority do the thinking and planning. ... You see there is a great variety of labor to be done in this world, but every one must be willing to do his part, just where he is needed most.” This kind of message was intentionally sent to freedpeople by the Northern government through school education so that ex-slaves did not associate idleness with freedom from forced labor (i.e., slavery).

Moreover, newspapers published by an abolitionist society reported that freedpeople loved Lincoln’s photographs or drawings and that they stated these blacks’ love for “Massa Lincum”[sic] is same as their love for “de Lord Jesus”[sic]. Many of them replaced their family names with Lincoln—during the slavery period, it was customary for slaves to use their owner’s family names as theirs. The Northern neo-abolitionist news happily (—they were happy because they thought family naming after Northern leaders proved freedpeople’s deep respect toward them) reported that there were now so many “Lincolns” (as well as “Shermans” and “Saxtons”) among freedpeople in the region. There are numerous other examples that show ex-slaves’ admiration and love for Lincoln, but we must remember also that their good feelings toward their President were reinforced by those Northern education as well as the tragedy—the assassination of the President soon after the Union’s victory.


If we search for the answer to this question: “who freed slaves?” within historiography, we find revisionist studies of 1960s and beyond that shed a light on the abolitionists who (long before the war broke out) claimed the abolition of the system on religious, moral, egalitarian and humanitarian grounds. Among these abolitionists were both whites and blacks, both free and enslaved blacks, both Northerners and Southerners; some of them were activists of the secret network to free slaves (the Underground Railroad). Traditionally, however, abolitionists were more likely to be portrayed as Northern white Protestants except for several famous black activists during this period. Major studies on abolitionists have been undertaken by James
McPherson, on Frederick Douglass by David Blight, on Evangelical Abolitionists by Bertram Wyatt-Brown, and finally on the earlier Port Royalists who assisted freed people by Willie Lee Rose.²³

We can name only a few women such as Harriet Beecher Stow with her pen who aroused the abolitionist sentiment in Northern society, Anna Elizabeth Dickinson who traveled to give effective abolitionist speeches, Susie King Taylor who went to live on campgrounds with black regiments to look after soldiers' wounds and battle lives, and finally Harriet Tubman who conducted "the Underground Railroad" and worked as a spy for the Union army at the war front.²⁴ These are only the tip of the iceberg; there were uncountable and nameless contributions by various individuals and groups to the very long journey and processes of the emancipation.

Due to the upheaval of African American historical studies after the Civil Rights Movement, the contribution of both free and enslaved blacks to the emancipation came to light. This narrative emphasizes the impact of the enactment of the fugitive slave law of 1855, which threatened the status of free blacks in the North. Along with fugitives and slaves of the South, they oftentimes sacrificed their lives to win freedom for their fellow blacks in the abolitionist activities and war battles.²⁵ The movie "Glory" is another product of both revisionist and self-emancipationist approach to this history. It is a highly regarded film among historians who pay attention to the role of blacks—recognizing that the black regiment contributed to the Northern victory, and celebrating the courage of black soldiers as well as their work that made emancipation real.²⁶

CONCLUSION:

Being the second class citizens even among the minds of their white abolitionist friends, black individuals had to risk and pay with their own lives in order to win recognition from the mainstream society and to acquire citizenship—a status that was granted through the fifteenth amendment of the constitution (though it was only granted partially—for men in the case of the voting right—and temporarily—as racial violence toward black people worsened during and soon after the Reconstruction period). Had that fight been only for individuals, the burden must have been unbearable. The struggle that individuals were fighting was no longer for individuals only, but it was also for their racial uplift. Memories and experiences of slavery (including the material reality of sexual violence most often coerced by Master
upon enslaved women) let slaves take ownership of the war on a great surge of revolutionary zeal towards emancipation.

As mentioned above, the black self-emancipation thesis grew out of the soil of the New Social History, the Civil Rights Movement, and the revisionist works fertilized from the mid-twentieth century on despite the persistent Historical narrative of Lincoln as the great emancipator among the established historians and general public. Furthermore, Multiculturalism in 1990s served as a help for the later generation of scholars who inherited this thesis. Being referred to as Identity Politics, Cultural Wars, or Politics of Recognition, Multiculturalism encouraged historical/social minority groups to tell their own stories of the past, and asked for recognition from the mainstream society. As a result, previously invisible historical figures have been re-written into historical accounts, thus challenging the static and problematic traditional-historical accounts of the past.

In those processes, while the movement found voices unheard, stories forgotten, and histories erased, we cannot deny the fact that it also created both an artificial and imagined “we” or “us” as certain agents or subjects of the historical act. After the so-called Linguistic Turn, postmodern or postcolonial critiques have cast doubts over notions of essentialism and authenticity, thus urging historians to be more careful about fixed notions of agency. Some even proclaim that assuming a certain agency or subject is an act of enclosure of a group of people, and that they insisted that we should negate agency or subjectivity. From that standpoint, the question “who freed slaves?” becomes no longer appropriate. Perhaps should we or “I” ask “what freed slaves?” or “how did slaves become free?” Or from another perspective, whether a historian is conscious or not of the latent political element in the act of writing history. We can step forward only when we start from embracing the fact that the act of historical writing today can be as political as blacks or slaves were in their revolutionary act of emancipation in mid-nineteenth century.

4 Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War, ed., Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber (New York: Oxford
8 While some scholars call it slave self-emancipation thesis, I would argue that free blacks or fugitives also played a significant role in an act of emancipation, thus, I would like to use the term black self-emancipation thesis here.
16 Berlin, "Who Freed the Slaves ? " 105-121.
20 Freedmen's Schools and Textbooks, volume 5 "John Freeman and His Family; Plain Counsels for Freedman," 41-42.
21 The Pennsylvania Freedmen's Bulletin, November and December 1866, 5.
24 Among many accounts, the following is a good overview. John Hope Franklin and Loren Shweninger, Runaway Slaves: Rebels on the Plantation (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
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28 Although I am aware of an importat article by Walter Johnson on a topic similar to this one, I must admit that I disagree with his statement about writing agency into our historical narrative today as more likely to be "therapy" rather than "politics." Walter Johnson, "On Agency," *Journal of Social History,* Vol. 37, No 1, Special Issue (Autumn, 2003), 113-124.