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Beyond Freedom: New Directions in the Study of Emancipation

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The Militarization of Freedom

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In thinking about the relationship between violence and freedom, we typically think of the role violence played in the destruction of freedom; that is, the violent counter-revolution of white supremacy in the South and the terrorizing of freedpeople during Reconstruction. Much of the work on the period, including my own, traces how southern blacks struggled against white violence to forge a freedom founded upon the rights of protection, physical security, and independence. In this narrative about the tragic demise of Reconstruction and freedpeople's valiant struggles to forge a world free from brutality and intimidation, violence becomes the antithesis of freedom.

But if freedpeople and their white allies struggled to be free from violence, they also struggled to be free through violence. Historians have debated who freed the slaves, the limits of formal emancipation, and the dynamics of self-emancipation, but one thing is clear: war destroyed slavery and made it possible to imagine a "new birth of freedom," or as James

McPherson put it, a second American revolution. The revolutionary, war-like nature of freedom's coming in the American Civil War may seem obvious, but its implications have yet to be fully interrogated. Of particular interest to me is how the language of war infused the language of freedom, and vice versa. What did it matter that many Americans, both black and white, envisioned freedom as a violent struggle?

- I. The importance of physical resistance to radical abolitionism
 - A. "A man without force is without the essential dignity of humanity"
 - B. Respectability and martial manhood
 - C. Conundrum: how to stake a claim to manliness while not appearing too aggressive, uncontrollable, or violent

- II. II. The army as a school for freedom?
 - A. Making slaves into soldiers and soldiers into citizens
 - B. Managing freedom and dependency
 - C. "Savage to we": compulsion, brutality, and violence within the army
 - D. What kind of citizens?

- III. III. A Divided Legacy
 - A. "What higher order of citizens is there than the soldier?"
 - B. A gendered freedom
 - C. The trials of Jerome
 - D. The paradox of freedom and violence