Unwriting the Freedom Narrative: 
A Review Essay 

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IN THE FIFTY YEARS SPANNING THE CENTENNIAL AND SESQUICENTENNIAL anniversaries of the Civil War, much has changed in the way historians think about that cataclysmic event. Indeed, many no longer think of the Civil War as a single event but rather as a series of wars fought on a number of fronts. Not only does the western theater now compete with the eastern theater for historians’ attention, but scholars of the war in the West also assert that the nature of warfare in the lower Mississippi Valley, not to mention in Texas and New Mexico, differed considerably from warfare in Virginia, so much so as to perhaps qualify as a different war altogether. Historians today recognize the importance of the home front—both Union and Confederate—where, some argue, what happened in kitchens and bedrooms was just as important as what transpired on battlefields. As a result, the definition of combatants has expanded to include not only partisans and guerrillas but also women, children, and slaves. Perhaps most important, professional historians today generally agree that the political divide over slavery caused the war, even as segments of the larger public still cling to a myth that the institution was a tangential issue at most. 

Despite these sweeping changes in historians’ understanding of why the war was fought, where it was fought, and who fought it, the master narrative of the Civil War in the last fifty years has been remarkably static. The standard syntheses of the period repeat more or less the same refrain: by late 1862, what initially began as a war to preserve the Union with slavery intact became a war for freedom. Although historians continue to disagree about the extent to which emancipation reflected a calculated military necessity or a principled commitment to liberal ideals, if not to flesh-and-blood people who were enslaved, freedom has become the sine qua non of Civil War history. Whether it came gradually and begrudgingly or, as James Oakes has recently
argued, perpetually and willfully, freedom was both the Civil War’s battle cry and its “unfinished revolution.”¹

Recent events, however, suggest that the freedom narrative may be ready for a twenty-first-century reboot. In the wake of the June 2015 murders at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, debates about the Confederate flag converged with the larger #blacklivesmatter movement to push national conversations about race in new directions. By exposing how the legacy of chattel slavery continues to infuse the American political economy and culture, activists marked the end of the Civil War sesquicentennial not by celebrating the emergence of a nebulous condition that succeeded legal bondage but by indicting the very notion that such a succession was either clear or complete. Their focus was not on the incremental accrual of civil or political rights but rather on the accrual of dead bodies. The continuum of violence against black people, stretching from the antebellum plantation to twenty-first-century cities and suburbs, and carried out by law enforcement and private citizens alike, raises troubling questions about how historians narrate the Civil War and its aftermath. As Ta-Nehisi Coates writes, “Enslavement was not destined to end, and it is wrong to claim our present circumstance—no matter how improved—as the redemption for the lives of people who never asked for the posthumous, untouchable glory of dying for their children.”²

This recent grassroots revision of the nation’s historical consciousness coincides with a scholarly movement to reframe our understanding of the Civil War and emancipation. For nearly two decades, historians have been grappling with the inadequacies of the freedom narrative for analyzing American history, but their efforts so far have not produced a new, synthetic alternative to the Whiggish march toward greater and more perfect freedom. Nevertheless, significant revisions to the way we interpret the multifaceted changes wrought by the destruction of chattel bondage and the institution of new regimes of labor and political organization suggest that we will not wait much longer for a more comprehensive rewriting of the freedom narrative. For if anything is clear from a consideration of the major works under review in this essay, it is that the conventional understanding of revision as an act of correction or improvement may be

²Ta-Nehisi Coates, Between the World and Me (New York, 2015), 70.
inadequate for describing the wholesale shift in perspective that is currently underway in the field of Civil War studies.

Skeptical of the oppositional pairing that Civil War historians often give to slavery and freedom, these scholars take up where colonial historian Edmund S. Morgan left off in his classic essay outlining the "intertwined and interdependent" relationship between slavery and freedom that he termed "the American paradox." Like Morgan, who urged us to think about the ways that chattel bondage informed American understandings of freedom, these scholars do not see a dichotomy so much as a duality. Working through the implications of the paradox, they ask questions about the nature of freedom once unmoored from the institution of slavery. How did slavery continue to define the meaning as well as the experience of freedom? Could the language of emancipation be deployed in the service of its old partner slavery? Having been bound so tightly to slavery for so long, the freedom that emerged during the Civil War appears warped. As Morgan cautions at the end of his essay, "[I]t may perhaps make us wonder about the ties that bind more devious tyrannies to our own freedoms and give us still today our own American paradox." These "more devious tyrannies" form the critical core of the emerging history of emancipation in the Civil War era.

How freedom came is as important as the fact that it came at all. Throughout the Atlantic world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, warfare played an important role in the destruction of slavery. In some places that role was more revolutionary than in others; in Saint Domingue, for instance, arming slaves to stave off British occupation led to the abolition of slavery in France and its colonies. Similarly in the United States during the Civil War, the recruitment of enslaved and free black men into the Union army transformed the war and opened up new avenues for African Americans to claim citizenship. In both the French Caribbean and the United States, emancipation was swift and shocking.4

It was also brutal. In Sick from Freedom, Jim Downs challenges readers to acknowledge the "hidden cost of war" for enslaved people. That hidden cost became most evident, Downs tells us, in the increased mortality of contrabands and freedpeople who suffered from disease, malnutrition, and exposure brought about inadvertently by the very

army that represented their liberation. When the Confederacy’s slaves flocked to the approaching Union troops, they often suffered the same pestilence that claimed more soldiers’ lives than bullets—dysentery, typhoid fever, influenza, and smallpox. Army-run contraband camps were riddled with disease and filth, and death tolls were high. Harriet Jacobs, who had herself escaped from slavery and endured the emotional and physical suffering that accompanied freedom, found conditions in a Washington, D.C., refugee camp beyond compare. Measles, scarlet fever, and diphtheria claimed at least ten lives a day, according to Jacobs’s estimation. Downs argues that “the Civil War . . . produced the largest biological crisis of the nineteenth century”; and while some may take issue with that generalization when considering the perennial epidemics of smallpox, cholera, and yellow fever that plagued the country both before and after the war, the impact of war-borne disease and injury outlined in Sick from Freedom is not overstated. Recent demographic analysis supports Downs’s conclusions. J. David Hacker demonstrates not only that many more enlisted soldiers died after the war as a result of wounds or diseases contracted during their service but also that the death toll for civilians, including freedpeople, was probably greater than anyone has imagined, although inadequate data makes it impossible to track. The implications are clear nonetheless. Sickness and death often characterized wartime freedom.

And while sickness and death might be unavoidable consequences of any war, Jim Downs is careful to show that motiveless microbes were not freedom’s only enemies. In addition to charting the biological threats to freedpeople’s jubilee, Downs also relates how ideas about black people’s proclivity toward sickness and dependency shaped the army’s response to the health crisis freedpeople faced both in camps and on the road. Popular opinion in the scientific community predicted the impending extinction of black people, who many believed had managed to persevere only because of the material benefits of slavery. Now that their masters would no longer provide food, clothing, and shelter, freedpeople would have to shift for themselves, and numerous army officials, including many in the medical bureau, doubted their chances. While medical officers worked tirelessly to contain outbreaks of smallpox and other contagious diseases among the troops, those conditions among black people were viewed as a “‘natural outcome’”

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of their freedom. Harriet Jacobs noticed how army chaplains and nurses seemed to pay little attention to dying freedpeople. Not only did freedpeople lack healthy food, clean water, and warm clothes, she noted, but they also faced a lack of compassion from those in positions to ease their suffering, if not prevent it. Downs questions the assumption that this situation was simply because the army wanted for manpower and resources. In the postwar period, fears that the government was encouraging idleness and dependency among the freed population made it increasingly difficult for freedpeople to receive medical care. While the “able-bodied” were put to work (or jailed for vagrancy), single women, children, and old people struggled for subsistence in a wage-based economy predicated on their competition in the labor market. Their inability to compete, however, disqualified them for rations and other forms of aid. Likewise, growing fears of epidemics and contagion presumably harbored within the freed communities worked against the goals of racial equality and civil rights advanced during Radical Reconstruction. Ironically, freedpeople became sick in large part because of the way that freedom happened during the war, and their sickness then marked them as being unfit for freedom.7

The movement of human populations during the war contributed to this “biological crisis.” The mobilization of great armies and their spread across large expanses of the country, and the flight of refugees and contrabands simultaneously away from and toward those armies, shuffled and reshuffled communities, families, and individuals, along with the diseases they carried. Such instability also created the material conditions for sickness. Food became scarce, shelter lacking, and exposure to the elements unavoidable. The opportunities for mobility for freedpeople opened up by the war usually represent the essence of liberation. Indeed, the conventional characterization of “the transition from slavery to freedom” connotes a sense of movement from one state to another.8 In other words, movement was good, at least for enslaved people, who exercised their independence first and foremost by hightailing it off the plantation. But what about those enslaved people forced to leave their homes and families and taken to the farthest reaches of the Confederacy by their refugeing slave owners? Or the men who joined the invading Union army, some unwillingly,

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never to return? Or the orphaned children left to wander the towns and countryside when sickness and war claimed their parents? Yael A. Sternhell captures more of the ambivalent character of wartime movement in *Routes of War*. She traces the “mobile universe of the Civil War South” and how the act of leaving one place and going to another could signify liberation for some and subjugation for others. “Orders, threats, necessity, and hope threw people on the road,” she writes, creating a new world of experience that could be simultaneously exhilarating and terrifying.9

In sum, however, Sternhell envisages the movement of enslaved people as symbolic of freedom in ways that movement for white southerners was not. That is surely true, but the contention that “once enough human chattel had obtained the ability to move at will, their owners could not bring them back to the life and labor of the antebellum era. . . . Slavery had begun to wither away,” seems less certain in light of Jim Downs’s research as well as that of Heather Andrea Williams, who in *Help Me to Find My People* traces the agonizing work of finding lost family members after emancipation. Although slave sale accounted for most of the lost family in Williams’s book, the war claimed its share as well. Families wondered about the fates of refugeed slaves, many of whom were never seen or heard from again. Similarly, slaves impressed into Confederate service, not as soldiers but as manual laborers and camp servants, found themselves newly mobile but hardly free. Jaime Amanda Martinez shows that the numbers of enslaved people forced to leave their plantations and labor for the Confederate government and army was much greater than has been previously supposed. After the war, violence continued to set freedpeople in motion, as Hannah Rosen and Kidada E. Williams demonstrate in their works on Reconstruction-era terror. Thus, the experience of wartime movement could be as terrifying as it was liberating.10

This ambivalence represents a central feature of the emerging work on wartime emancipation. Some scholars have interpreted this

ambivalence as ignorance about how the military actually worked.\textsuperscript{11} And while most historians of emancipation do not categorize themselves primarily as military historians, the “new military history” or so-called dark history of the Civil War (however one may wish to characterize it) nonetheless lends considerable support to the view of the military as an indispensable agent of emancipation.\textsuperscript{12} The question is no longer \textit{if} we should consider the army alongside the politicians and the slaves themselves as agents of emancipation, but rather to consider how warfare shaped the experience of emancipation in ways that may have undermined freedpeople’s ability to claim status or rights as free, independent actors. As Anne Sarah Rubin writes in her study of William T. Sherman’s March to the Sea, such wartime experiences were “the epitome of a double-edged sword” for African Americans. Or, as Sherman himself wrote to the mayor of Atlanta, “War is cruelty and you cannot refine it.” We may not be able to refine it, but that does not mean we cannot critique it as a vehicle of liberation.\textsuperscript{13}

The most comprehensive revision of the freedom narrative to date has been Stephen Kantrowitz’s narrative of the fight for citizenship among nineteenth-century Boston’s African American community. In \textit{More Than Freedom}, Kantrowitz interrogates the racialized view of freedom that emerged from Reconstruction and how after emancipation African Americans struggled to expand what it meant to be an American citizen. Nominally a microhistory of one city, this book sheds light on the “quest for belonging” shared among black people throughout the United States in the nineteenth century and arguably still today. Kantrowitz points out that “the Union’s triumph over the Confederacy did not by itself wholly dispense with \textit{Dred Scott}’s dicta about black people’s rights. It remained unclear what ‘freedom’ meant, besides not literally being the property of another.” In contrast, black Bostonians embraced a “citizenship of the heart” that sought to establish broader criteria for inclusion than even the Fourteenth Amendment prescribed. The amendment, according to Kantrowitz, protected only


the “bare liberal freedoms” of life, liberty, and property, whereas the vision of freedom that emerged from Boston’s established community of radical black abolitionists was one of “solidarity, regard, and even love” across racial lines. This was citizenship founded on true interracial cooperation and acceptance, not begrudging tolerance from white political leaders more concerned with political expediency than with the erasure of racial prejudice.14

But getting others, even their most ardent white allies, to see black and white Americans as “one common mass” proved difficult. Although black Bostonians succeeded in making inroads into positions of federal patronage, fighting against segregated public accommodations in some areas, gaining admission to institutions of higher education, including the prestigious Harvard University, and integrating Freemasonry, these black activists found northern whites could be as intractable as white southerners when it came to protecting their racial privilege. The perennial cry against social equality loomed large and pushed white Americans North and South closer toward reconciliation. Thus, what Kantrowitz uncovers was not simply an ineffective means of delivering meaningful freedom that resulted from a weak federal infrastructure and too few troops to enforce civil rights mandates. On the contrary, Kantrowitz finds a corrupted vision among liberal white northerners who continued to understand “national life as a racial contest in which one group must prevail and the other be dominated.” Unlike the vision of freedom defined by cooperation, this vision of freedom was defined by competition. Instead of inspiring respect, if not love, this vision of freedom inspired stinginess and suspicion.15

Kantrowitz’s *More Than Freedom* is a companion piece in many respects to *From Bondage to Contract*, Amy Dru Stanley’s pivotal study of how the ideas of the free market and the right to contract or sell one’s labor first paved the way for antislavery agitation before the war and then made possible the constriction of individual freedom for women and freedpeople after emancipation. Both of these works deftly show how ideas informed public policy and political behaviors and, in particular, illustrate the important work that race performed in American political life in the age of emancipation.16

But race was not simply a matter of white over black. In *Black Slaves, Indian Masters*, a study of emancipation among the Choctaw and Chickasaw nations, Barbara Krauthamer pushes past the conventional racial binary. She asks readers to consider the complicated relationship between slaveholding Native people, themselves racial others in the larger context of American race relations, and their slaves, many of whom identified as members of those indigenous societies. Krauthamer argues that “the history of emancipation and the subsequent efforts to redefine freedom and citizenship in a postslavery age were never simply matters of black and white” but rather part of a larger process of state-making and the conquest of indigenous people that stretched across the long nineteenth century. The Choctaws and the Chickasaws understood their decision to join the Confederacy and “their defense of slavery as part of a larger campaign to defend their sovereignty,” a campaign that continued until 1866, when they were forced to sign a new treaty with the United States that included emancipation and recognition of black rights in exchange for land claims and annuities. The resulting emancipation in Indian country was both “protracted” and “twisted,” according to Krauthamer, who charts the efforts of the Choctaws and Chickasaws to constrict the meaning of freedom as much as possible because they linked the push for black freedom to white encroachment. Like their white counterparts in the South, these Native Americans passed black codes that penalized vagrancy and coerced freedpeople into labor contracts. They used violence and intimidation freely. But Krauthamer cautions against the temptation to make a facile equation of white southern resistance to Reconstruction with Native resistance to emancipation. She insists that “a shared disdain for black people’s economic and social autonomy did not cement a bond between Choctaws, Chickasaws, and the white people.” That was because the U.S. government—Freedmen’s Bureau agents, army officers, and other federal officials—used the Choctaws’ and Chickasaws’ recalcitrance as leverage against Native sovereignty claims and as justification for an increased military presence in the region. The treaty that granted freedom and land parcels to the Indians’ slaves was a “[warm] up” for the allotment policies of the 1880s. In this way, slave emancipation was a rehearsal for the dissolution of Indian sovereignty.17

The color line gets more complicated the farther west we travel. In California, a “re-racialization of slavery” followed emancipation, argues Stacey L. Smith, that allowed for a complex system of quasi servitude despite the state’s nominal acceptance of the ideology of free labor. In *Freedom’s Frontier*, Smith explains how “ambiguously free laborers” such as Chinese coolies and *peones* from Mexico, South America, and the Pacific Islands, as well as Indian women and children bound as domestic servants, continued to suffer exploitation in the form of vagrancy laws, apprenticeship, ration restrictions, and the reservation system, which in many instances looked a lot like slavery. Yet because coolies and *peones* “voluntarily” entered into labor contracts—the “hallmarks of free labor”—these foreign workers were not seen as coerced regardless of the ways that their debts to employers, who typically had paid their passage to the United States, “made them powerless to resist abuse and severely limited their autonomy and mobility.” Similarly, a pre-emancipation law, the 1850 Act for the Government and Protection of Indians, “fueled a statewide traffic in kidnapped or captive Native children, bought and sold as domestic servants,” by allowing white families to claim Indian children as “wards.” The age of emancipation did little to diminish this practice. In 1860 the state legislature amended the law to provide for “the binding out of Indian children and Indian adults convicted of vagrancy or captured in war.” Thus, just as the trade in black slaves was coming to an end in the East, the trade in Indian slaves expanded in California, as did the compulsive labor practices used against *peones* and coolies.18

Californians rectified their commitment to a multiracial system of unfree labor with the emancipationist vision of postbellum America by summoning slavery’s ghost. Only now it was the fear of “Chinese ‘slavery’” in the form of coolie labor and prostitution that animated the state’s political efforts to maneuver around the Reconstruction Amendments to maintain Indian apprenticeship and other forms of compulsory labor. According to Smith, the same antislavery ideology that gave rise to emancipation in the 1860s infused the anti-Chinese legislation in the 1870s and 1880s. Under the pretense of alleviating Chinese suffering and liberating exploited workers, particularly women

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18 Stacey L. Smith, *Freedom’s Frontier: California and the Struggle over Unfree Labor, Emancipation, and Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill, 2013), 5–12 (first quotation on 5; second quotation on 9; third, fourth, and fifth quotations on 10; sixth and seventh quotations on 11; eighth quotation on 12).
in the sex trade, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 mirrored earlier antislavery efforts and should be understood, Smith contends, as the culmination of antislavery agitation in the United States. Although the act purported to deny entrance only to "servile workers," in effect it allowed for the exclusion of all Chinese immigrants while avoiding any explicit race-based criteria for that exclusion. The political valence of this color-blind protectionism enabled Republicans to ally with race-baiting Democrats and salvage votes from among the state's white working class and, at the same time, to hoist the banner of freedom even higher—a phenomenon hardly limited to California but deriving from the particular racial hybridity of the state's labor market. "What happened in California," Smith concludes, "helps to explain how Reconstruction, the era of civil rights and equal protection, simultaneously became an era of Chinese exclusion."19

This "western turn" in the period's history exposes the interpretative divide that exists among historians of the Civil War. As many Civil War historians typically focus on the East, they also are more likely to limit their investigations to conventional temporal markers that reflect the starting and end points of official military engagements: 1861–1865. For these scholars, the war is the central and defining event of the nineteenth century. But as a recent roundtable at the Southern Historical Association conference in Little Rock demonstrated, not only are old geographical and chronological boundaries being stretched to include a new cast of characters and events within the larger arc of Civil War history, but also those new characters and events are challenging how we understand the Civil War, including when it began and ended, as well as how the war shaped American society and politics. As Steven Hahn put it both at that session and in his epilogue to the edited volume Civil War Wests, "The incorporation of the Trans-Mississippi West into the history of the Civil War era thus gives us the opportunity not only to add to our knowledge and examine the North/South issues in deeper and more expansive ways, but also to reposition ourselves in relation to the course of American development."20 What does such a repositioning look like? Historians of the American West during this period still see the war as crucial but not singular. For them, the questions that define the nineteenth

19Ibid., 207.
20 "The Boundaries of Reconstruction" (roundtable session at the Southern Historical Association annual meeting, Little Rock, Arkansas, November 14, 2015); Steven Hahn, "The Widest Implications of Disorienting the Civil War Era," in Adam Arenson and Andrew R. Graybill, eds., Civil War Wests: Testing the Limits of the United States (Oakland, Calif., 2015), 265–74 (quotation on 272).
neither began nor ended with the war itself. The Civil War was one of many military conflicts, albeit the largest, that resulted from the acquisition and settlement of western lands and the determination of white Americans to command the physical landscape and its resources, whether by planting cotton or panning for gold. That they acted all in the name of freedom further complicates our understanding of the Civil War and its relationship to that troubling term.

By tracing how “freedom” became a tool for subduing Native people and enhancing both the ideological and legal sovereignty of the nation-state, Krauthamer and Smith join a growing chorus of scholars who see the Civil War not as the culminating act in America’s heroic slavery drama but as part of the rising action in the tragedy of American empire. Ari Kelman’s prizewinning *A Misplaced Massacre: Struggling over the Memory of Sand Creek* demonstrates what is at stake for Civil War historians as they turn westward. Focusing on the 1864 slaughter of more than 150 Native people, mostly women and children, by two Colorado regiments of the Union army, Kelman’s book is as much about how Americans remember horrific acts of violence as it is about the violence itself. Kelman charts the contentious process to build a permanent, national memorial to the victims of the massacre and the struggle of the survivors’ descendants to obtain some control over that process. As descendants and professional historians quarreled over the legitimacy of indigenous knowledge and oral tradition, the book reveals how the politics of memory are complicated by centuries of mistrust and mistreatment.21

A central point of contention among the many participants in this riveting drama was how a memorial to a Union army-led massacre (as opposed to a battle, as the event had been remembered among most non-Native people) altered the conventional narrative of the Civil War. The change in nomenclature reflected an emerging recognition that the Union cause was multifaceted and entailed the suppression of both Native American sovereignty and Confederate independence. Kelman explains that “for Native people gazing east from the banks of Sand Creek, the Civil War . . . looked like a war of empire, a contest to control expansion into the West, rather than a war of liberation.”

While members of the National Park Service and Colorado state

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officials hoped to maintain a commemorative tradition that promised redemption from past misdeeds and honored both the Union war effort and indigenous suffering, Native people challenged any hope of an easy reconciliation of the freedom narrative with the history of the West and American Indians.22

Still, there were moments when the path of empire might have been altered, or at least slowed. As C. Joseph Genetin-Pilawa argues in Crooked Paths to Allotment: The Fight over Federal Indian Policy after the Civil War, “genuine reform alternatives emerged [in the mid-to late nineteenth century] that destabilized—if only briefly—the status quo in federal Indian policy development.” Central to Genetin-Pilawa’s analysis are “alternative reformers,” such as General Ely S. Parker, a Tonawanda Seneca leader and Union army veteran who became the first indigenous head of the Office of Indian Affairs under his old commander, now president, Ulysses S. Grant. Unlike previous scholars who view Parker either as a hero to the American nation or as a “sellout” to his own people, Genetin-Pilawa takes seriously Parker’s efforts to protect Native sovereignty and counter the assimilationist thrust of federal policy after the war. A lawyer by training, Parker advocated enforcing existing treaties, even fraudulent ones, and using the military against Native resistance “only as a last resort.” His “effort to slow the pace of assimilation.” Genetin-Pilawa believes, would have given indigenous people a crucial space within which to preserve their own cultural practices and avoid the violence that ensued from the more accelerated, heavy-handed approach that many “Friends of the Indian” favored. Thus, for both Parker and Genetin-Pilawa, empire was unavoidable but hardly an either-or proposition when it came to the question of indigenous sovereignty.23

In a similar vein, Gregory P. Downs sees the immediate postwar period as ripe with real if not always radical opportunities for social transformation. In After Appomattox, he reveals how the military “occupation of the South, despite its limitations, created narrow but precious space for freedpeople to organize economically, socially, and politically.” Pushing the temporal boundaries of the Civil War well past the conventional 1865 marker, Downs charts the U.S. Army’s role in securing a meaningful freedom for former slaves until at least 1871, when the last military district closed as Georgia was readmitted to the

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22 Kelman, Misplaced Massacre, xi.
23 C. Joseph Genetin-Pilawa, Crooked Paths to Allotment: The Fight over Federal Indian Policy after the Civil War (Chapel Hill, 2012), 2–3 (first and second quotations on 2; fourth and fifth quotations on 3), 8 (third quotation), 5 (sixth quotation).
Union. A novel take on military reconstruction, which is typically viewed as weak and halfhearted at best, the idea that the army provided freedpeople's best hope of "actual freedom" stands in stark opposition to both Kelman's and Genetin-Pilawa's depiction of military occupation of the West, where the army made possible the subjugation and dispossession of Native peoples through acts of violence sanctioned by federal authority in the name of freedom.24

What are we to make of these two radically divergent views of the military as a force for social transformation? If the army helped secure substantial gains for southern blacks, as Gregory Downs argues, how are those gains to be measured against the violent assaults on Native people at Sand Creek and elsewhere in the West? How did the military presence in the South and the controversies it engendered inform military action in the West? Rather than two distinct Reconstructions, in what ways did the South and the West intersect in political discourse and the popular imagination as part of what Elliott West terms "the Greater Reconstruction"? Just as slaveholders had understood their political and economic future as dependent on their ability to control western settlement, politicians and military commanders after the war understood the South's reconstruction as inextricably bound to continued westward migration, the building of the transcontinental railroad, and the opening up of new markets. The West offered defeated southerners and victorious northerners alike hope for new beginnings. Soldiers trained to fight Indians in the 1840s and 1850s transferred those skills to Civil War battlefields in the 1860s, where they were sharpened against the southern rebels. Then, in the late 1860s and 1870s, Union army leaders like William T. Sherman, Philip H. Sheridan, George Armstrong Custer, Edward R. S. Canby, and O. O. Howard were stationed in the West to combat the ongoing resistance of indigenous people to the federal government's efforts to pen them up on reservations. What had their Civil War service taught them about Indian fighting? How did the "new birth of freedom" they helped bring about enable them to lead an army of empire? These are questions yet to be answered.25

Of course, imperial expansion did not end at America’s continental borders, nor was it an exclusively American enterprise. To the extent that abolition extended “moral capital” to the British empire in the 1830s, one sees similar justifications for American interference in the Pacific and Caribbean emerge in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. A mix of liberationist and protectionist discourse infused American foreign policy in those years and, one could argue, has done so ever since. While few scholars have made the links between the Civil War and American foreign policy as directly as Cecilia Elizabeth O’Leary, who traces not only the ideological legacies of the war but also the ways that veterans actively forged the culture of empire, the global dimensions of the Civil War are the subject of two recent works: Don H. Doyle’s The Cause of All Nations and Sven Beckert’s Empire of Cotton.

In Doyle’s account, the American Civil War provided the rest of the world, particularly Europe, “with an unexpected lesson in the resilience of self-government.” Exploring how Europeans read the war and understood its meaning for their own political struggles, Doyle finds that despite foreign observers’ initial reservations about the centralizing thrust of Union power and their natural sympathies toward the Confederacy’s claims to self-determination, a “Universal Republican Alliance,” in the words of one Italian observer, had emerged by war’s end that allied republican movements across the Atlantic and in South America with the United States. Indispensable to this alliance was the Union’s abandonment of legalist arguments about the illegitimacy of rebellion and its embrace of a moralist narrative about human freedom and democracy. As evidenced in President Abraham Lincoln’s 1863 Gettysburg Address, the portrayal of the war as a “trial of democracy”—that would determine if “government of the people, by the people, and for the people” would continue, and if a “new birth of freedom” could make its survival possible—spoke to republican yearnings around the world. Doyle notes that by the late 1860s,
Spain’s attempts to recolonize Santo Domingo had fizzled, as had its new imperialist ventures in Peru and Chile. Likewise, France abandoned Mexico, and an independence movement erupted in Cuba, slowly but surely “putting slavery on the road to extinction.” A similar trend emerged in Brazil. Doyle credits the American Civil War with inspiring these republican movements and the eventual abolition of slavery in the Western Hemisphere.28

But what other lessons might European states have learned from “the American question”? According to Sven Beckert, they learned new ways of securing the stuff of which nineteenth-century fortunes, both personal and national, were made: cotton. In *Empire of Cotton*, Beckert asserts that “the best way to make the war against the Confederacy palatable to powerful cotton interests in Europe was to demonstrate that inexpensive cotton could be secured elsewhere.” In an effort to circumvent Confederate efforts to secure British and French support, the United States government encouraged the expansion of cotton production in places like India and Egypt, which resulted in a vast expansion of the British colonial apparatus. Soon other European states with an eye for entering the newly expanded cotton market made plays for colonial holdings in Asia, West Africa, and South America and sought “new ways to mobilize cotton-growing labor” other than slavery. Often these new methods looked a lot like slavery. For example, in northern Mexico by the 1880s the hacienda system concentrated landownership among a small elite and robbed everyone else of their “communal access to the resources of the land.” Although highly mechanized, cotton production on the haciendas, some of which were so large as to employ thousands of workers, organized laborers into gangs who “worked twelve hours a day six days a week.” On the haciendas, “[t]he landlord’s rule was law,” and employers used a variety of violent methods to discipline labor, including private police forces, jails, “physical punishment,” and vagrancy laws. “This resort to physical coercion was . . . important in the United States, Peru, Egypt, and elsewhere,” Beckert writes. “Capitalism’s awe-inspiring advances continued to rest not just on a great variety of labor regimes, but on a staggering degree of violence.”29


It is no easy task to reconcile Doyle’s and Beckert’s contradictory narratives. How could the Civil War simultaneously have instructed world leaders about the resilience of democratic self-governance and emboldened them to expand and strengthen their colonial holdings along with an impressive variety of unfree labor practices? Was the language of human freedom merely a guise for the expansion of new forms of subjugation and coercion? Or is the tension between freedom and domination more complicated and, perhaps, more productive than that? Beckert gestures toward an answer in his epilogue: “Within this larger story of domination and exploitation, however, sits a parallel story of liberation and creativity.” Beckert cannot help but be impressed by the “awesome adaptations” of cotton production over the last two and a half centuries, which have enabled human societies to both produce and obtain clothing more quickly and cheaply than they ever have. This success, in turn, has “enabled a growth in the churning out of goods that has never been matched by any other system of production.” Beckert encourages the reader to be hopeful that despite the overwhelming presence of injustice and exploitation in his story, the possibility for change is ever-present. “[T]he perpetual clashes of power at the center of cotton’s story,” he concludes, have allowed “the least powerful members of cotton’s empire” to attempt to make a more just world and “at times . . . have succeeded in effecting dramatic changes.” Whether or not one shares Beckert’s admiration for the industrial advantages of modern cotton production, historians are wise to remember his final point: “A world that seems stable and permanent in one moment can be radically transformed in the next.”

Nowhere is this insight more dramatic than in the lives of individuals. While sweeping syntheses like Doyle’s and Beckert’s help expand our understanding of where the Civil War fits into larger currents of world history, there is a danger that individuals will get swept away in the tide. This risk is especially true for individuals without status or notoriety—people for whom the quotidian matters of freedom meant so much. In *Beyond Freedom’s Reach*, Adam Rothman offers a corrective to this unintentional consequence of macro-level historical analysis. The book is a microhistory of one woman’s legal battle to regain her three children, taken to Cuba by a vindictive mistress during the Civil War. Rothman painstakingly reconstructs the life of Rose Herera, a slave in the De Hart household of New Orleans, from

30 Beckert, *Empire of Cotton*, 442–43 (first through fourth quotations on 442; fifth quotation on 442–43; sixth and seventh quotations on 443).
her birth in Point Coupée, Louisiana, to her appearance before a military court to plead for the return of her children. Combining the best investigative methods of social history with legal, political, and diplomatic history, Rothman narrates Rose Herera’s struggles both with and against the tides of national and world history. It is a story of freedom’s geographical boundaries and the conditional nature of emancipation. Here the military, in the form of the provost court in New Orleans, helped a freedwoman make a claim for her children against the powerful interests of the master class. Although separated from her children for three years, Rose Herera lived in a moment when she could imagine having her children returned to her, which for so many enslaved women before her was impossible. Her determination, bolstered by the Union occupation of her city and the Confederacy’s eventual defeat, left an imprint on the historical record, a testament to just how radically things can change in so very little time.31

But the story of another woman named Juana la Americana provides a sobering counterpoint to Herera’s triumph. Like Herera’s children, Juana had been taken as a child to Cuba from New Orleans during the Civil War so that her owners could avoid her impending emancipation. But no one complained to Union officials about her disappearance. No one filed a case in her behalf. Diplomatic officials overlooked her when searching for kidnapped American slaves after the war. Juana remained a slave on the island for more than a decade until another civil war (Cuba’s Ten Years’ War) prompted her discovery. Juana’s serendipitous and belated emancipation renders the old freedom narrative outdated and oversimplified. For every Rose Herera, Rothman asks, how many Juana la Americanas were there?32

Rothman tells an uneasy story of freedom that should inspire future historical works. Just as it is impossible to tell the story of Rose Herera without Juana la Americana, it is impossible to tell the story of freedom as a wholly redemptive experience that erased the wrongs of the past and renewed the nation’s mythic commitment to human justice. The “more devious tyrannies” that Edmund Morgan alluded to long outlived slavery and continue to shape not only our engagement with the history of the Civil War but also Americans’ relationship to each other and the nation. It is to them that our attention should turn.
