

# Southern Manhood At The Margins

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## Feature Essay

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**Beilein, Joseph M., Jr. and Lussana, Sergio A.** *Southern Manhood at the Margins*. Kent State University Press/University Press of Kentucky, \$34.95/\$50.00 ISBN 9781606352700/9780813166940

The study of southern masculinity is robust, with historians examining diverse groups of men beyond the planter class that jumpstarted the field. These two works feature men at the South's physical and cultural margins. Joseph M. Beilein Jr.'s work on Missouri guerillas depicts men who, although the sons of the planter class and adherents to gentry standards of white southern manhood, operated on the edges of conventional warfare and in the liminal landscape of the brush. Sergio A. Lussana, meanwhile, investigates friendship among enslaved men, a group officially denied the prerogatives of household mastery, a prerequisite of white southern manhood. Yet enslaved men created their own masculinity on the periphery, in exclusively male physical and cultural spaces outside the ken of white southerners. That both groups still drew from overarching norms of southern manhood underscores the malleability of that concept and raises questions about the historical utility of encompassing notions of southern masculinity.

### Guerilla Manhood

Guerillas need not be inaccessible or ahistorical evildoers, contends Joseph M. Beilein Jr. In *Bushwhackers: Guerilla Warfare, Manhood, and the Household in Civil War Missouri*, Beilein makes guerillas understandable as southern men by recreating how they understood themselves as southern men. Beilein situates these men in the familiar southern plantation household, which, in his analysis, was both a physical space and cultural construct. Guerillas' wartime actions grew out of their household roles. Enmeshed in this domestic context, Missouri's guerillas become historically fathomable, even as their conception of their household duties countenanced atrocities in the irregular world of the brush.

Placing guerillas within the patriarchal household imbues their actions with meaning. Even in the brush, unmoored from the physical household, guerillas were performing responsibilities conditioned by the household's dependent relationships and mutual obligations. These men were the sons of the Missouri gentry. Unlike many conventional soldiers, they became guerillas because their physical households were invaded, their patriarchs dethroned. These patriarchs-in-waiting thus approached the Civil War as a "household war," in which the battlefield was the household and the enemy were other heads-of-household. They fought not for Confederate nationalism, but for kin and the domestic hierarchies that structured their prewar lives. The immediacy of the war in Missouri, with its violent incursions into the home, grew out of this perception that the household order was under siege.

The household functions in sophisticated ways in this book, as both a physical site *and* a cultural construct transferrable to the brush. To uncover its physical dimension and prove that Missouri's Civil War was literally a war among households, Beilein uses demographic data to spatially map the kinship networks and household locations that comprised guerilla bands. These bands utilized households as physical sites of resistance and logistical support, and Beilein provides statistics on households' productive capacities and ability to wage war. Kinship anchored guerilla bands such as the Fristoe and Holtzclaw networks, which could include fictive kin, such as notorious guerilla leader William Quantrill. Women, moreover, played a crucial role in the logistical networks of household production and deserve the guerilla designation.

Yet male guerillas spent much of their time away from women and their homes, engaging in irregular warfare in the brush. Here, Beilein focuses on the household as a cultural construct which guerillas carried with them, imbuing the brush and its violence with meaning. Beilein relies on guerillas' own words and creative readings of their material culture to explain how they envisaged the brush as an extension of the household. These men were not atomized agents in a male homosocial space. Women were always present, because men entered the brush to preserve the domestic relationships which defined their manhood. They also regularly returned to homes that doubled as supply depots. The familiar southern household, long treated by historians as an ideology or aspiration in addition to a physical entity, becomes more elastic in this work, accounting for guerillas' seamless movement between their homes and the brush.

Beilein's work sparkles in its cultural analysis. He interprets guerilla material culture, including their dress and trophies, such as scalps, as expressive of their relational, masculine identities. Through rich description, Beilein grounds abstract masculine ideals in physical artifacts and the guerilla body, underscoring that guerilla manhood was performative. Thematic chapters on guerilla foodways, horses, and weaponry are innovative and engrossing. The chapter on "rebel style" is rigorous in its presentation of the guerilla shirt—colorful, individualized garments made by guerilla women. Wearing these shirts, guerillas carried their households into the brush and embodied the patriarchal domestic order for which they fought. A strength of the work is the synthesis of cultural with military history. Horses and pistols may have conveyed guerilla identity, but they were also tactically and strategically sound. The guerilla style was more than flourish—it was militarily effective.

Beilein colorfully portrays guerilla culture and bases it in a physical world of household production, slaveholding, and violence. With rigorous statistics and appendices, Beilein tells us who the guerillas were as individuals and families. He then uses memoirs and his own careful reading of their bodies, objects, and actions to tell us how they understood themselves. The combination of the material foundations of guerilla warfare with an appreciation of the guerilla aesthetic makes for a compelling and holistic account of men who otherwise defy classification. Beilein ultimately explains how these men, differing from most other Confederates, still went to war to defend their antebellum households. By adapting antebellum culture to the exigencies of war, "they created a paradigm of masculinity that worked for them" (166). Where readers might wonder why more of the South's young gentry did not end up scalping enemies, Beilein answers that Missouri's intimate household war prompted these men, although like other Confederates in their commitment to the antebellum racial and gender order, to take white southern manhood in a frightening new direction.

### **Enslaved Manhood**

Where Beilein positions the household as central to guerilla manhood, Sergio A. Lussana explores masculinity's development in homosocial settings. In *My Brother Slaves: Friendship, Masculinity, and Resistance in the Antebellum South*, Lussana recounts how enslaved southerners cultivated manhood before audiences of fellow men. Enslaved men were formally barred from household mastery and were regarded by white southerners as domestic dependents. For Lussana, their identities as men derived from their relationships with other men,

not from their roles as husbands and fathers. Men formed homosocial bonds at the physical and cultural margins of plantation life. With each other's support, they reinterpreted plantation space, moved transgressively through southern landscapes, and laid claim to their bodies, all of which constituted acts of enslaved politics and everyday resistance.

Lussana predicated his discussion of enslaved male culture on sex-segregated spaces and labor regimes. Enslaved men generally worked with other men, whether in male work gangs or in all-male locales, such as camps in North Carolina's pine forests. After mapping out sex-segregated labor practices across economic sectors, much of Lussana's subsequent analysis prioritizes plantation laborers, inviting other scholars to investigate enslaved male subcultures in urban areas and industries like mining. In addition to sex-segregated labor regimes, moreover, many men married off-plantation. The physical separation of men and women, husbands and wives, gave rise to separate cultural spaces in which a man's gender identity coalesced, not through interaction with women, but among other men. Lussana prioritizes men's homosocial bonds over their roles as domestic protectors and providers as determinants of their masculinity.

The plantation offered cultural in addition to physical space in which men solidified friendships and ratified each other's manhood. Men assessed each other through public performance and leisure. Many of these activities, like their labor, were exclusively male. They drank, gambled, wrestled, practiced craft skills, evaded slave patrols, and hunted. The estimation of peers sanctioned hierarchies and leadership among them. Like Missouri's white guerillas, enslaved men nurtured their masculinity in marginal spaces. They gathered as friends in the woods, often nocturnally, and flouted slaveholders' spatial and temporal strictures together on forays to other plantations, transmitting information and stolen goods. Surreptitious movement through "illicit space" (71) and control over their own bodies were key components of masculinity. Mobility was gendered male among slaves. Lussana relies on enslaved testimony such as slave narratives and WPA interviews to uncover how men understood their bonds with one another. In addition, he carefully makes use of white-authored sources, especially court records and plantation rules, as inverse evidence of transgressive slave activities. White complaints of black criminality were a recognition of black political agency facilitated by male social bonds.

Enslaved men cultivated political agency in addition to masculine identity in these spaces. Marginal spaces were politicized, and the “masculine body” became a “a site of direct resistance to white oppression” (63). Building on scholarship that locates enslaved resistance in performance, the body, material culture, and fashion, Lussana employs an expansive definition of politics. Cross-plantation networks of masculine solidarity served as the springboard for overt politics. Friendships fostered communication networks like the grapevine telegraph to disseminate political news, men helped each other along the Underground Railroad, and male artisanal culture provided the physical and ideological space for plotting insurrection and escape. But friendly bouts of drinking and wrestling also qualified as resistance. The bodily control connoted by such acts was a means of asserting self-ownership and flouting the chattel principle. Resistance was also the everyday interactions among men.

Enslaved men pulled from multiple sources to construct their manhood. Lussana cites folklore and anthropological studies of West African friendship as evidence of the influence of African heritage. Enslaved men’s intense bonds, furthermore, were akin to the romantic friendships characteristic of antebellum American culture more broadly. Gambling, drinking, hunting, and physical self-assertion were also distinctly southern tenets of manhood, common to white and black men. Enslaved men, like southern white men, were expected to exhibit honor and let the community scrutinize their manhood. The intriguing argument in favor of a hybrid manhood derived from West African and white southern traditions should spur further study.

### **“Southern” Manhood**

These works, considered together, can be taken to suggest the existence of an overarching paradigm of southern manhood, to which all men, black and white, free and enslaved, subscribed, even as they repurposed it for their own ends. Both Beilein and Lussana note that southern men were expected to publicly perform the rituals of honor culture and prove themselves through undertakings like hunting and feats of physical strength. Is there more to southern manhood? Some historians point to household mastery alongside honor. Beilein’s work testifies to the household’s resonance among guerillas. Lussana, however, challenges the plantation household’s historiographical hold by showing that enslaved manhood matured in homosocial spaces. Scholarship has long held that the patriarchal household became an aspiration for freedmen after emancipation, with African American men legally marrying, regulating the labor

of household dependents, and physically removing families beyond white supervision. Lussana's account undermines the antebellum foundations of postbellum black patriarchy. His study of black men complements scholarship which finds that formerly enslaved women did not submit to white models of patriarchal domesticity and instead envisioned a variety of domestic arrangements as they reconstituted families sundered by slavery and war.

Even if black men did not covet household mastery as a signifier of manhood, Lussana still contends that they borrowed from a shared southern culture by drinking, hunting, and wrestling. What are the implications of African American men working within the white South's conception of masculinity, when white southern manhood was predicated on racial mastery? Lussana emphasizes that enslaved men simultaneously hearkened back to their West African heritage, resulting in a composite manhood, but the problem of "southern manhood" serving as a basis for enslaved resistance remains. The fraught applicability of southern manhood to both black and white men is only one example of how these works can prompt historians to challenge the utility of any gender ideology generalizable enough to shape the identities and actions of all southern men.

A related question concerns men and women's ability to articulate alternatives to culturally determined gender roles. Although men on the South's physical and cultural peripheries constructed their own masculinity, prevailing notions of "southern manhood" still seem deterministic at times. Beilein argues that guerillas crafted unique identities, concluding, "the ghosts of the guerillas remind us that we have the ability to choose what kind of men and women we will become" (194). Beilein's guerillas, nonetheless, occasionally abdicated their agency in adherence to cultural scripts. They gunned down African American soldiers because, "in their minds, the guerillas had no other option" (181). Similarly, scalping appears as a logical, albeit ghastly, outgrowth of antebellum hunting culture.

As historians examine more diverse subsets of southern men, they can ask whether they worked within a regional consensus regarding what made a southern man or whether they looked elsewhere to reinforce their masculinity. While calling into question a hegemonic southern manhood, these works also recommend ways of defining manhood without recourse to the historiographical stalwarts of honor and mastery. Guerillas and enslaved men performed their gender, doing so by controlling their landscape, their mobility, and their bodies.

Both groups of men retreated to the margins, with guerillas operating in the brush and African Americans moving outside the gaze of white southerners and the plantation household. These men also mastered their own bodies, establishing their physical selves as politicized sites of resistance. Beilein, for instance, draws on queer theory to tantalize readers with the observation that reconnoitering guerillas wore blue to “pass” as Union soldiers and even cross-dressed. Both authors thereby provide criteria for manhood in the South beyond overdetermined honor rituals or household mastery in their attention to manly control over space, mobility, and bodies. But is this basis for manhood distinctly southern?

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