



Clio

Women, Gender, History

40 | 2014

Making Gender with Things

To look like men of war: visual transformation narratives of African American Union Soldiers

Quand l'uniforme fait l'homme libre : les soldats noirs dans la Guerre civile américaine (1861-1865)

Sarah Jones Weicksel



Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/cliowgh/701>

DOI: 10.4000/cliowgh.701

ISSN: 2554-3822

Publisher

Belin

Electronic reference

Sarah Jones Weicksel, « To look like men of war: visual transformation narratives of African American Union Soldiers », *Clio* [Online], 40 | 2014, Online since 15 April 2015, connection on 19 April 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/cliowgh/701> ; DOI : 10.4000/cliowgh.701

Complementary point of view

To look like men of war: visual transformation narratives of African American Union Soldiers

Sarah Jones WEICKSEL

In the midst of the American Civil War, the United States government officially sanctioned the formation of the first regiments of African American soldiers. Among them were thousands of former slaves. The 1863 decision to outfit the United States Colored Troops (USCT) in the uniform of the Union Army was a moment of both hopefulness and trepidation – trepidation that stemmed from suspicions about the emasculating effects of slavery and the perceived character flaws of a “barbaric” black race. Wearing a uniform, the white public believed, was the right of a man and a citizen. Manhood and citizenship in the American nation were inextricably intertwined; possessing full citizenship was contingent upon being an adult male in full property of himself. In the case of northern white men, then, all attributes of manhood were dependent upon possessing independence, something a slave, the property of another person, could not achieve. The degraded slave was considered unprepared for both soldiering and citizenship. He first needed to be redeemed from slavery and reclaim the manhood that bondage had allegedly crushed – to rise and shed the identity of the kneeling, half-naked slave, who pleaded with chain-bound hands, “Am I Not a Man and a Brother?” In the eyes of the white northern public, for all that an emancipated slave might have been, a man he certainly was not.

Clothing takes on remarkable, transformative power in both the textual and visual arguments intended to demonstrate that black men, and especially ex-slaves, were capable, willing, and patriotic soldiers of the United States; that they could become *men* worthy of the title of soldier. It was no ordinary feat for an ex-slave to become a soldier – he required a “metamorphosis.” The *chattel* needed to become a *man* before he could act like a *soldier*. This transformation hinged on the stripping of the material costume of the rags of slavery and the donning of a uniform. Clothing played a critical role in the production of gender. In both textual and visual accounts, the crumpled, shrinking slave body is metamorphosed into an upright, battle-ready man. Indeed, as Maurice Wallace has recently argued, between 1862 and 1890,

photography, in the popularity and proliferation of the black soldier portrait, participated in nothing less than the genesis of African American manhood as a coherent category of civil identity and experience in the postbellum political imaginary.¹

This article explores how and why clothing bore such narrative weight and power in visual depictions of slaves-turned-soldiers, reading texts and images alongside material objects and situating them within the context of nineteenth-century conceptions of bodily management and developing theories on physical anthropology and phrenology. In doing so, it highlights the role of these images in constructing both a coherent narrative of redemption from slavery and a more inclusive, universal category of “men” that was linked to military service.

Slaves’ “transformations” from chattels to free people were circulated as *cartes-de-visite*, a range of ephemeral paper objects, and in the popular press. Scholars have described these “before-and-after” images in terms of dirtiness and neatness, skimming over the clothing itself, noting its presence and condition, but otherwise addressing it only in terms of *representation*.² Their analysis accounts for neither why clothing

* Research support for this article was provided by the American Antiquarian Society, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, the Library Company of Philadelphia, the Newberry Library, and the Center for the Study of Gender and Sexuality at the University of Chicago.

1 Wallace 2012: 247.

2 Images depicting soldiers before and after enlistment seem to have been limited to

could represent a change in status, nor its active role in effecting such a change and inner conversion.³ I term images in this genre “visual transformation narratives” to communicate more accurately that a *process* is depicted, not simply two static glimpses of a person.

Many of these images are fictitious or posed, display clear artistic license and draw on racial stereotypes to convey their message. Indeed, the conditions of contrabands entering army camps were, at times, exaggerated for political purposes, and the “ragged slave” became both a visual and literary trope. These visual narratives are nevertheless critical to understanding both how abolition-minded people depicted black men and the ways in which clothing was believed to shape and portray the inner self.

A metamorphosis

White officers described the transition from slave to soldier as a ritualistic process. After passing a physical examination, Colonel Robert Cowden recalled, the soldiers proceeded to shave the ex-slave’s hair and “to strip him of his filthy rags and burn them, and scour him thoroughly with soap and water.” Scrubbed and uniformed, the transformation from slave to man was complete:

He was completely metamorphosed, not only in appearance and dress, but in character and relations also. Yesterday a filthy, repulsive ‘nigger,’ to-day a neatly-attired man; yesterday a slave, to-day a freeman; yesterday a civilian, to-day a soldier. He is nothing of what he ever before was; he never was aught of what he now is.⁴

The opposing binaries Cowden drew between “nigger” and “man”; “slave” and “free”; “civilian” and “soldier,” clearly linked freedom, manhood and military service to one another. Clothing former slaves in uniforms, then, had the power to change not only appearance, but also, from the perspective of anti-slavery advocates, to restore slaves to virile manhood.

black men, particularly former slaves. White men do, however, appear in other “before-and-after” images from this period, especially those documenting medical procedures.

³ See for instance: Mitchell 2008; Savage 1997; Putzi 2002; Jackson 2011.

⁴ Cowden 1883: 45.

The most well-known of the visual transformation narratives depicting this clothing ritual is that of Gordon, published July 4, 1863 in *Harper's Weekly*, one of the most widely circulated American illustrated weekly newspapers. (fig. 1) Accompanying an article entitled “A Typical Negro,” this triptych portrayed Gordon in three poses. In the first image, “As he entered our lines,” Gordon sits dejectedly on a stool, his feet bare, shoulders slumped, clothes tattered, covered with mud and dirt. With his legs casually crossed and hands resting in his lap, he appears discontent, yet passive.⁵ At the focal point, Gordon is shown “Under Medical Inspection,” the first step in his transformation into a soldier. His ragged shirt stripped away, Gordon sits with hunched shoulders, weighed down by the keloid scar tissue from brutal whippings prominently displayed for the viewer. The final image depicts a scoured Gordon outfitted in a uniform. The sketch artist’s visual transformation narrative of Gordon goes far beyond caricature – the change in clothing signals a change in the man himself. In uniform, Gordon stands tall and erect, his face appears thinner, and his creased, worried expression changes to one of hope and determination.

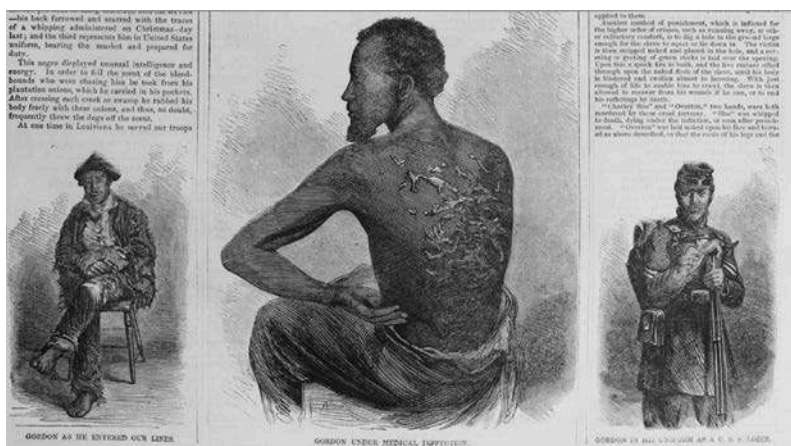


Fig. 1. “A Typical Negro” [Gordon], *Harper's Weekly*, July 4, 1863. With the permission of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA.

⁵ Jackson 2011: 26.

That the materiality of clothing was central to slaves' transition into soldiers and not merely a representation of that change becomes more evident when considering a similar visual transformation narrative of Hubbard Pryor. (fig. 2) Pryor sits slumped on a rickety stool, his elbows resting on his thighs, and hands on his knees. His shirt sleeves are rolled up, his ragged pants stuffed into his boots, and he sits in an ungentlemanly manner with his legs spread apart and one foot rolling to the side. Tears and holes are apparent throughout his clothes and a worn slouch hat covers his head. Once in uniform, the barrel-chested Pryor stands straight and tall, his shoulders thrust back and his bare arms respectfully covered, sporting clean clothing. Like Gordon, he appears ready for orders, standing at attention, disciplined, and a wholly changed person – his posture and neatness convey, by mid-nineteenth-century standards, a sense of self-worth and manliness.



Fig. 2. Private Hubbard Pryor before and after enlistment in the 44th U.S. Colored Infantry, October 10, 1864, Photographer: T.B. Bishop, RG 94: Records of the Adjutant General's Office, Series: Letters Received, 1863-1888, with the permission of National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C.

The power of these images lies in the contrast of the clothing – an evolution from tattered rags, to semi-nakedness, to a clean, crisp, more fitted uniform. The loose, mismatched clothes hanging from Gordon and Hubbard Pryor’s frames convey not only poverty and weakness, but also unruly, undisciplined bodies. The rags swallow them up. The uniform, by contrast, with its close-fitting jacket and leather straps that bind the gear to the torso, disciplines both the body and the men through its very materiality, allowing their manliness – their self-control and contained strength – to emerge. In uniform, these men look less like submissive, defeated slaves, and more like men imbued with a sense of manhood centered on determination, patriotism, and the restrained body. Indeed, as Jennifer Craik has argued more broadly, “uniforms are all about control not only of the social self but also of the inner self and its formation.”⁶ Gordon and Pryor in uniform suggested that the black body could be disciplined without the lash.

Transformations in posture

The centrality of posture to the visual language of images and descriptions of black recruits is significant given its broader place in mid-nineteenth-century American society and speculations about racial difference. Rhetoric and images of the slumped, shuffling slave reflected developing theories in physical anthropology and phrenology that linked race, body shape, and upright posture to gender and degrees of intelligence. Phrenologists and some evolutionists asserted that good posture separated white men from the “less civilized races of Men.”⁷ “The Negro is incapable of an erect or direct perpendicular posture,” claimed one physician. “The general structure of his limbs, the form of the pelvis, the spine, the way the head is set on the shoulders – in short, the *tout ensemble* of the anatomical formation, forbids an erect position.”⁸ The ability to walk in an upright, balanced manner was also critical to racist arguments about racial difference. Samuel Cartwright

⁶ Craik 2005: 4.

⁷ Stearns 1999: 76.

⁸ Hunt 1864: 21.

claimed that black men's bones were "more bent" and their spines shaped "more inwards," resulting in a gait that was "hopper-hipped, or what the French call *l'allure déhanchée*, not unlike that of a person carrying a burden."⁹ This lopsided man was antithetical to the "upright form" that Union officers held as an ideal for new black recruits. Unlike anthropologists, however, advocates of black enlistment believed that a transformation could be effected in black men. The "rolling, dragging, moping gait" of the slave, Cowden asserted, could "be exchanged for the upright form, the open face, the gentlemanly address and soldierly salute."¹⁰ The uniform had the power to turn servile, hunched slave bodies into men.

The image of the soldier standing tall is situated within a much longer western tradition that prized erect posture and employed corsets, therapeutic braces, and other forms of clothing to impose contours upon bodies. The degree to which one required postural support had longstanding gendered dimensions.¹¹ Both arbiters of fashion and physicians went to great lengths to corset and straighten women's "weaker" bodies to conform to a particular ideal of feminine beauty that valued a diminutive waist, sloping shoulders, and full, wide skirt. Men, by contrast, wore corsets or braces only to correct deformities. Clothing played a critical role in gendering women and men – both of these categories of gender were artifices created through material enactments upon the body. At mid-century, posture was a central goal of proper bodily management, and both women's corseted fashions and men's suits played an important role in molding bodies.¹² But while such shaping of men's and women's bodies through clothing might seem directly analogous, it was performed to different ends. Whereas men's clothing provided material reminders of good posture, women's mid-century fashions, as Lydia Sigourney described, verged on "severe discipline of busk and corset" and "constrained movement."¹³

⁹ Cartwright 1851: 65.

¹⁰ Cowden 1883: 46.

¹¹ Steele 2000: 52.

¹² Stearns 1999: 76.

¹³ Sigourney 1845: 81.

Such manipulation of the body played an important social role. Judgments about a person's character and station in life were made on the basis of posture and the way in which they carried themselves. Posture was central to the representation of success and failure – mid-century writers and illustrators frequently depicted a failed man as a “ragged, stooped beggar.”¹⁴ Similarly, antebellum caricatures of escaped slaves, black dandies, and “contrabands” frequently verged on physical deformity. To stand erect and move in a disciplined way, on the other hand, demonstrated inner self-control, moral uprightness, and accomplishment.

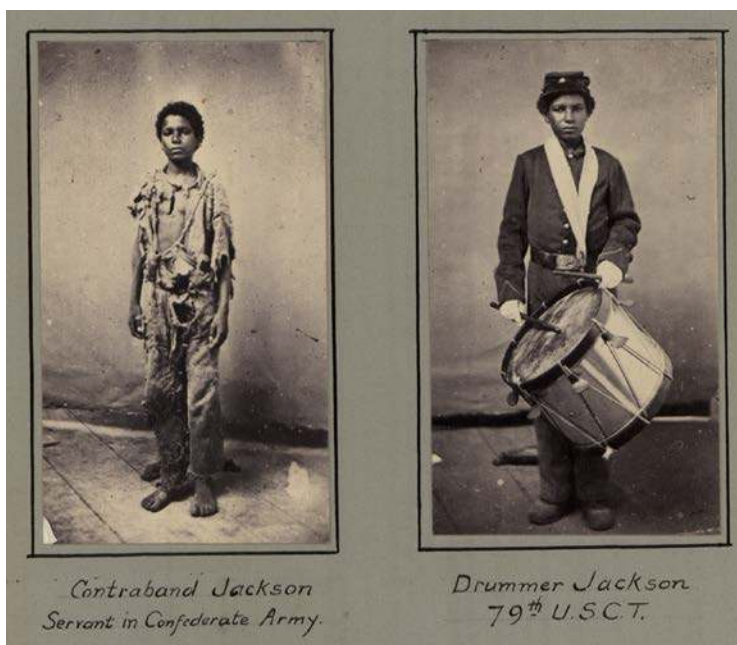


Fig. 3. «Contraband Jackson, Servant in Confederate Army» and «Drummer Jackson, 79th U.S.C.T.» c. 1861-1865. With the permission of the Carlisle Military History Institute.

¹⁴ Sandage 2005: 56.

Military clothing provided structural support for such upright posture, both materially and symbolically.¹⁵ As Philippe Perrot has argued, clothing conditions behavior, posture, gait and gestures; it helps to model the body for particular activities or movements.¹⁶ White men who transitioned from civilian suits to military uniforms likely noticed little difference in the fittedness of their clothing, but by placing dilapidated rags alongside uniforms, the creators of ex-slaves' visual transformation narratives constructed a striking contrast. In the visual transformation of a young slave into "Drummer Jackson," the loose rags that barely cling to Jackson's frame place no restrictions on the body. By comparison, his uniform hugs the body, physically instructing the boy to stand erect. (fig. 3)

Uniforms and the gendering of the male body

Analysis of surviving uniforms confirms the ability of coats, when fully buttoned, to provide a degree of structural support in effecting this change, or, at the very least, to physically remind the wearer of good posture.¹⁷ Cutters' manuals and tailors' guides provided detailed instructions on cutting military clothing, noting that coats and pants needed to be fitted, while still leaving "room for respiration and exercise with freedom."¹⁸ Smaller armholes and a shoulder seam that ran along the back of a man's coat, rather than the top of the line of the shoulder enhanced his posture; the diamond shaped seams on the back of the coat helped him to maintain that posture.¹⁹ A detail from Genio Scott's *Cutter's Guide* illustrates these elements of tailoring and the loosely fitted nature of a military frock coat, emphasizing tapered shoulders and a cinched waist. (fig. 4) These instructions were intended for use in tailoring a dress uniform to a specific body, but even ready-made clothing manufacturers and the public had access to

¹⁵ Yosifon & Stearns 1998: 1057.

¹⁶ Perrot 1994: 12.

¹⁷ Yosifon & Stearns 1998: 1061.

¹⁸ Scott 1859: 11.

¹⁹ Special thanks to Sara Hume for sharing her knowledge of nineteenth-century tailoring and men's wear with me.

military uniform regulations through army manuals and reprints in clothing catalogs and periodicals. With few exceptions, former slaves would not have worn dress uniforms specifically tailored to their bodies, but rather, ready-made uniforms intended for life in the field. Many black soldiers wore shorter, semi-fitted sack jackets, but they were also often photographed and depicted wearing longer, frock coats reminiscent of that illustrated in Scott's *Guide*.

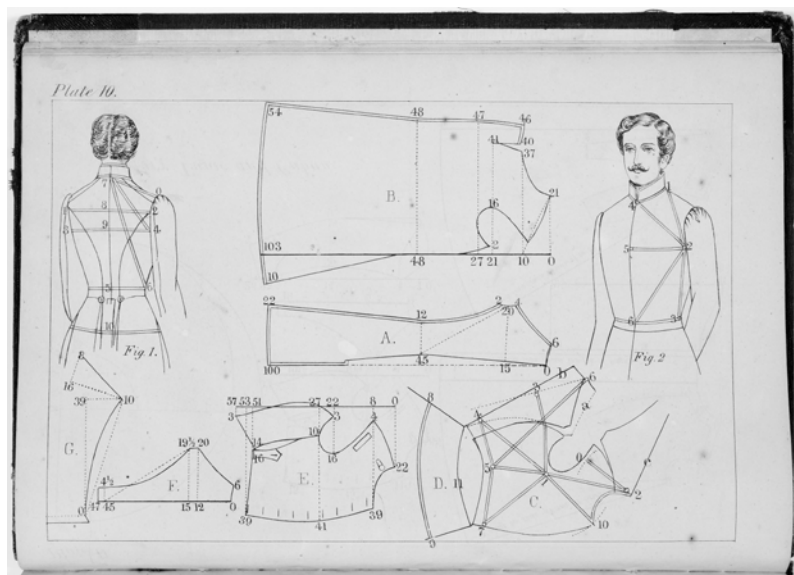


Fig. 4. *The Cutter's Guide: Being a Series of Systems for Cutting Every Kind of Modern Garment* (New York, 1859). With the permission of the American Antiquarian Society.

Indeed, a survey of more than forty images depicting black men in Union uniforms in both the field and in studios, shows that over half of the men were clothed in frock coats. Despite the existence of a range of uniforms, visual transformation narratives worked to create a more universal image of the slave-turned-soldier.

Although a man could still slouch in a uniform, the style of frock coats, the materials, and the consciousness of the uniform's meanings, both encouraged and facilitated erect posture. More

obviously, the leather straps of a variety of necessary military accoutrements worn over the uniform, including haversacks, knapsacks, canteens, and belts, further restricted the body's movement. (fig. 5) As one white soldier vividly described:

We are buttoned up to the chin in our dress coats, and all bound up in our harness which we are not used to.²⁰

Linking uniforms and the military accouterments of a foot soldier, this man's description clearly identified clothing as a form of physical constraint.



Fig. 5. Charles P. Trumbull, c. 1861-1865, Cartes-de-Visite Collection, with the permission of American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA.

Note the leather straps across the man's chest, as well as the various accoutrements that hang upon the body.

The white northern public who encountered visual transformation narratives of former slaves would have understood the material aspects of the change in attire. Although the ready-made clothing industry had already begun to emerge, tailoring was still a visible part of everyday life. The majority of middle- and upper-class white men would have had some experience with being measured and fitted for civilian

²⁰ Anderson 1861-1865.

clothing – whether made by a tailor or by a family member. Properly tailored men’s coats corrected for irregularities and asymmetry caused by physical deformities, thereby creating the image of correct posture.²¹ There was, however, great discrepancy in cost and quality between such custom-made coats and ready-to-wear clothing. A person’s social status, then, was bound up in degrees of quality and fit – extremely ill-fitting, coarse clothing was closely associated with poverty. Lived experience and knowledge of the material world helped viewers to interpret two-dimensional depictions of former slaves turned soldiers. For those images to convey transformation, former slaves need not don expertly tailored uniforms – the transformation could be made evident by juxtaposing torn rags and clothing that was obviously improved in terms of fit and quality.

The transformation such material discipline could effect when combined with freedom is vividly portrayed in an 1863 set of collecting cards entitled “Journey of a Slave from Plantation to Battlefield.” In “Stand up a Man” and “Make Way for Liberty,” the manly, albeit caricatured, soldier charges forward, replacing the cowering, half-naked slave. (fig. 6) Were these images to be superimposed, the kneeling slave would fit in the empty space under the soldier’s foot, completing the defeat of his former identity. (fig. 7) This series was explicit about that which the images of Gordon, Jackson, and Pryor only imply: that the slave-become-soldier would fight for his place alongside white soldiers, and willingly make the ultimate sacrifice for “Liberty.”

Probing the politics surrounding uniforms reveals how ideas of racial difference, manhood, enslavement, and the meaning of clothing intertwined in African Americans’ struggle for equality and citizenship during a volatile period of militarization and federal expansion. Clothing was imbued with great narrative weight and power in nineteenth-century texts and images; it oriented people to, and enabled them to act in, the social, political and physical worlds they inhabited. Through the ways in which they posed, manipulated, and described black men’s bodies, these artists, photographers, and writers confirmed racist assumptions that the slave was degraded and that only through freedom could he begin to call himself a man. They

²¹ Sara Hume by email, January 2014.

admit to the reader and viewer that the image of the helpless slave is a reality, only to destabilize that belief by depicting a starkly contrasting image of a man who has been fully “metamorphosed” by scrubbing away the metaphorical grime of slavery, stripping away his ragged helplessness, and empowering him by clothing him in the freedom of the Union blue, with eagles upon his buttons and the brass letters U.S. upon his person.²²

By donning a suit of clothing that white Americans recognized as their own symbol of virile manhood, citizenship, sacrifice, and the preservation of the Union – the military uniform – black men forced society to acknowledge, if not to respect, their claims of belonging to the nation. As Frederick Douglass asserted: “when you have Uncle Sam’s uniform on your back, all the devils in Jeff. Davis’ dominions cannot keep you out of citizenship.”²³ Depicting black men in uniforms provided a coherent visual and material element to the construction of a more universal category of “men” that was connected to the nation through military service – a category that would soon be cemented for the first time in the nation’s laws through amendments to the U.S. Constitution. In their writings, photographs, and sketches, abolition-minded Americans, both white and black, imbued uniforms with transformative power, the power to cover the emasculating scars of slavery and initiate an inner re-birth that transformed slaves into men worthy of citizenship.

Bibliography

- ABRUZZO, Margaret. 2011. *Polemical Pain: slavery, cruelty, and the rise of humanitarianism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- ANDERSON, John E. 1861-1865. *Civil War Collection*. Box 1, Folder 1. Worcester: American Antiquarian Society.
- CARTWRIGHT, Samuel. 1851. Diseases and Peculiarities of the Negro Race. *De Bow’s Review* XI: 64-69.

²² Douglass, July 1863: 7.

²³ Douglass, April 1863.

- COWDEN, Robert. 1883. *A Brief Sketch of the Organization and Services of the Fifty-Ninth Regiment of United States Colored Infantry, and Biographical Sketches*. Dayton: United Brethren Publishing House.
- CRAIK, Jennifer. 2005. *Uniforms Exposed: from conformity to transgression*. Oxford: Berg.
- DOUGLASS, Frederick. July 1863. *Addresses of the Hon. W.D. Kelley, Miss Anna E. Dickenson and Mr. Frederick Douglass: at a mass meeting, held at National Hall, July 6, 1863, for the promotion of colored enlistments*. Philadelphia.
- April 1863. Lecture on “The Crisis.” *Douglass’ Monthly*. Rochester, New York.
- HUNT, James. 1864. *The Negro’s Place in Nature: a paper read before the London Anthropological Society*. New York.
- JACKSON, Cassandra. 2011. *Violence, Visual Culture, and the Black Male Body*. New York: Routledge.
- MITCHELL, Mary Niall. 2008. *Raising Freedom’s Child: black children and visions of the future after slavery*. New York: New York University Press.
- PERROT, Philippe. 1994. *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie: a history of clothing in the nineteenth century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press [Translated by Richard Bienvenu from *Le Dessus et les dessous de la Bourgeoisie. Une Histoire du vêtement au XIX^e siècle*. Paris: Fayard, 1981].
- PUTZI, Jennifer. 2002. “The Skin of an American Slave”: African American manhood and the marked body in nineteenth-century abolitionist literature. *Studies in American Fiction* 30(2): 181-206.
- SANDAGE, Scott. 2005. *Born Losers: a history of failure in America*. Cambridge Ma.: Harvard University Press.
- SAVAGE, Kirk. 1997. *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: race war and monument in nineteenth-century America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- SCOTT, Genio C. 1859. *The Cutter’s Guide: being a series of systems for cutting every kind of modern garment*. New York: Genio C. Scott.
- SIGOURNEY, Lydia Howard. 1845. *Letters to Mothers*. New York: Harper and Brothers.
- STEARNS, Peter N. 1999. *Battleground of Desire: the struggle for self-control in Modern America*. New York: New York University Press.
- WALLACE, Maurice O. 2012. Framing the Black Soldier: image, uplift, and the duplicity of pictures. In *Pictures and Progress: early photography and the making of African American identity*, ed. Maurice O. WALLACE and Shawn Michelle SMITH. Durham: Duke University Press.
- YOSIFON, David, and Peter N. STEARNS. 1998. The rise and fall of american posture. *American Historical Review* 108(4): 1057-1095.