

2025 AAR Presidential Theme  
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## Freedom

I invite the AAR to reflect on what is perhaps the most desired and at the same time, the most contentious condition in history: Freedom.

Folk poetic imagination of the Tamil country of South India tells the story of Veerapandiya Kattabomman, a proud South Indian chief who was captured and hung by the British East India Company in 1799 for refusing to pay tribute. Ballads resonate with the spirit of his defiance: “Freedom is not yours to give or take; my people are always free.” We have heard echoes of this spirit in other places and times, and in our own lives.

Today, assaults on freedom and human rights are rampant, ruthless, and recurring. Ironically, some of these assaults are done in the name of freedom, co-opting the language of freedom. We witness states bulldozing homes and humans, societies enslaving peoples and muffling voices, and laws invading bodies. We live in democracies that regard imprisonment as a solution. Yet, even when freedom is imperiled, the hunger for it drives life itself. Poets, storytellers, philosophers, and other visionaries affirm freedoms that can never be taken. They remind us of inner playgrounds that remain sovereign. They inspire us to wonder whether the mountains, the forests, the deserts and the oceans are free. Like Joshua Brian Campbell and Cynthia Erivo, they tell us to keep asking, “Far across the river, can you hear freedom calling?”

So, let us ask ourselves questions that we have asked before but let us ask them with new sensibilities that allow us to draw on the past, be haunted by our times, and search anew. Who decides who or what is free; for how long? Where is freedom preserved, where is it lost? Do we agree with Kris Kristofferson’s line, made famous by Janis Joplin: “Freedom’s just another word for nothing left to lose”? Can there be freedom without justice? Does, or should, freedom equal material and emotional well-being? How does one reconcile competing senses of freedom? We can ponder how freedoms and un-freedoms are entwined: Am I free if my freedom has come from the silencing or persecution of others (who, too, seek the freedom to worship, to earn a wage, to live with dignity, to love whom they choose, to laugh, to grieve, and so on)? What makes me believe I am free when not all of us are free? How is the human claim to freedom entangled with other life-forms—are there consequences to this entanglement? Relatedly, is freedom the right of all species? If freedom is temporal, when does a subject *feel* free? What, in the end, is the lived meaning of freedom?

AAR’s members are invited to explore throughout this year the imaginary of freedom in its widest sense: across traditions and religions, practices and policies, art and ecology, and poetry and performance. I hope that our deliberations can help chart pathways for understanding and ensuring a distant but visible and viable horizon of freedom for all.