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Beyond Freedom: New Directions in the Study of Emancipation

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Writing Slavery into Freedom's Story: Mobility and Messages in the Late Antebellum South

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In July 1865, an assistant quartermaster stationed at City Point, Virginia, Captain W. Storer How, drafted an address to the former slaves in his jurisdiction in which he proclaimed them “the youngest children of freedom.” According to How, bondage had bequeathed nothing of use to the nation’s four million recently emancipated slaves. On the premise that children “must never run before they can walk,” former slaves had much to learn – about work, about social place, about domestic responsibility – before they could aspire to a white man’s rights. That same month, General Joseph Fullerton was just as quick to write off black people’s pasts and when black Floridians crowded around him exclaiming “We have no massa now – We is come to the law now,” Fullerton refused to believe them. Those were not the former slaves’ own words or ideas, the general maintained, they were stolen property: understandings that had been appropriated from the few Union soldiers then on duty in Florida.

Neither How nor Fullerton were alone in discounting the cerebral capacity of the nation's ex-slaves. Most of their contemporaries shared that rather gloomy and patronizing conclusion, at least at first. By many Northerners' reckoning, black Southerners had turned a corner with emancipation. To paraphrase How, they had been born again. Slavery, by this reasoning, was a prior state: a previous life and a previous condition that occupied an analytical and conceptual space apart from the new condition of freedom. Fortunately for the former slaves, federal officers and Freedmen's Bureau officials soon changed their tune. As early as the fall of 1865, many had come to understand that the former slaves were not impressionable young children who required years of tutoring but rather fully realized and respectable participants in what was quickly becoming a fierce debate about black people's place in a post-slave nation.

While reality on the ground soon disabused people like How of their initial assumptions about black incapacity; it has been much more difficult to shake off the belief that slavery and freedom constitute two separate if serial stories. It is a division that persists in most of our textbooks and in our course catalogs: one history ends before the other begins. It is also still predominate in our scholarship. Of the dissertations produced since 2005 on the history of black Reconstruction, only four percent make any attempt to take slavery's measure. It is an accounting that seems to suggest that most of us are content with How's discontinuous history: one in which that black people's lives began anew the day that slavery died.

Yet some of us have begun to reconsider such a telling and are beginning to locate slavery more fully in freedom's story. Building on and taking into account a new history of slavery, investigations that have revealed the enslaved as meaningful historical actors, a number

of historians – some of whom will be at this conference – have begun to trace the many ways in which experiences in bondage shaped freedom’s terrain. We now know, for instance, something about how skills learned in bondage could be deployed to a freedpeople’s advantage, and about how the latent effects of an antebellum market in black bodies could later take political form. We know too, something about how the rhythms and routines of antebellum cotton production could condition freedpeople’s options as women and men. But what I want to suggest today, is that the time has arrived to take seriously what Fullerton was so quick to dismiss and to ask how it was that those recently emancipated Floridians came to believe that in losing their masters they had won the law, and perhaps – time permitting – to consider what it means to freedom’s history that they had.