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Beyond Freedom: New Directions in the Study of Emancipation

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Writing the History of Postemancipation Violence

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In this presentation, I explore both ethical dilemmas and methodological challenges involved in studying the racially targeted political violence that followed emancipation in the southern United States, and in particular in studying the sexual violence that African American women suffered at the hands of white men in this context. In the past, scholars considering postemancipation political violence have recounted experiences of rape and other forms of sexual violence primarily for the purpose of merely highlighting the extent of overall terror. More recently some feminist historians have detailed sexual assaults to argue that rape was a conscious strategy intentionally deployed by white men in order to shore up a white supremacist patriarchy that had been challenged by the outcome of the Civil War. I argue for a third approach, one that combines social historical methods and cultural theory to analyze not only the political conflicts that compelled violence or the impact of attacks, but also the specific content of violent encounters themselves, that is the language used, gestures made, and scenes coerced

by the assailants. This approach can help us move beyond purely instrumentalist readings of violence, as well as unnecessary recounting of graphic details of black suffering. It can instead help us reach useful interpretations of the symbolic universe of the assailants that made particular kinds of violence both meaningful and possible and that shaped the experience of the victims.

To make this case, I recount three examples of violence during Reconstruction, describe briefly the context in which these assaults occurred, and then suggest how these examples demonstrate that following emancipation, political violence was not simply an instrument of force but rather also worked as a form of brutal political expression. Through their words and actions, assailants staged meanings for race that contested the rights and identities being claimed by African Americans in freedom. These scenes involved enormous performative excess, content seemingly unrelated to the stated political aims of the assailants, which drew on gendered imagery circulating in white political discourse at the time. This imagery depicted African American women and men as lacking what were considered to be honorable gender norms, sexuality, and family relationships in order to argue against the political empowerment of former slaves. I argue that focusing on these aspects of postemancipation violence reveals how specific attacks can best be understood as both a manifestation of and a participant in discursive contests over what race was going to mean in a society without slavery.

Finally, I suggest that this exploration of the rhetorical dimensions of violence—how rhetorical strategies shaped particular acts of violence and how violence itself became a rhetorical strategy—offers one answer to the question the conference organizers have asked us to consider, and that is has the field of emancipation studies moved beyond the “problem of freedom” as its organizing framework, or have understandings of that problem evolved in important ways. Reading postemancipation violence for its discursive dimensions suggests that

central to contests over what it was going to mean to be “free” in the United States following the end of slavery were meanings for race. Recent work on emancipation has increasingly and fruitfully tackled race itself not as an inevitable dimension of power and identity in postemancipation society but rather as a contested category of meaning that was open to radical alteration at the end of slavery. This category of meaning had to be continually produced and reproduced through the interaction of material conditions and discursive practices in order for the particular postemancipation racial trajectory taken in the United States to take shape. If violence is a key component of how hierarchical meanings for race were re-established after the end of slavery, ones that facilitated and justified the ultimate exclusion of African American from political rights of citizenship for another century, then the intertwined problems of violence and of race might join the problem of freedom as a key framework for thinking about emancipation and its legacy in the United States and also comparatively.