John Brown, Slavery, and the Legacies of Revolutionary Violence in Our Own Time: A Conference Commemorating the 150th Anniversary of the Harpers Ferry Raid

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Considerations on the Rhetoric of Race War in the Antebellum South and John Brown

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Abstract

Although ideas about a race war in America are usually thought of in the context of the post-emancipation south—the south that saw the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and venomous race riots—these ideas did not originate then, but rather had a pre-history that began much earlier. Indeed, the metalanguage of race war always implied extermination or total warfare. White anxiety about the catalytic nature of slavery perpetuated the notion that bloodshed might be necessary for self-defense and racial control. And since Anglo ideas of a race war embodied the decision to sacrifice or save those held in bondage, the consequences of advocating a life and death struggle as a form of political agitation deserves more attention from the African American perspective. Thus, John Brown's attempt to use the possibility of a servile insurrection as a catalyst for civil war needs further investigation.

Southerners articulated fear of a war between the races in 1858 and 1859 during their debates over the possibility of reopening the African slave trade. Yet, John Brown, who was aware of what slaves were up against—the death of not only black men, but also women and

children—challenged all black people, slave and free, to engage in war with slave owners in his plans for invading Harper's Ferry those very same years. The enslaved black community in the South, however, had a certain understanding of what was at stake if they attempted to free themselves, and my work examines the cost not accounted for by radical abolitionists who sought to dismantle slavery through forceful means.