

### Festivals of Freedom: Memory and Meaning in African American Emancipation Celebrations, 1808-1915

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## Review

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**Kachun, Mitch** *Festivals of Freedom: Memory and Meaning in African American Emancipation Celebrations, 1808-1915*. University of Massachusetts Press, \$39.95 ISBN 1558494073

Jubilee

Commemorating the abolition of slavery

Mitch Kachun has written an important book on African American traditions of historical commemoration, a topic that has escaped the attention of historians for too long. Perhaps in our present age, when pundits complain that public life is disappearing, it is difficult to imagine a time when massive commemorations were a conspicuous and recurring feature of life. Kachun begins the long overdue project of restoring African American commemorations to their proper place in the civic life of nineteenth century America. His particular focus is emancipation celebrations, but his book addresses American and African American historical memory more broadly.

Written in lucid prose and displaying commendable research, **Festivals of Freedom** covers a century of black commemorative traditions across the nation. Kachun is aware of the scholarly literature on historical memory, but he avoids theoretical digressions. Instead, he mines black newspapers and publications to provide a textured portrait of the wide array of celebrations that blacks invented as a means to assert their claims to citizenship and to give themselves a history in the face of white contempt. Kachun begins by outlining the proliferation of public festivities that northern blacks used to celebrate their freedom and to protest slavery. Through celebrations of the abolition of the slave trade and of the end of slavery in the British West Indies, antebellum blacks in the North (and even in some southern communities) contributed to the gathering antislavery movement by rejecting the premise that history predestined the black race for subservience. Kachun astutely avoids a simplistic reading of these communal expressions of historical memory. Although he emphasizes their importance in

forging communal and regional black networks, he also acknowledges the ways they became forums for debates over strategies of resistance and codes of conduct that simultaneously divided African Americans.

With the abolition of slavery and the passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, the African American tradition of commemoration acquired new urgency and new pretexts. Blacks celebrated the anniversaries of the Emancipation Proclamation and the Reconstruction-era amendments, as well as the dates of the effective abolition of slavery in specific regions (e.g., June 19th in Texas). For recently freed slaves in the South, these celebrations were an opportunity to give voice to their broadest political and social aspirations while at the same time rooting them in American history. This commemorative tradition also became a vital forum for historical education in a region where opportunities for formal schooling remained severely circumscribed until well into the twentieth century.

Kachun ranges broadly in this book, tracing patterns of commemoration across the North and South to the far West. Yet this broad geographical scope does not preclude attention to the specifics of place. He provides an excellent chapter on the controversies surrounding Emancipation Day celebrations in Washington D. C. There, political divisions among the capital's black elites, as well as differing notions of respectability (rooted in class divisions) led to competing parades and an eventual withering of the public commemorative tradition. For Kachun, the evolution and ultimate demise of Emancipation Day celebrations in the nation's seat of government presaged developments elsewhere. He contends that maturing institutions within the black community began to absorb some of the functions previously performed by Emancipation Day rituals. Simultaneously, changes in leisure and a shift toward emphasizing the printed rather than the spoken word sapped the tradition of its importance.

Let there be no mistake: Kachun has written a superb book that provides an essential foundation for subsequent scholarship on this topic. But, for all the strengths of his book, there are many aspects of its argument that scholars may want to revisit or expand upon.

Given Kachun's temporal and geographic sweep, it hardly seems fair to fault him for his treatment of Emancipation Day celebrations in the South. Even so, there is much, much more to be said about these events. In particular, I think his conclusion that southern celebrations were less likely to broach controversial

topics by the close of the nineteenth century is contradicted by countless examples. For instance, blacks in North Carolina used their Emancipation Day celebrations between 1899 and 1907 to protest against the Wilmington Race Riot of 1898, the constitutional revisions that disfranchised black men, and lynchings and the ideology of white supremacy, among other issues. Similarly, I suspect that subsequent scholars may question the appropriateness of 1915 as the ending of the study of Emancipation Day ceremonies. That date appears to be an emerging convention in the scholarship. David Blight ends his *Race and Reunion* in 1915. Two forthcoming studies on Emancipation Day also will end in 1915. Given the sparsity of scholarship on Emancipation Day, I think it is premature to conclude that the tradition withered after World War One. In some cities, such as Norfolk, Virginia, and Birmingham, Alabama, Emancipation Day continued to mobilize tens of thousands of blacks at least until the 1930s. Likewise, Juneteenth remained a robust tradition right across the twentieth century. The celebrations certainly changed and they may not have mobilized crowds as they once had, but it is worth noting that Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke during Emancipation Day celebrations in Montgomery, Alabama during the 1950s. This continuity between Emancipation Day commemorations, Negro History Week, and civil rights activism can only be traced if historians extend their focus beyond 1915. Furthermore, by ending the story in 1915, I believe that scholars will overlook the changing roles of participants, especially black women, in the celebrations.

It is a testament to the quality of this book that it raises and answers so many important questions about black historical consciousness during the nineteenth century. Kachun's book should find its proper place, beside Blight's *Race and Reunion*, on the book shelves of all readers interested in how African Americans struggled collectively to create a useable past in nineteenth century America.

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