

clusions startling, Mason has done an excellent job of assembling and presenting a wealth of evidence in a clear, coherent fashion.

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Festivals of Freedom

Memory and Meaning in African American Emancipation Celebrations, 1808-1915

By Mitch Kachun

(Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006. Pp. xii, 339. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$39.95.)

Mitch Kachun draws on a rich collection of primary sources to explore the ways in which African Americans sought to “create and perpetuate” a usable past through public celebration and commemorative ritual (p. 7). Beginning with the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade and ending with the fiftieth anniversary of the abolition of slavery, Kachun explains how African Americans sought to use such public displays both to celebrate emancipation and to commemorate their distinctive past. Kachun also argues that the scope and nature of freedom festivals changed in the wake of emancipation. In addition to the traditions of activism and protest that had characterized antebellum celebrations, African Americans also sought to foster race pride and uplift as Reconstruction gave way to Jim Crow. In the author’s hands, these freedom festivals become a vehicle for understanding how African Americans strove to agitate for emancipation, to create a coherent racial identity and history, and to combat

the postbellum proliferation of racist caricatures (p. 6).

In presenting this larger narrative, Kachun deftly reveals the often-overlooked complexity and tension that lay underneath this history. Freedom festival organizers simultaneously struggled to craft a distinct African American identity while demonstrating a basic Americanness to the broader society. Like other recent works in African American history that accentuate the complexity of racial identity, Kachun’s work helps to give greater dimension to African Americans’ struggle to carve out a place in American society. The study also raises important questions of class. As festival organizers pushed first for emancipation and then nondiscrimination, they became increasingly concerned with eradicating slave culture and instilling Christian morality (especially in freedmen). Kachun also explains, however, that festival organizers subscribed to “a moral vision that was often at odds with the lives of the

masses of black Americans whose value systems had been largely shaped under the peculiar institution” (p. 5).

Though the voices of women are mostly silent and the issue of gender is largely absent from this book, *Festivals of Freedom* is a very good study of how African Americans have sought to use public space and the public sphere to advance freedom and equality. Kachun’s use of editorials from African American newspapers

and the texts of Freedom Day speeches is particularly engaging. Readers interested in African American history, African Americans’ transition from slavery to freedom, African American identity and historical consciousness, and African American institutional life would benefit from reading this book.

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Copperhead Gore

Benjamin Wood’s Fort Lafayette and Civil War America

Edited by Menahem Blondheim

(Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006. Pp. xi, 292. Appendices, glossary, notes. Cloth-bound, \$55.00; paperbound, \$21.95.)

“An interesting cultural artifact” is a euphemism literary critics sometimes use for a piece of literature that is a dog artistically but has value for what it illuminates about the society that produced it. Such is the case with *Fort Lafayette; or, Love and Secession*, a Civil War novel published in 1862 by Benjamin Wood, Democratic U.S. congressman from New York, owner-editor of *The New York Daily News*, and a Copperhead.

Menahem Blondheim, of the departments of American Studies and Communication at Hebrew University of Jerusalem, has exhumed Wood’s long-forgotten novel, added an extensive introduction and glossary, and appended two of Wood’s anti-war congressional speeches. The result is

an eye-opening overview of the Copperhead movement, particularly in New York, during the war.

The action of *Fort Lafayette* is painfully melodramatic much of the time. Deathbed scenes read like shameless lifts from *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, and in another nod to Harriet Beecher Stowe, Wood includes an exciting cross-river chase with a slave trader in hot pursuit. The characters, both good and bad, are exceedingly flat. The protagonists exist primarily to present representative views from 1861 of the impending conflict. There’s the lovely Southern belle, fiercely loyal to the Southern cause and to her paternalistic version of slavery; her fiancé, a northerner equally opposed to secession; her