

Defining Moments: African American Commemoration & Political Culture in the South, 1863-1913

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Review

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Clark, Kathleen Ann *Defining Moments: African American Commemoration & Political Culture in the South, 1863-1913*. University of North Carolina Press, \$19.95 paperback ISBN 807856223

African American Commemorations

The Control of Past and a Hold on the Future

In 1989 David W. Blight's *Frederick Douglass' Civil War* helped pave the way for increasing scholarly attention to the ways in which the then emergent field of memory studies might be applied to the Civil War era and to African American history. The past several years have seen a flurry of such scholarly activity. Blight's own *Race and Reunion* (2001) explores the conflicting African American, northern white, and southern white memories of the war during the half century after its conclusion. Mitch Kachun's *Festivals of Freedom* (2003) outlines national patterns in African American memories of emancipation up to 1915 within the context of a broader study of nineteenth century black commemorative culture. William Blair's *Cities of the Dead* (2004) examines the period from 1865 to 1914 with a focus on both white and black southerners' uses of commemoration in their struggles to consolidate political power in the South. And John R. Neff's *Honoring the Civil War Dead* (2005) focuses on the ways in which northern and southern memories and commemorations of fallen soldiers contributed to the emergence of competing mythologies regarding the war's meaning.

Kathleen Ann Clark, an assistant professor of History at the University of Georgia, now contributes to this recent historiography with the first monograph to concentrate exclusively on southern African American commemorations in the fifty years following emancipation. Many of Clark's concerns and conclusions are very much in keeping with those advanced in the aforementioned works: her attention to overtly political functions of African American commemorations; the heterogeneity of African American actions and

priorities; the class-inflected tensions surrounding commemorative practices and public behavior; public commemorations' role in shaping historical understanding and collective memory; and the general reorientation and diminution of black celebrations by the early twentieth century. Still, Clark does add to this literature in important ways because her study's tight focus on black commemorations in the postwar South allows her to explore in greater depth the activities of particular communities and individuals, as well as the roles of black religious institutions and the ways in which gender helped to shape black commemorative culture.

Clark's most intensive research is situated in Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia, but additional material from across the South does indicate that the patterns she identifies have broad regional significance. One of the greatest contributions of the book is its attention to the particulars surrounding commemorative culture in specific cities and towns—especially Raleigh, Augusta, and Charleston. The dictum that all history is local history applies here, as Clark's use of specific examples examined in some depth enhances our understanding of broader regional or even national trends.

For example, Clark nicely situates celebrations of the Fifteenth Amendment and July Fourth in Augusta, Georgia, in 1870, within the context of political infighting among black and white Republicans as they staked out their turf in the shifting terrain of Reconstruction political culture. This local situation is shown to be part of a broader pattern of assertive black public celebration and political empowerment from the 1863 Emancipation through the early Reconstruction years. Clark shows how white southern institutions of memory like the Southern Historical Society helped to reestablish white supremacy after the 1870s and force a redirection of African American commemorations. Black leaders assumed a more defensive and conciliatory posture in their public celebrations, as they attempted to control the public behavior of the black masses in order to demonstrate African American respectability and progress. Black educator Charles Hunter's organization of Emancipation Celebrations and African American industrial fairs in Raleigh, North Carolina, during the 1870s and 1880s illustrates the balancing act black leaders carried out as they worked to preserve both black interpretations of history and deteriorating black rights in the public sphere without antagonizing white power brokers. This pattern continued as Jim Crow solidified after the 1890s. As Clark asserts on page 195, Even as African Americans negotiated broadening parameters of white control . . . commemorative celebrations persisted as sites for articulating an alternative

history of the past and road map for the future.

Both gender issues and the role of the black church receive much needed analysis, as Clark demonstrates how African Americans used commemorations to express their understandings of history, society, and politics. The African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church and several of its leading ministers were especially involved in shaping black commemorations in the postbellum South. In fact, AME leaders were among the most vocal and visible advocates for the use of public commemorations—the denomination's 1866 semicentennial, the 1876 US Centennial Exposition, and numerous Emancipation Day platforms—to make their case for black citizenship and black manhood. The Church, along with other male dominated organizations like Union Leagues and black militias, advanced gendered constructions of the meaning of African American freedom that privileged black male citizenship and leadership. Clark complicates this vision by examining the ways in which women participated in, and shaped, black commemorative culture. Black women's agendas and behavior were just as varied as black men's. They organized, raised money, and prepared food behind the scenes; represented the Goddess of Liberty in processions; gathered in both respectable Victorian attire and gaudy African-derived garb; and at times they even appeared on the platform, reading speeches or reciting poetry. Whether rowdy or respectable, women made it clear that their own pursuits of freedom would play a large role in defining the new order of the post-emancipation South.

Clark makes effective use of period newspapers, manuscripts, published primary sources, and a range of secondary sources to offer a valuable regional study of an important aspect of postbellum southern political culture. Like other works on African American commemorative culture, **Defining Moments** has helped establish a firm foundation for further studies that might delve more deeply into local and subregional commemorative practices. Also like other works, her chosen chronological endpoint in the early twentieth century begs for further research into the mid- and late-twentieth century.

*Mitch Kachun is Associate Professor of History at Western Michigan University, and author of **Festivals of Freedom: Memory and Meaning in African American Emancipation Celebrations, 1808-1915** (Massachusetts, 2003), which will be issued in paperback in 2006. He is also co-editor of **The Curse of Caste; or, the Slave Bride**, an 1865 serialized novel by an African American woman named Julia C. Collins, which will be published in 2006 by*

Oxford University Press.