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YouTube Wednesday: Why I'm CELEBRATING the Civil War 150th (and why you should too)

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Abstract

There's quite a bit of talk within the interpretive community about the word, "celebration." The word is tiptoed around and eschewed. Its use raised ire in Charleston Harbor this past December. These debates over commemoration versus celebration, no doubt, will crop up again and again over the next few years. We, as a community, are nearly afraid of one misstep. We catch our words as they escape our mouths, quickly correcting ourselves every time "celebration" accidentally emerges trips over our teeth. We seem afraid to say that we are celebrating an American bloodbath of biblical proportions. I can understand this reticence.

[*excerpt*]

Keywords

CW150, Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Civil War Era Studies, Civil War Interpretation

Disciplines

Cultural History | History | Public History | Social History | United States History

Comments

Interpreting the Civil War: Connecting the Civil War to the American Public is written by alum and adjunct professor, John Rudy. Each post is his own opinions, musings, discussions, and questions about the Civil War era, public history, historical interpretation, and the future of history. In his own words, it is "a blog talking about how we talk about a war where over 600,000 died, 4 million were freed and a nation forever changed. Meditating on interpretation, both theory and practice, at no charge to you."

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Interpreting the Civil War

Connecting the Civil War to the American Public

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[YouTube Wednesday: Why I'm CELEBRATING the Civil War 150th \(and why you should too\).](#)

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 9, 2011

Second in our on-again, off-again series... YouTube Wednesdays!

There's quite a bit of talk within the interpretive community about the word, "celebration." The word is tiptoed around and eschewed. Its use raised ire in Charleston Harbor this past December. These debates over commemoration versus celebration, no doubt, will crop up again and again over the next few years. We, as a community, are nearly afraid of one misstep. We catch our words as they escape our mouths, quickly correcting ourselves every time "celebration" accidentally emerges trips over our teeth. We seem afraid to say that we are celebrating an American bloodbath of biblical proportions. I can understand this reticence.

I agreed with that sentiment. I agreed up until a few weeks ago. Then I came across this interview with Hari Jones, Curator of the [African American Civil War on U Street in DC](#):

https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=NAbGOfjz6wM

The choice sections:

"For those who win their freedom in the Civil War, this is a celebration. For those who fight for the various reasons they fight and, in particular, lose, this is a commemoration... So when our community was witnessing this secessionist movement reaching a point to where they were really about to dissolve the Union, then that meant the opportunity to strike a blow for liberty was really about to arrive. So there was a great deal of celebration. Frederick Douglass writes about that as well, that there's joy in our community because now we have a genuine opportunity to strike a blow for liberty.

"So commemoration for those who are seceding from the Union, and right now, as in 150 years later, we know how the story ends. They're commemorating when they seceded from the Union. But for Americans who believe in the ideals of the founders, we must see this as the opportunity to really create a, "new birth of freedom." We must see this and we must understand this war even, itself, much like we understand the American Revolution and the 4th of July: independence, freedom, liberty, to secure the blessings of liberty for all was made

possible in this war. So we're celebrating this genuine opportunity to end the tyranny of slavery."

The passion in his voice is palpable. Jones is owning the word celebration, making it his own. He is redefining how we should look at the war. His argument is relatively keen. Why aren't we focusing on celebrating the Emancipation moment? Why can't we celebrate the notion that a "new birth of freedom" and newfound liberty for 4 million Americans spurned for so long is just on the horizon?

I can't wait for that museum on U Street to open in July. I want to be there.

So, I am *celebrating* the Civil War Sesquicentennial. I am *celebrating* the fact that, each and every moment of the war, the future definition of freedom in America hung in the balance. I am *celebrating* the Emancipation moment, not simply on January 1st, 2013, but everyday for the next five years.