UC SANTA BARBARA

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Perspectives on Juneteenth

June 19, 1865.

It was the day that U.S. Army General Gordon Granger announced the end of slavery in Texas. Word of the Emancipation Proclamation had already gotten around since its signing more than two years earlier, but this news made it official in Texas and, ostensibly, meant it was going to be enforced. Celebration ensued.

One year later, on June 19, 1866, Texas marked its first “Jubilee Day” and Juneteenth has been commemorated there ever since, eventually spreading across the nation and made a holiday in several states. In 2021, Juneteenth National Independence Day was at last established as a federal holiday.

In advance and in honor of Juneteenth this year, The Current asked a diversity of scholars for their perspectives on its significance, and on some meaningful ways it can be commemorated.

Here are the responses that were received:

Stephanie L. Batiste, associate professor of English; associate director, Center for Black Studies Research

Neither the United States nor the world has ever taken full accountability for the totalizing impact of 400-plus years of race-based slavery and global colonialism that forged the modern era — in fact forged everything that happened during and has come after it. Slavery governed human, identity, sexual, economic, legal, trade,

labor, political, regional, national and international features of structural and everyday life in an epic and intergenerational fashion. Slavery as a structure of knowledge vibrates deeply in the sinews of assumption and practice of our national identities to the extent that destructive racist sensibilities and practices still traverse quotidian interactions as natural and innocent. This holiday acknowledging that it took years after the legal emancipation for slaveholders to release their ownership, subjugation, labor and resource extraction of human beings with “inalienable rights” to freedom is a tiny step in recognizing the errors of a normalized violent history.

Science fiction understands slavery better than everyday people and certainly our political entities. Addressing history can reveal the deviously tangled, again thickly totalizing structures of racism in a nation purportedly committed to democracy and freedom. Black Americans as a people have been committed to that dream, and to broader freedom dreams, even as we have not been able to benefit from national promises or the entitlements of citizenship. This holiday may be a celebration, but it is also a very late federal step, particularly for contemporary citizens, in recognizing that slavery was a significant happening in the U.S. with thundering consequences that resonate to this moment, to each moment.

Community celebrations toward healing and mutual recognition of survival, resilience, creativity and genius among Black people will be wonderful. But a public reckoning with the many outstanding histories my colleagues and forebears have written about the broad processes and intimate details of colonialism, slavery and abolition is essential. Slavery and its deep-seated global legacies of anti-Black racism have impacted every institution in this and every other country. An intentional dismantling of racist structures that universally impact the poor, the young, the sick, the practice of law, the incarcerated, the structurally hopeless, entire industries of workers, et cetera must occur if this recognition on the part of our government is to have any feet.

Ninotchka Bennahum, professor of theater and dance

Juneteenth is significant because it symbolizes the re-founding of a nation, not on the backs of a free labor source brutalized and enslaved but rather with the written and holistic notion of a place where everybody is born equal, with an inalienable right to happiness, to freedom, to life.

Juneteenth is a reimagining of a nation that was founded far away from the principles of an egalitarian nation. It is a reenactment of an ideal: a united nation where all are free to live in freedom and prosperity.

It is important to remember that 1866 [the first year Juneteenth was officially celebrated in Texas] also witnessed another tragedy: the genocidal tactics of the U.S. government against First Peoples, Native Americans, in order to seize their land and to control their ancient secular and religious traditions.

To commemorate Juneteenth we can dance, a kinesthetic act of remembrance. We can dance in public spaces, civic spaces. Dance becomes an act, however small, of resistance, a mnemonic — an embodied liberty that recognizes the tremendous cultural contribution of African Americans to our history.

Richard Durán, professor of education, associate dean for faculty equity, The Gevirtz School

The proclamation of Juneteenth as a federal holiday marks our country's moral commitment to keep its promises to ensure the freedom and liberty of Black Americans backed by whatever actions are necessary. It is a day of national recognition of the racist harms that Black Americans suffered historically stemming from slavery and that they continue to encounter to this day. It also marks our celebration that, as Americans, we can right wrongs when we understand each other's common good and human rights, and that, when put to the test, we can take actions righting wrongs — whether this be by civil policies or healing enforcement of laws tied to education and human rights. Importantly, the Juneteenth holiday is about the energy of hope and belief in each other, when we look ahead to building our futures as Americans in concert with our many global partners and heritage communities.

We all can join in honoring and celebrating this joyful holiday. I suggest visiting the 2022 Juneteenth "Caring for the People" Block Party website. This site and the local in-person activities set for June 19 described therein is a collaboration of many Santa Barbara community groups led by Juneteenth SB and Healing Justice Santa Barbara. Beyond offering details on the planned wonderful block party event open to all, this site includes information on the history of the Juneteenth movement locally as well as nationally. While Juneteenth is commemorated as a distinct holiday, it also needs to be commemorated in our everyday reflections on the importance of our support

for our Black community members, and their well-being must be backed up by our actions and advocacy in daily life.

Pei-Te Lien, professor of political science; affiliated faculty, Asian American studies, Black studies, feminist studies

In the context of a deeply divided and unevenly polarized America, the bipartisan support for the installation of a new national holiday in honor of enslaved African Americans and to acknowledge the profound and continuing impacts of institutionalized anti-Black racism by the federal government was a feat for America, not just progressive America or Afro America. This act signaled the strong collective will and commitment of the American people to pursue racial justice, even if the process had been delayed for over 150 years.

As Asian Americans, whose access to immigration, citizenship and other social and political rights have been historically denied or systematically blocked, and our community continues to experience anti-Asian microaggression and endure a high volume of hate violence and xenophobic attacks in the triple pandemics of COVID-19, racism and sexism, we hope the celebration of this national holiday will go beyond recognizing anti-Black racism and can address other forms of marginalization and oppression against all minorities. Insisting on teaching students a critical understanding of U.S. history from a racially and ethnically inclusive perspective is the most crucial first step for me.

Giuliana Perrone, associate professor of history; affiliated faculty, Center for Black Studies Research

Often, we’re told that Juneteenth was the moment enslaved Texans learned they were free. Not quite. Plenty knew what was going on and were actively working to subvert the power of enslavers. Rather, General Order No. 3 told white enslavers that the U.S. Army would enforce emancipation in Texas and prevent them from holding human property from that point forward. Current rhetoric also runs the risk of overstating what Granger’s order did; it prevented ongoing enslavement but did NOT deliver lasting equality or citizenship. The job of securing liberation, that is, isn’t over.

The holiday honors not only emancipation but also the historical Black celebrations of it. Making the holiday federal signals to all Americans that those celebrations are not just for Black people but should be shared by all Americans — that Black history

is American history, and vice versa. It's also a reminder that the nation has a slave past and that it must continue to move beyond the legacies of slavery. It is, in that way, a call to action; it reminds people that celebrating freedom from bondage is just one step in a much longer liberation struggle. We can celebrate successes in that struggle (emancipation) while we continue to fight for the promises made during Reconstruction (civil rights acts and new amendments especially). It's also a way to honor the fact that Black Americans — often enslaved Black Americans — made the Civil War about their own freedom. So celebrating Juneteenth is a celebration of the thousands of Black people who fled plantations, worked in union encampments, and served as soldiers whose names may not be known but whose collective deeds fundamentally changed the course of American history.

To me, commemorations of Juneteenth should include joyful celebration of an important moment in the Black freedom struggle AND a recommitment to continue fighting for the abolition of structural and other forms of racism that have lingered well after the end of enslavement. (The distinction between emancipation and abolition is really important in my work; emancipation notes the moment that enslavement ended, but abolition requires something much more substantial — the removal of slavery's lasting legacies and the construction of equal and equitable citizenship.) There's a reason that efforts to make Juneteenth a federal holiday finally succeeded with the momentum of the George Floyd uprising behind it. It was a moment in which Americans mobilized for change and renewed calls to end all manifestations of racism. So when we celebrate Juneteenth, we must each honor that by asking ourselves, "What am I going to do to advance the cause of social justice for all?"

Paul Spickard, distinguished professor of history; affiliate professor of Black studies, Chicana/o studies, Asian American studies

We celebrate freedom in many ways in our country, but freedom has not been equally available to all Americans throughout our history. July 4 celebrates our national independence from Britain, but only a small minority — adult, propertied, White males — possessed full citizenship rights in the first several generations. Wives were legally considered the property of their husbands, as were children of their parents. Most egregiously, one out of every six Americans was enslaved: abused, working for no wages, subject to being separated from family members, bought and sold, having no rights.

Enslaved African Americans did not suddenly become free and acquire full citizenship rights on June 19, 1865, when word went out across Texas of the Emancipation Proclamation two years earlier. Gradually then, formerly enslaved people worked to achieve something like full citizenship.

That has taken more than 125 years and we are far from equality. But since the Galveston Black community first celebrated their limited freedom on Juneteenth in 1866, African Americans have consistently pushed against White supremacy. We have made some progress since then, but it has not been steady, and we currently are in a period when White supremacy is on the rise again. Juneteenth reminds all Americans that the Bill of Rights is supposed to be for everybody. It holds out our better ideals before us, even as we still fail to achieve them.

I'm sure there will be a parade somewhere, and picnics and barbecues. Those are good things to do. But I'm going to suggest another.

I'm in Hungary at the moment on sabbatical. Here this year I have watched democracy be systematically disassembled by a corrupt dictatorship. All the things that have been done in Hungary to destroy democracy and social equality, and to subvert the will of the people, are currently being tried by political actors in the United States. Now is a time to get to work to stop them. Find a political cause or campaign that favors social justice and get involved. That's a good way to celebrate Juneteenth.

Sharon Tettegah, associate vice chancellor for diversity, equity and inclusion; director, Center for Black Studies Research; professor of Black studies

Juneteenth is an important date that commemorates emancipation of slaves of African descent in the U.S. No human being should be enslaved to the extent that African Americans were enslaved. It's a prime example of how the history of African American peoples was erased and Juneteenth is a recognition of how we have not been recognized up until today as human beings.

We can systematize and create a safe space for African Americans on the UCSB campus. We need more anti-racism training for non-Black faculty, staff and students — particularly for those who do not understand African American/Black individuals and communities. This campus should demonstrate support for African Americans knowing that historical, institutional and structural racism still exists and

the struggle continues. Governor Gavin Newsom signed measure AB3121 and developed a task force to study and develop reparations. At the very least, the university and its system should understand the part it plays in maintaining over 400 years of institutional racism and anti-Blackness.

African Americans are still trying to fight for justice against verbal, physical and emotional accusations and abuse, as in the cases of Emmett Till, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor and others whose accusers and killers never faced any legal consequences. The Black individual in U.S. society does not have any power in a system based on the tenets of anti-Blackness, regardless of their position.

A 2016 meta-analytical integration of over 40 years of research on diversity training evaluation found that DEI (diversity, equity and inclusion) training and dialogue are insufficient to address anti-Blackness. We need actions that address anti-Blackness and an understanding of the history of slavery and its impact.

Isaiah Jay Jones, doctoral student, counseling, clinical and school psychology; clinician, The Healing Space

The injustice of the continued enslavement of peoples in Galveston, Texas, for an additional two years was able to continue because of enforced isolation and ignorance. Through community, allyship, learning and sharing, we celebrate, support and uplift Black life. While there is more work to be done, we must all also take time for radical joy, hope and healing, and especially so in times of hardship.

As Juneteenth is the commemoration of Black/African American freedom, celebration and community, the best ways to honor that are by participating with the community! In Santa Barbara, that could mean attending the Juneteenth “Caring for the People” Block Party, supporting local Black businesses, spending time with each other, or simply continuing to be an ally and friend. As individuals, we can also prioritize opening ourselves to discussions or reflections on injustice in the U.S., both historic and ongoing.

About UC Santa Barbara

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