

America was founded on the ideals embodied in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. It is like a needle on scale: with every era in America, we have moved that needle closer to making those ideals a reality for everyone. To me, Juneteenth represents a major shift of that needle. It represents America moving closer to having the words "All men are created equal" be tangible instead of a parchment guarantee, as it was for so many Americans prior to Juneteenth.

***Bradley Deckel. Temple University Beasley School of Law, Class of 2022***

Juneteenth is recognized as a national holiday; it is very important for the American people to recognize our country's history. My take on the meaning of Juneteenth is that it is important to recognize that when the United States gained independence, not every person residing in the land of the free and the home of the brave was considered free. Juneteenth is an important day that marks the official end of slavery. The Emancipation Proclamation, issued by President Abraham Lincoln, on January 1, 1863, outlawed slavery in the states under rebellion but it was not until June 19, 1865, when General Gordon Granger announced the official freedom for enslaved people in Texas. African Americans have celebrated Juneteenth since then and I am glad to see it finally become a national holiday. Juneteenth is a day where our nation can reflect on its history, a day African Americans come together through cultural traditions and celebrate our progression as a community. The meaning of Juneteenth is significant, a day of celebration and education. The Fourth of July, Independence Day is a Freedom Day for American citizens, but Juneteenth is for African American citizens, and it is the true Freedom Day.

***Brianna Watford, Chestnut Hill College, December 2021 Graduation***

July 4th. December 7th. September 11th. These are dates that live in various levels of fame and infamy in American history. Children at the various stages of education in this country learn the events that occurred on these dates and the effects that those events had on the development of our national consciousness. At one point, I too was a young student learning of the Founding Fathers getting together in a stuffy hall in Philadelphia to promise "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" to the citizens of the nation they were about to create. I learned of the attack on Pearl Harbor that vaulted the United States headfirst into a global conflict on a "date that will live in infamy." I learned of the tragedy of September 11th in the aftermath as a young kindergartner at the time. These are dates that are forever stitched into the fabric of American history. And while kids learn about these events every year in history classes of varying levels, some dates are left out of the narrative. Juneteenth has been one of those dates for too long.

The Declaration of Independence is a promise to a nation. A promise that the tyranny of the few will no longer oppress the will of the many. A promise that society will not be divided into castes made up of Lords and Commons. A promise that government will be made up of a representation of the population and will conform to democratic norms. This was a promise that was void from the start. As Thomas Jefferson wielded the quill in his right hand, he wielded a whip in his left. The very framing of the American government, as evidenced by the later Constitutional Convention, illustrated who the promise was made to, white landowning men. The resulting

country was an utter contradiction to the country that was promised. For almost a century, the United States would project this narrative of moral superiority while simultaneously oppressing African Americans through slavery. The political system itself was designed to empower slave states to maintain slavery through provisions like the three-fifths compromise as codified in Article I, Section 2, Clause 3.

Juneteenth was partial payment on the promise made 89 years prior. When the Union Army entered Galveston, Texas on June 19, 1865, the Emancipation Proclamation could finally be put into effect for the entire former Confederacy. The law of the land essentially banned slavery across the entire country as formerly enslaved people were now full citizens of the United States. This was further entrenched into law with the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment. Constitutionally speaking, all people in the United States were now entitled to the liberties and protections contained therein. Now we all know that the institutionalized racism and discrimination from Jim Crow Laws prevented the complete payment of the promise, and another century would pass before the civil rights movement dismantled de jure discrimination and racism. Juneteenth was only the beginning of a long process of ensuring equal justice under the law, a process that is ongoing to this very day.

Juneteenth should be celebrated as vigorously as July 4th yet it has long been neglected by a large portion of society. It is not heavily taught in history classes or represented in media. There are not Juneteenth discounts at local car dealerships. I have talked to several people who had never heard of Juneteenth prior to this year and others who have heard of it but could not tell me its significance. Others vigorously oppose Juneteenth's elevation to a federal holiday as an attack at the very heart of what it means to be an American. They think that American history should be a 250 year or so veneration of the actions of this country. All the good with none of the bad. Like a cake without the calories. I disagree. We cannot be ignorant of our history, or we will be doomed to repeat it, or however the old adage goes. Juneteenth is a reminder of our country's original sins as well as an example that these sins can be overcome. Martin Luther King Jr. once said that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice" to which Justice Ginsburg added "...if there is a steadfast commitment to see the task through to completion." Juneteenth can be an example of this lesson if we understand that it was merely the beginning and not the end.

***Michael McMaster, a recent graduate of Drexel University Thomas R. Kline School of Law***

As a white individual, Juneteenth is an acknowledgment of our past and a reminder to keep doing better. Its declaration as a national holiday seemed performative at a time when people of color are being killed at an alarming rate by police officers and while debates are happening across the country threatening to erase the teaching of injustices faced by people of color throughout history from our classrooms. However, the first step in righting a wrong is acknowledging the wrong happened. As a white American, Juneteenth cannot become just another day off - it should be a day of reflection, remembrance, and self-education. A reminder to learn about the past so we can be better in the future. And, of course, Juneteenth is a day of celebration. Despite the work that still needs to be done, Juneteenth marks the day roughly 250 thousand people learned they were free and there are few better reasons to celebrate than gaining freedom.

***Lisa Laffend, Rutgers Camden Law School, Class of 2022***

To me, Juneteenth, is the definition of living freely in the Land of the Free. Juneteenth reminds me of the struggles that Black people had endured over time. It means that they have worked for a very long time to address issues of equal opportunity. It means that they have fought the battle and won the race and without the big fight, we would not be celebrating this day. It means that the country is moving in the right direction and realizing that changes had to happen. I did not personally experience slavery when I immigrated to the U.S.; however, I know what it is like being a slave when I was back home. Juneteenth is a day where we are reminded of the people who fought for justice and have won the race.

***Rogena Rezkalla, Widener Law Commonwealth, Class of 2022***

When the Second Continental Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence in 1776, it did so on the premise that “all men were created equal.” Eleven years later, the delegates of the Philadelphia Convention declared in the Preamble of the U.S. Constitution that the People established a new national government “in order to form a more perfect union.” Juneteenth represents an important milestone in American history as the date enslaved people learned of their freedom under the Emancipation Proclamation. But it also marks America’s commitment to the principles of equal rights and a republican form of government in which the People are sovereign. Juneteenth serves as a reminder that our “blessings of liberty” are not secured by a singular event. Securing freedom is an on-going process, and one that requires hard work and sacrifice from each successive generation of Americans. While Juneteenth represents the latest federal holiday to recognize America’s commitment to equal rights, it will not be the last.

***Kyle C. Kopko, Ph.D., University of New Hampshire Franklin Pierce School of Law, Class of 2023***

“Besides, they’ll see how beautiful I am and be ashamed—I, too, am America.”—James Baldwin

I often think about all the layers to the woman I am today. What comes to the forefront of my mind is a splattering of different experiences in my life, highlighting the most obvious parts of my identity. I remember watching all my aunties and my mother dance to afrobeat classics at so many Nigerian parties and weddings. I remember the defining moments that defined my womanhood to the world around me. I remember the moments I wondered about my sexuality. As I reflect on the experiences that have and will form my existence in this life, I am constantly reminded that to those unknowing to the building blocks of my identity, I first and foremost am a black woman. The next stranger walking past me on the street is unlikely to know my mother is an immigrant from Nigeria, nor would they know that my father still lives there. They’d look at me and won’t guess that I’m the last born of my family, the younger sister to two adult brothers. They surely wouldn’t know that every day I feel like I’m losing a culture that I see my brothers embrace so well. And even with my oldest brother, also born in America and for most of his life raised here like myself, our relationships with the Nigerian/Igbo culture are still drastically

different. They wouldn't know how guilty I feel for growing to dislike Nigerian foods I once enjoyed or traditional garments I once felt like royalty in.

As I face doubts about my "Africanis", I am plighted with an intense case of imposter syndrome as a Black woman in America. I would like to think that while I may lose my Nigerian culture, I can still be Black American, but I have come to realize that with that comes another culture I cannot fully embrace. Though Black Americans are not a monolith, there are so many common experiences shared. And when I see a Twitter post about an experience many Black Americans can relate to or a pop culture reference that connects to this community, I feel dejected when I cannot seem to relate. Being raised in the United States within a Nigerian household has created sizable gaps in my dual identity, leaving me to wonder what I can identify as.

During my senior year of high school, I was applying to scholarships, and like many of my Black friends and peers, I looked towards scholarships formulated for Black students. One scholarship in particular came across my friend's desk, specifically requesting applications from African American students. I have always known the term African American to describe to the descendants of the enslaved people brought into America. My Black friend, who was also raised in the United States by immigrants, questioned if she was still allowed to apply for the scholarship, as the words black and African American are frequently used interchangeably. I hesitated to give her an answer, because at that moment, her question pivoted my mind to all the unanswered questions I had surrounding my identity.

While I recognize the weight of the term African American, I recognize just how many cultural commonalities exist between myself and that community. After nearly nineteen years growing up in America, I have come to realize a lot about perception when it comes to being black in this country. Yes, I first and foremost am a black woman. That is what I first see when I look in the mirror. That is what store owners see when they follow my friends and I around their store, examining the shelves for missing items as we stroll from aisle to aisle. That is what internet strangers see when they look at my profile picture. When it comes to social media, my worries about identity are only intensified. Time and time again, I watch people's identity questioned because they do not quite fit a mold others associated with that part of their existence. Resultantly, I have come to apply this scrutiny to myself.

Juneteenth is a great time of reflection for me. Through discourse and reading, I've learned Juneteenth is not a holiday that represents me. It's a day to recognize the true end of slavery for black people in America. Therefore, as a child of an immigrant, with only one familial connection to slavery, Juneteenth isn't mine to claim. Although I share experiences with other Black Americans, my American identity doesn't run deep like my friends who can traceback generations of formerly enslaved ancestors in America. Because within their lineages is a history more complex and heavier than I could ever understand, no matter how much I read, hear, or see.

For me, Juneteenth is a time to support the African American community as they celebrate and mourn the history that shapes their very existence. It is a time to learn and listen to those who know more than I ever could. It is a time to be neither Nigerian nor American, but to simply be an advocate for the freedom of a community that holds great significance in my life, even as I teeter the line between the two communities.

*Chidinma Onukwuru, Vanderbilt University, Class of 2024*