Juneteenth

Even as we recognize Juneteenth today, we must be cognizant that our efforts are purely performative and self-serving, unless we authentically center the community to which this celebration truly belongs. We must recognize the dichotomy of Juneteenth as we raise a flag in a community that is largely racially segregated and still bears the scars of restrictive covenants, redlining, and steering. Juneteenth is more than an observance and celebration of freedom, it is also a time to recognize the continual struggle for equity. It is a holiday that perfectly illustrates that two seemingly opposing things can be true at the same time.

Even while we celebrate official word of the Emancipation Proclamation finally reaching Galveston, TX, on June 19th, 1865, we cannot forget that it was not until Congress passed and ratified the 13th Amendment, on December 6th, 1865, that the last 16 slaves in New Jersey were freed. Slavery was not actually abolished in the United States until the 13th Amendment was ratified—because the Emancipation Proclamation didn’t apply to northern states. Such is the dichotomy of Juneteenth.

Juneteenth lies in the shadow of July 4th, and in a speech in Rochester, NY, in 1852, Frederick Douglass acknowledged the hypocrisy of a nation that celebrated its independence and freedom, while simultaneously oppressing and treating an entire group of people as property. July 4th celebrations went on for 89 years before the United States abolished slavery and Blacks in this country could celebrate our freedom. Such is the dichotomy of Juneteenth.

After bills easily passed both chambers of Congress, just this past Thursday, President Biden signed a law making Juneteenth a federal holiday. However, the same lawmakers have adopted a decidedly tepid approach to fighting current racial discrimination and injustice — including through the John Lewis Voting Rights Act, legislation that would restore and strengthen parts of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 that the Supreme Court struck down in 2013. Many of the same lawmakers who supported a law making Juneteenth a federal holiday simultaneously back state laws that would ban the teaching of critical race theory in schools—which would effectively stop teachers from talking about Juneteenth in classrooms. Such is the dichotomy of Juneteenth.

Juneteenth reminds us that the notion that there has been continuous progress toward justice in our nation is deeply flawed. Emancipation was met with immediate violence, terror and death. In the fight for civil rights in our country, each measurable step towards progress has always been met with backlash. Julia Delacroix the associate editor of Learning for Justice points out that we tend to think of the fight for civil rights as though there has always been a set list of barriers to surmount—slavery, then racial terror, then segregation, then disenfranchisement, then mass incarceration. But we know that “racism takes the shape of whatever will hold it.” Obstacles to freedom weren’t predetermined, but they do confirm that there has always been a force to maintain racial hierarchy by pushing back against change. Such is the dichotomy of Juneteenth.
In a town in which I am only the second Black woman to serve in elected office, and I am the only member of the Town Board directly-impacted by chattel slavery in the Americas, I was not asked to offer my perspective on Juneteenth. I had to channel my inner Shirley Chisholm, and pull my folding chair up the table, so to speak. In celebrating Juneteenth as a nation that still has a long way to go to achieve racial equity, we must ensure that we uplift directly impacted voices, but do not appropriate space. We must ensure that we observe and listen, but do not undermine the leadership of those directly impacted. And most importantly, we must use this opportunity to do better. Holding a Juneteenth observation in a predominantly white space is a dichotomy, in and of itself. I challenge everyone at this observance to disrupt their own patterns today and spend time in predominantly Black spaces. Take an action to support Black joy. Get involved in an effort that supports equity and justice in our community.

In other words, on this Juneteenth, I challenge all of you to lift the veil, embrace the dichotomy, and appreciate that your truth is not the only truth.