

651 ARTS JUNETEENTH CELEBRATION (RE)VISION: A Cultural Context
by Bianca Moña

“We gather our community on the steps of our future home, in the spirit of our ancestors who knew to envision and pursue their own freedom before they could see it and before they were seen as free. We honor the spirit of resistance and resilience of African-Americans in the United States by taking inspiration from the fact that many Black people proclaimed and pursued freedom long before the Freedmen’s Bureau arrived in Galveston, Texas, declaring independence.”

Monica L. Williams, Chief Curator and Director of Programs, 651 ARTS

Juneteenth is a celebration to honor Black resilience, resistance and survival of chattel slavery, given that enslaved Africans held a (re)visionist version of themselves before and after enslavement. Nonetheless, on June 19, 1865, in Galveston, Texas, a proclamation was read to enslaved Africans, “The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes that between employer and hired labor. The freedmen are advised to remain **quietly** at their present homes and work for wages...” — [General Orders, Number 3](#).

The newly freed people in Texas declared this day Juneteenth, a holiday to commemorate the end of slavery. Celebrations began in the late 19th century as localized community gatherings among Black Texans, who solidified their freedom through communal feasting, organized competitions, and staged historical reenactments. Juneteenth took on enormous political significance, as Jim Crow laws and customs denied Black Americans of their citizenship rights and economic autonomy. As a dual celebration, it honors both the official legislative announcement and those ancestors who proclaimed, pursued, purchased their freedom before the proclamation. It is a remembrance of Black fortitude. Between 1940 and 1970, millions of Black Americans departed Texas in the Great Migration for places like Chicago, Detroit, and California. Similar to their ancestors, they entered these new spaces with their Juneteenth knowledge and traditions. This legacy of migration in the quest to seek betterment further demonstrates Black people’s renewal to access freedom. The ability to self-define and govern our identities, bodies, and ways of being are engrained in our history.

The robust fellowship that commences throughout the continental United States makes Juneteenth a dynamic holiday. Originally, public gatherings included parades, pageants, performances, political speeches, and prayers. These struts and parades of dignity were indeed precursors to later, more formalized emancipation celebrations. These initial gatherings allowed Black communities to honor themselves, and today continue to create spaces where we can boldly show up to celebrate ourselves, our legacy and contributions, and our projections for a collective future. Juneteenth celebrations overflow with music, dance, prancing, and processing throughout parks and city streets. Our presence is pronounced during these celebrations. Our movements articulate our shapely forms - boastful, jutting chests, swanking, shifting legs and arms, and bedazzled, coiffed heads. These celebrations serve as visual authorship of our self-defining narratives and proclamations of our continued legacies of self-determination.

Juneteenth is a manifestation of a desire we held within ourselves. Desires enacted upon when the times were right. Desires embodied through the body by absconding and maneuvering from location to location in search of spaces where we could flourish. Juneteenth is an intentional gathering where Black communities declare themselves free and bask in the knowing that they are held within a protective and loving embrace. It is the moment where Black communities renew pathways to liberation. Juneteenth is a revisionist movement where we see ourselves as our untethered spirit beings. We are a people of and from movement, which is essential in these celebrations as an entry point to various pleasure principles. Culturally and historically, Black people have used movement to usher in liberation through devotee praise and spiritual possession. The body is the epicenter from which we can be nourished and healed, and when the body is completely fueled, whole and complete Black people are equipped to soar beyond measure.

It is widely believed that the Emancipation Proclamation was a defining tool that ended slavery. That is false. The ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment ended slavery. Congress passed the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1865 so “neither slavery nor involuntary servitude except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction,” thus making the abolishment of slavery a national policy. The Emancipation Proclamation began a legislative process that would later lead to Juneteenth and commemorating events. Prior to President Abraham Lincoln signing this document, enslaved African persons instituted a series of defiant actions. They sought and found freedom and thus reclaimed themselves.

Let us not romanticize resistance. Instead, let us recognize these many acts of subversion as interventions needed for Black people to claim freedom as an act of self-expression. A commonly known intervention is the Underground Railroad, which was a vast system of networks, people, places, and pathways that stealthily took an estimated 100,000 enslaved persons from the American South to Northern territories and Canada. Black men implored another notable strategy by breaking away from Confederate states and crossing borders into Union states, thereby stepping into freedom. Once there, they would establish freedom villages. This movement of claiming liberation is credited as one of the last acts to urge President Lincoln into signing the Emancipation Proclamation.

Women also resisted slavery with their everyday actions. In *A Kick in the Belly: Women, Slavery, and Resistance*, Stella Dadzie reminds us that Black women regularly enacted cultural practices such as storytelling, administering medicines, fixing hair, birthing and naming rites, and burial rituals to ensure that the lives of chattel slaves retained both meaning and purpose. This sense of self gave rise to a sense of agency so that over time, both their subtle acts of insubordination and their conscious acts of rebellion came to undermine the entire slave system. Revolutionary freedom acts, often done in the **soundless** repetition of regular activities, helped eventually lead to Juneteenth.

It is in this spirit that 651 ARTS gathers our community in a public cypher to revisit ‘silence’ as a system of resistance, an act of self-determination, and in collective celebration of our Black brilliance.

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Resources

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