JEFFERSON
EDUCATIONAL SOCIETY

Book Notes

June 2021

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence
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Celebrate Juneteenth on Saturday

The American story is, indeed, endlessly complicated.'
— Annette Gordon-Reed [2]

If, as we said in last week's ***Book Notes***, paraphrasing William Faulkner, "the past won't stay past," or, at least, paraphrasing Annette Gordon-Reed, "Its echoes won't stay silent," [3] and the repressed, as Sigmund Freud warned, will return, then each echo, each "return" reveals yet another layer of complication in the American story. Some of those revelations are disheartening, while others, tinged with pain as they might be, are beautiful, heartening, and touched with grace.

Among the latter is the growing awareness across the land of *Juneteenth,* which African Americans have known about since 1866, but about which most of the rest of the country has only begun to become aware. As Jennie Geisler reported in the ***Erie Times-News***, June 19, 2020 was the first time the holiday was observed in Erie. [4] A combination of June and nineteen, *Juneteenth* celebrates the day in 1865, June 19, two and a half years after the Emancipation Proclamation, when federal troops arrived in Galveston, Texas and announced that the Civil War "was over and the enslaved were now free." [5]

It's a story that needs telling; a day that needs celebrating.
In a marvelous memoir, Annette Gordon-Reed does just that.

Consisting of six interrelated essays, Gordon-Reed's brief memoir is really a meditation upon her own experience as a young black woman growing up in Texas just north of Galveston in the 1960s and 1970s. In the process of sharing aspects of that experience, she explains what *"Juneteenth"* is and what it means. The essays, as Eugene Meyer says in the **Washington Independent Review of Books**:

> offer a thoughtful and affectionate meditation on the state in which, despite its dualities, she still feels most at home. Where others might see a simple picture of unreconstructed racism, Gordon-Reed sees — and dissects — complexities that largely defy stereotypes. In so doing, she makes ***On Juneteenth*** an important part of the discussion about who and what we are as 21st century Americans. [6]

As Meyer notes, one of the great strengths of Gordon-Reed's superb book is its tone. She does not succumb to "wokeness," pass judgment, or preach; nor does she engage in avoidance behavior refusing to see what's there to be seen. No, as the accomplished historian she is, Gordon-Reed unflinchingly looks at the facts, those persistent things that insist on being noted, notes them and then places them in the larger context from which they emerged. Guided by what Jennifer Szalai in **The New York Times** calls her "humane skepticism," Gordon-Reed lets the facts tell their own story. [7]

As in her account of the subtle, not so subtle actually, racism of white shopkeepers in her East Texas hometown, like the owner of the small store in which she and other children bought candy. The law said they had to be served, but it couldn't make the store owner happy to do it, for as Gordon-Reed recalls many of those storeowners "were gratuitously mean to us." [8] Which didn't anger her; it just puzzled her, for she had done nothing to cause it. She doesn't condemn; she wants to understand. Still, as she says, "Perhaps my experiences are the reason I have no nostalgia for the old-style, small-town general store, where customers were supposedly treated better than in large, so-called impersonal places like Walmart." [9]

"Yet," as Daina Ramey Berry, chairwoman of the History Department at the University of Texas wrote in **The Washington Post**,

> Those experiences did not tamp down the joy of her upbringing or the pride she took in being a Black woman in a state mythologized as the Wild West home of ranchers, cowboys, and oilmen. In the popular imagination, (Gordon-Reed) writes, 'Texas is a White man.' Nothing punctures that myth so perfectly as *Juneteenth*, a once-obscure holiday birthed in Texas that has in recent years become a nationwide celebration of Black American independence. [10]

There is so much in Gordon-Reed's marvelous but brief book I would like to share with you I fear that my ***Book Note*** might run on –and on. The book itself is only about 142 pages long, but when I counted the pages, I had dogeared to include in this ***"Note"*** I stopped at about 45! So, we'll ask and answer who is Annette Gordon-Reed, note a comment or two of hers on the nature of history, on what it means to be a "Texan" and the rich diversity of Texas history, the inescapable racism of that history, and conclude with a short sketch of *Juneteenth* – what it is, what it celebrates, how it is celebrated, and the growing movement to make it a

national holiday.

Who is Annette Gordon-Reed?

The Carl M. Loeb University Professor and Professor of History at Harvard University, she is the acclaimed historian who wrote ***The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family,*** for which she received the Pulitzer Prize for History, the National Book Award for Nonfiction, and numerous other awards including the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. Founded in Cleveland in 1935 by poet and philanthropist Edith Anisfield-Wolf, the award is given every year to "recognize books that have made important contributions to our understanding of racism and our appreciation of the rich diversity of human cultures." [11] It was at the 2009 awards that I briefly met Gordon-Reed and left with a signed, First Edition of ***The Hemingses of Monticello***. In it, she tells the story of Thomas Jefferson and his slave mistress Sally Hemings' family. [12] It was a story denied for almost two centuries by Jefferson's white descendants, but DNA evidence combined with documentary and anecdotal evidence makes continuing to deny Jefferson's parentage a quixotic mission. That's a subject for a future ***Book Notes***, but it speaks directly to the complications of American history.

For, what to make of Thomas Jefferson, arguably American history's most complicated person? He wrote those glittering words, "We hold these truths to be self-evident …," among which are that "all men are created equal," but he owned slaves. In his ***Notes on the State of Virginia***, the only book Jefferson ever wrote, he had some less than flattering things to say about Black people, the least offensive being that, if freed, they could not live in the United States because they did not love the country, for how could they love a country that did not love them? Yet, for the five men he freed in his will, Jefferson petitioned the Virginia Legislature to permit them to stay in Virginia (by law freed slaves had to leave the state), because Virginia was their home "where their families and connections were." [13]

What I really appreciate about Gordon-Reed is the integrity of her assessments. She sees what there is to see; she calls it to account; but she does not condemn, because, well, because it's complicated. Just as other historians reminding Americans of things many would like to forget or to deny, as Gordon-Reed would tell you about Mr. Jefferson, as she would tell you about herself and why she loves Texas, it's her home and its complicated. It's not a cancellation, whatever that means, but an act of love as one "attempt(s) to recognize and grapple with the humanity, and thus, the fallibility of people in the past – and the present ..." [14] For, as she says, "love does not require taking an uncritical stance toward the object of one's affections. In truth, it often requires the opposite. We can't be of real service to the hopes we have for places – and people, ourselves included – without a clear-eyed assessment of their (and our) strengths and weaknesses." [15]

Which is how she approaches history – "clear-eyed" and understanding that it's a story whose shape is always shifting, that it is "always being revised, as new information comes to light and when different people see known documents and have their own responses to them, shaped by their individual experiences" [16] altering their understanding of where we came from and how we got to here and now. Knowing where we came from is important, for as Gordon-Reed writes, "Origin stories matter for individuals, groups of people and for nations. They inform our sense of self; telling us what kind of people we believe we are, what kind of nation we believe we live in." [17]

Equally important is understanding that “history is about people and events in a particular setting and context, and how those things changed over time in ways that make the past different from our own time, with an understanding that those changes were not inevitable.” [18] And those changes resulted from the interplay of choices made by individuals and groups within the context of their time, where context is not simply a passive backdrop to human action, but the, if not definitive, the impinging influence of geography, socioeconomic forces, religion and competing values about how society ought to be organized.

Gordon-Reed does all of this within the context of attempting to understand American history and the history of Texas, which she sees as a microcosm of American history, for “no other state brings together so many disparate and defining characteristics all in one – a state that shares a border with a foreign nation, a state with a long history of disputes between Europeans and an indigenous population and between Anglo-Europeans and people of Spanish origin, a state that existed as an independent nation, that had plantation-based slavery and legalized Jim Crow.” [19] Her discussion of all of this is rich and insightful, but I will only focus on two or three aspects of it, hoping to tease you into reading ***On Juneteenth.***

Regarding origins, Gordon-Reed asks when did American and Texas history begin? Whichever date you choose is not neutral, for it imposes upon the narrative its own point –of view. For example, did American history begin in 1619, 1776, 1789, 1865 or earlier in the 16th century in St. Augustine, Florida, where George Bancroft, sometimes called “the father of American history,” placed it attempting to give the new republic of the United States more gravitas by making its lineage longer. Not only when, but where the story of that history begins influences how it is told and its point –of view. Gordon-Reed has an interesting several pages comparing the differing “meanings” of America if one says it began at Plimouth Plantation in Massachusetts in 1621 or in Jamestown, Virginia in 1607.

The settlers of the former sought religious freedom, if not for everyone, then for themselves. Their messianic fervor, some, like my colleague at the Jefferson Educational Society, Charles Brock in the book he is currently crafting, ***Holy Warrior Presidents***, call it their *Mosaic fervor* to make the world safe for Christianity and then, when wedded to the 18th century’s democratic impulse, safe for Christianity and democracy, which came to dominate American culture and foreign policy. That is an oversimplification on my part, but, regardless, some see that as a noble goal.

Not so noble, however, were those who settled Jamestown in Virginia. They sought only the freedom to find gold, which they didn’t, and to become rich, which they did from the cultivation of a weed that could be smoked, but whose cultivation was so strenuous that the Virginians rather quickly created a slave culture to grow it for them. The marriage of those two notions of America’s origin is, in some senses, the story of America, but, of course, it is more complicated than that.

So, too, Texas, for when does Texas history begin? With the Spanish and Mexicans who claimed it since the 16th century or with the indigenous people from whom they wrested their claim? Or with the Anglos led by Stephen F. Austin, the father of Texas, who began to settle it in the 1820s “not to create cattle ranches and hire cowboys, but to turn a large swath of the Mexican province

Coahuila y Tejas into a western version of the cotton fields of Mississippi?" [20] Or does it begin in the 1830s and the creation of the republic of Texas in 1836 when the Anglos rebelled against Mexico, fearing the Mexicans were about to outlaw slavery, thus dashing Anglo hopes of a plantation culture? Or does it begin with the successful Texian (those who would break from Mexico) quest to be annexed to the United States as a slave state, which happened in 1845 and was reinforced by the American conquest of Mexico in the Mexican War of the late-1840s only to see all of that undone by the defeat of the Confederacy in 1865?

It's all complicated, very complicated only to be made more complicated by asking an additional question: when did Blacks first come to Texas? Gordon-Reed has a fascinating several pages about Estebanico, a North African who was not a slave, passing through what later became Texas in the 16th century. After being stranded in Florida, he accompanied Cabeza de Vaca and his men on their epic "walk" across the North American continent from Florida to California. Gordon-Reed finds it somehow heartening but a bit unsettling, in that he was a conqueror, that the first documented African in Texas was a free man. She nonetheless points out that enslaved Blacks and others of ambiguous status were there when Texas was Mexican, but first arrived in what became the state of Texas in significant numbers in the 1820s with those who would create a slave-plantation, cotton culture. That is to say, from the vantage point of U.S. history, Blacks have been in Texas from the beginning.

But they were only welcome if they were slaves. For those who twitch when any mention of America's racist history is made or who argue the Civil War was fought for states' rights (which is technically true but the state's right to do what?) then for them Gordon-Reed has several uncomfortable pages as she parses the *Texas Declaration of Independence* and Alexander Stephens' "Cornerstone Speech." The *Texas Declaration of Independence*, which predates the fall of the Alamo, is modeled after Jefferson's American Declaration, but with a significant difference. Conspicuous by their absence "are any words about 'self-evident' truth that 'all men are created equal.'" [21]

In its Section 6, it declares that "All free***white*** *(emphasis added)* persons who shall emigrate to this republic ... shall be entitled to all the privileges of citizenship."[22] As Gordon-Reed points out, "only whites were welcome," for Section 9 pointedly states "All persons of color who were slaves for life previous to their emigration to Texas, and who are now held in bondage, shall remain in the like state of servitude. … ***No free person of African descent, either in whole or in part*** *(emphasis added)*, shall be permitted to reside permanently in the republic without the consent of congress. ..." In case anyone missed the point, Section 10 adds "All persons, (Africans, the descendants of Africans, and Indians ***excepted*** (emphasis added)) who were residing in Texas on the day of the Declaration of Independence shall be considered citizens. ..." [23]

Hopkins, however, is interested in the apopathic, which Armstrong defined as the seeker seeking the ineffable, the divine. At first, the seeker is filled with ecstasy and her language filled with joy, but as one approaches closer to the ineffable, to that which cannot be known but only sensed, human language breaks down and can no longer articulate what it apprehends but only share the experience's emotional intensity.

Similarly, for those who say slavery was an aberration and not the cause of the Civil War, Gordon-Reed notes that General Order #3, which announced on June 19, 1865, to the enslaved of Texas that they were now free, also included an

absolute repudiation of the Stephens' *Cornerstone Speech* and the Confederacy's constitution. After stating that all slaves were free, it stated, "This involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of personal property between former masters and slaves." [24] This, to borrow a phrase, literally "turned the world upside down," for Stephens, the vice president of the Confederacy, said in his *"Cornerstone"* speech that the framers were wrong in their Declaration of Independence, that America had been founded upon an error and that the government's collapse should have been anticipated. Here is Stephens' comment in full:

Those ideas, the Declaration of Independence and other
founding documents, were fundamentally wrong. They rested
upon the assumption of the equality of races. This was an error.
It was a sandy foundation, and the government built upon it
fell when the storm came, and the wind blew. Our new
government, the Confederate States of America, is founded
upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid,
its ***cornerstone*** *(emphasis added)* rests, upon the great truth
that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery subordination
to the superior race is his natural and normal
condition. This, our new government, is the first, in the history
of the world, based upon this great physical, philosophical, and
moral truth. ... [25]

Gordon-Reed notes several other powerful incidents illumining the complications of America's racial and ethnic heritage, such as the origins and conflicting perceptions of the legend of *"The Yellow Rose of Texas,"* the story of Cynthia Ann Parker, a young white girl kidnapped by Comanches whose son became the foremost warrior chieftain of the Comanche tribe, the conflicting and conflicted attitudes towards indigenous people, and the "complicated" relations between African Americans and indigenous people.

As mentioned earlier, however, the most moving parts of her story are not the detailed analyses of the larger history, but the stories of her own family and growing up as segregation ended and a new world began to unfold in the 1960s and 1970s. For her, W.E.B. DuBois' "twoness" was not an abstract concept, but a living reality as she was the first Black student in a previously all white school. The kindness of a white teacher, Mrs. Daughtry, who with others helped her understand that not all white people were the same, and other less positive experiences affected her experience. But her recollection of how her family celebrated *Juneteenth* speaks across cultural divides as she recollects large picnics in Emancipation Park, one of the oldest parks in Texas. It was created by freed black men in the 1870s as a place for celebrating *Juneteenth*.

How was it celebrated? The way all Americans have and continue to celebrate their freedom every Fourth of July, except this celebration was more culturally focused and occurred on June 19. Still, there were fireworks and music, firecrackers and sparklers, and there was food and feasting. As she notes, in addition to "the usual southern-style cuisine" there was "red (strawberry) 'soda water'... and barbecued goat." She skipped eating the goat, but for her and her friends, *Juneteenth* was a day of excess "on the red soda waterfront." [26] But what she remembers most warmly is making tamales with her grandmother, mother, and aunts as her family's tradition merged with an even more ancient cross-cultural tradition as "People of African descent, and to be honest, of some

European descent, celebrated the end of slavery in Texas with dishes learned in slavery and a dish favored by ancient Mesoamerican Indians that connected Texas to its Mexican past; so much Texas history brought together for this one special day." [27]

Texas, as one might suspect, in 1980 was the first state to make *Juneteenth* a state holiday and New York in October 2020 one of the most recent. Already a state holiday or day of observance in 47 states, what is this "one special day" that is now gathering momentum towards becoming a national holiday? It marks the day in 1865 when news of Lincoln's *Emancipation Proclamation* freeing the slaves held in the states in rebellion against the Union finally made it to Texas. [28] As recorded by the Texas Historical Association, "on June 19, 1865, Union General Gordon Granger arrived in Galveston and issued General Order Number 3, which read, in part:

> 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 rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes that between employer and hired laborer. [29]

This was two and a half years after the Emancipation Proclamation of January 1, 1863. The delay was caused by the fact that Texas was on the remote edge of the Confederacy and had not been conquered by the Union Army. With Lee's surrender at Appomattox in April 1865, however, the situation changed. Still, some in Texas resisted and there is a legend that the news was deliberately withheld so that the enslavers could harvest one last cotton crop. [30] Regardless, celebrations broke out among the freed Black people and *Juneteenth* and the promise of freedom was born. As Gordon-Reed remarks, "If the promise of *Juneteenth* lived anywhere in Texas, it was in Galveston." [31] Freed Black people decamped from the plantations in search of lost family members separated during slavery, some heading North and others to Oklahoma and elsewhere.

Initially called *Emancipation Day*, at first, *Juneteenth* was celebrated in churches, not unusual for a church-going people, but Gordon-Reed speculates it might also have been for safety. Eventually, celebrations moved out-of-doors, still, however, including a religious component. Later still, in 1872 in Houston, four black men created Emancipation Park to celebrate *Juneteenth*. Gradually, the celebration spread throughout Texas, then to neighboring states, and finally became a national holiday within the African American community.

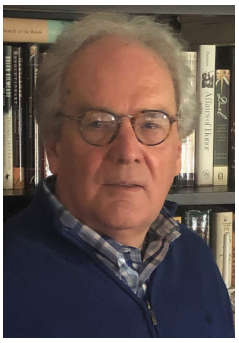
During the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, *Juneteenth* became a rallying point among black students. The Poor People's Campaign of 1968 helped it become a nationally recognized event. The Rev. Ralph Abernathy scheduled the Poor People's Campaign to end on June 19, 1968. Participants left the event in Washington, D.C. taking news of it back to their home states. Since then, recognition of the holiday has steadily grown. After the murder of George Floyd in 2020, as the Texas Historical Association notes, "*Juneteenth* became a celebration of freedom steeped in the centuries-long struggle to end racism in America." [32]

So, *Juneteenth* has now emerged to join Patriots Day in Massachusetts and other state-anchored celebrations of freedom, to join Memorial Day, the Fourth of July, and Veterans Day as national celebrations of America's commitment to its

founding ideals, Alexander Stephens be damned, that all men are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

There is still work to do, but this Saturday, June 19,*Juneteenth*, go ahead and celebrate freedom by doing what Black Americans have been doing these past 156 years: have a picnic, have some strawberry soda pop, have some barbecue (but not, as Gordon-Reed would agree, goat), go fishing or to a baseball game and, most importantly, remember that the earliest *Juneteenth* celebrations focused on education and self-improvement. [33]

If you want to improve yourself through education, then an excellent place to begin is Annette Gordon-Reed's superb *On Juneteenth*.



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End Notes

1. "Juneteenth" image *"Juneteenth Now a State and Public Holiday in New Jersey"* from **NBC News Channel 10 Philadelphia** available at https://www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/local/juneteenth-now-a-state-ad-public-holiday-in-new-jersey/2529818/ accessed May 17, 2021.
2. Gordon-Reed, Annette. **On Juneteenth**. (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2021), p. 96.
3. Ibid., p. 33.
4. Geisler, Jennie. *"Juneteenth brought out the best in Erie,"* in **Erie Times-News** (July 7, 2020) available at https://www.goerie.com/story/opinion/columns/2020/07/07/jennie-geisler-juneteenth-brought-out-best-in-erie/113439430/ accessed May 26, 2021.
5. *History of Juneteenth,"* from **Juneteenth.com** available at https://www.juneteenth.com/history.htm accessed May 26, 2021.
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7. Szalai, Jennifer. *"The Historian Annette Gordon-Reed Gets Personal in 'On Juneteenth,"* in **The New York Times** (April 21, 2021) available at https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/21/books/review-on-juneteenth-annette-gordon-reed.html accessed May 26, 2021.
8. Gordon-Reed, ***On Juneteenth***, p. 42.
9. Ibid.
10. Berry, Daina Ramey, *"Annette Gordon-Reed's 'On Juneteenth' complicates notions of Black history"* in **The Washington Post** (May 14, 2021) available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/annette-gordon-reeds-on-juneteenth-complicates-notions-of-black-history/2021/05/13/f153ff16-a6b6-11eb-bca5-048b2759a489_story.html accessed May 26, 2021.
11. *"The Awards",* in **Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards**" available at https://www.anisfield-wolf.org/about/#the-awards accessed May 26, 2021.
12. Cf. Gordon-Reed, Annette. **The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family**. (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2008).
13. Gordon-Reed, **On Juneteenth**, pp. 139-141.
14. Ibid., p. 110.
15. Ibid., p. 141.
16. Ibid., p, 107.
17. Ibid., p., 58.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., p. 28.
20. Ibid., p. 23.
21. Ibid. pp. 104-105.
22. Ibid., p. 106.
23. Ibid., p. 125.
24. Ibid., p. 127. **Nb.** A complete copy of Stephens' infamous speech can be found in **American Speeches: Political Oratory from the Revolution to the Civil War**, Ed. Ted Widmer. (New York: The

Library of America, 2006), pp. 717-731 and online at "The 'Cornerstone Speech'" at Owl Eyes available at https://www.owleyes.org/text/the-cornerstone-speech accessed May 27, 2021.
25. Gordon-Reed, **On Juneteenth**, p. 136.
26. bid., p. 136.
27. Ibid., p. 137
28. **Note:** Slavery did not end with *Juneteenth*; slavery only ended when on December 6, 1865, Georgia ratified the 13th Amendment.
29. Acosta, Teresa Palomo. *"Juneteenth,"* at **Texas State Historical Association** available at https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/juneteenth accessed May 27, 2021.
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31. Gordon-Reed, **On Juneteenth**, p. 134.
32. Acosta, Teresa Palomo. *"Juneteenth,"* at **Texas State Historical Association** available at https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/juneteenth accessed May 27, 2021.
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