

Podcast: On Juneteenth: A Discussion with McGlinchey's African American Affinity Group

June 30, 2022

Juneteenth is the oldest commemoration of the ending of slavery in the United States. In the latest episode of More with McGlinchey, we present a recording of an internal panel discussion between members of McGlinchey's African American Affinity Group on the novel "On Juneteenth" by Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Annette Gordon-Reed. It provides a historian's view of the country's long road to Juneteenth, recounting both its origins in Texas and the enormous hardships that African-Americans have endured in the century since, from Reconstruction through Jim Crow and beyond.

Thank you to **Camille Bryant** (New Orleans), **Kerry Cummings** (Fort Lauderdale) and **Farren Davis** (New Orleans) for the insightful discussion!

Camille Bryant: Good morning/afternoon, everyone, depending on what area of the country you are in. For those of you who may not know me, my name is Camille Bryant. I am a member in the labor and employment section based in the New Orleans office. And I'd like to welcome all of you to this year's Juneteenth coffee break. So with me, I have Kerry Cummings out of Fort Lauderdale and Farren Davis also out of New Orleans.

So a little bit of background on Juneteenth for those of you that may not know. Juneteenth is, in fact, the oldest commemoration of the ending of slavery in the United States. And so the origins of Juneteenth actually date back to June 19th, 1865, in Galveston, Texas, when then-Major General Gordon Grainger issued general orders which essentially stated that "the people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the executive of the United States, all slaves are free. In accordance with this proclamation, this involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves. And the connection hereto existing between them becomes between employer and hired labor." The freedmen were advised to remain quietly at their present homes and to work for wages.

This was significant because this order was actually received two years after the Emancipation Proclamation. And so, not surprisingly, spontaneous celebrations then ensued among the enslaved people once news of the proclamation spread. And so those celebrations later then expound all across the country. As these former enslaved persons then migrated outside of Texas, often looking for their relatives who they had been separated from. So, hence that is the tradition of Juneteenth.

Last year, President Joe Biden actually signed the Juneteenth national independence day act into law, which essentially made Juneteenth a federal holiday. This year, because it falls on a Saturday, Juneteenth is actually going to be observed on Monday, June 20th, both across the country, federally, as well as here at McGlinchey. And so, since the passing of the Juneteenth National Independence Day Act, we've seen this flurry of various observances and celebrations across the country with respect to Juneteenth, oftentimes from corporations that are seeking to capitalize off of the holiday.

For example, there was one recent incident in Indianapolis with a very famous children's museum, where they were selling watermelon salad in celebration of Juneteenth. And so, a lot of people were offended because watermelon has historically been used as sort of a racist trope against Black Americans. So we're seeing a lot of different corporations that are sort of missing the mark on Juneteenth by commercializing what has often been a celebration that African Americans have had throughout history since 1865. And so, by failing to provide some of that historical context with these events, companies are oftentimes perpetuating stereotypes unintentionally.

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What we would like to do today as an affinity group is spend a few minutes digging a little bit deeper into the education and understanding the purpose behind Juneteenth. We want to use some of the literature from an award-winning novel, "On Juneteenth" by Annette Gordon-Reed, to discuss a few key points. It's not necessary for anyone to have read the book, but we will certainly make sure that everyone has information to the extent you would like to read it after the fact so that you can get those details.

The first prompt that we want to address, and Kerry, I'll kick this one over to you. I'll read a couple of the excerpts from the book to provide a little context. It says,

"The world enclosed in that way left out so much of the true nature of life in early America, about all varying experiences that shaped people and circumstances during those times. It comes off the vital understanding about contingency, how things could have taken a different turn. Very significantly, it helped create and maintain an extremely narrow constructive of Blackness. Under the conventional narrative with which most Americans, it's safe to say, are familiar, Blacks came to North America under the power of English from places that were not clearly defined. Where they came from didn't matter much. They went from speaking their native languages of their lands to speaking English. They worked on plantations in the fields or in the house. This highly edited origin story winds the Black experience tight, limiting the imaginative possibilities of Blackness. What could be done by the people in that skin? To be sure, the institution of slavery itself circumscribed the actions of enslaved African Americans, but it never destroyed their personhood. They did not

become a separate species by the experience of being enslaved. All the feelings, talents, failings, strengths and weaknesses, all the states and qualities that exist in human beings remained there. There has been too great a tendency within some presentation of enslaved people to lose sight of that fact in ways obvious or not."

Excerpt from "On Juneteenth"

So, Kerry, the question that I want to pose to you based on that excerpt is, what stories about American history did you learn growing up? What do you think was left out if anything was left out that you've learned from history? And how did it change your sense of what you are and what you do?

Kerry Cummings: I mean, I've learned a lot of stories about American history growing up, but one of the things that I guess has always resonated with me is actually the story about Harriet Tubman. She was the conductor of the underground railroad. She helped to rescue about 70 slaves, including her parents, and she never lost a passenger on there. But a lot of people may not know that she was also a Union spy, and she helped to conduct the espionage and scout network for the Union army, to help intercept some of the Confederate supplies, and also helped free slaves that way and she was also a nurse. And the fact of the matter is this woman was five foot tall! And as a five person who's about five foot two, that's very impressive! So that's kind of always resonated with me.

One of the things that I actually didn't learn until recently, which I think is crazy, is about the Tulsa massacre. Frankly, that that was never taught to me, you know, back in the Nineties, I just dated myself in high school. In U.S. history, that was never taught to me. We're looking at what was probably one of the deadliest massacres in United States history. And I literally never heard of it until the past ten years. We lost about anywhere from 100 to 300 people. Thirty-five city blocks were burned. And I think 8,000 people were left homeless. How is it something that's never discussed, you know, when I was growing up? And frankly, embarrassingly enough, the way I learned about it is because I was watching the show "Watchmen," and that's how I learned about it. I was like, "this is a crazy beginning to a show," but it was based on real life. That's just still completely insane to me.

A lot of people may not know that Harriet Tubman was also a Union spy, and she helped to conduct the espionage and scout network for the Union army to help intercept some of the Confederate supplies and also helped free slaves that way. Also, she was a nurse.

And I guess the third aspect of the question is, what would I change? I think I want to make sure that my little niece and nephew that I now have, who are four and five, that they don't lose sight of these very big points of history and that they are well aware of these things. And they're fully educated to such things.

Camille Byrant: Those are all really, really good points. And you talked about your nieces and your nephews and just not learning some of these things in school and history class. I sort of have the same sentiment. There were a lot of things that we didn't learn in school. And I remember being young. I don't know if either of you had Addie dolls. For the parents on the line, American Girl dolls were really big when I was a kid, and Addie was "the Black American Girl doll." And it told stories of slavery and of oppression and segregation. That's one of the ways that I had to get my education outside of the traditional means of learning history because a lot of things just weren't taught to us. So that's something that really stuck out to me.

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And you also mentioned the Tulsa Massacre, which I think has gotten a lot more sort of notoriety and press as of late because of some of the more recent events that we’ve seen with regards to George Floyd and other incidences of oppression and violence against Black and brown people. And so that sort of brings us to our next excerpt for you, Farren. In the book, Gordon-Reed talks about the assassination of President Kennedy, and in it, she says that she could tell from the conversation of all of the adults around her that this was something that was significant and profound. And so in it, she writes:

“It seemed unreal. Did that happen? I had seen people shot on television, but only in dramas and westerns, make believe. But this was supposed to be real. Can people really be shot on TV? Living in the world of childhood, asking for permission to do things, having things proceeding in an orderly fashion, I couldn’t fathom how this could happen. I’ve watched the tape of those moments as an adult. Even though I’m much more aware of life and have the knowledge of hindsight that this could happen, the moment still feels a bit unreal. I was not old enough to think of the event in Dallas fitting into a broader pattern of Texas history or culture. It was a violent act and it was clear to me that everyone in my world experienced it as a deep and senseless tragedy. I did not know it at the time, but some of my fellow Texans did not see it that way. They welcomed Kennedy’s violent death because they violently disagreed with his politics. The idea of violence as a solution to a problem has plagued humankind from the beginning. People all over the world have employed violence to move situations from one point to the other.”

Excerpt from “On Juneteenth”

And so Farren, we’ve recently, as Kerry just talked about, observed the hundred-year anniversary of the Tulsa Massacre. We’ve also seen broadcast on TV and social media the death of George Floyd and other Black people. We’ve also seen, just last month, what was a self-described White supremacist murdered 10 Black people in a mass shooting at a Buffalo grocery store, as well as many other acts of violence. And so, how have these events shaped your perception of America, and how can we avoid becoming desensitized to violence when these things are continuing to happen?

Farren Davis: As far as have these events changed my perception of America, it’s crazy. I grew up as a child in suburbs of Houston and Pearland, and the only crime that I really heard was someone stealing someone’s cow. And so your parents really shielded you from so much growing up, and you really don’t realize it. So when I got older and went off to college, and you start meeting all these people from different backgrounds and paths of life, and you’re hearing their stories, you’re like, wait, that happened? And you start thinking; you realize, “I’ve been shielded.” So it made me take a deep dive. Actually, my freshman year of college, the Trayvon Martin incident happened, and which, kind of for people that don’t know, it kick-started the Black Lives Matter movement. But that happened my freshman year of college.

And so, I ended up deciding to minor in African and African American Studies. And so, it just made me take a deep dive. And that’s when I really realized that it’s not so much that these are new events. It’s repeated events in different, new fashion.

As far as how can we avoid to be desensitized, when y'all find out, let me know! No, but I think I realized, and COVID kind of made me realize this also, you have to isolate yourself from social media at times. Yes, you need to know these things. Yes, you need to be in the know. But there's times where you need a mental break. It's almost too much information at one time for anyone to one person to digest.

So I think one of the best things to do is just set those mental breaks for you, and just kind of, let me get a week off of social media. Let me hone in onto my work and what I need to do and try to break off because it really is hard. Right? Our phones make it so hard, let alone having two phones. It makes it so hard to unplug, but it's so necessary more than ever.

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Also just, it sounds cliché, but take a walk in the park and just appreciate nature and life, and just the abundance of life. Just the fact that I'm able to move my limbs and talk and hear and breathe. I know it sounds very minute and small, but those things really do help you just become more involved in self and people, again, being involved in the community. I think when the stuff happened in Buffalo; sometimes if people are far away, maybe you don't know someone that lives in Buffalo, right. It feels farther away from you, but actually, what can I do from New Orleans to help the people that suffered, their family? And just kind of relating to people in a different level. And if that's a mentorship with kids, like with the stuff that happened in Texas. People that don't have kids are not, or are not fond of kids, might have not felt as strong of an urge as people who have a connectivity with kids. And so just being involved in your community and in something that is different from you, I think would also help as well.

Camille Bryant: Yeah. You said so many things. I definitely agree with you that this isn't something that's new. These things have been going on since, unfortunately, 1865, since Juneteenth, but I do think that social media has had a way of bringing them to light and showcasing and highlighting them for the better or for, the worse. There's definitely benefits to now everyone being able to see that these are some of the things that are plaguing our communities and what can we do to change them and to advance our communities for the betterment of everyone. But at the same time, you do need that break because, as Black and brown people, it can be particularly taxing on your mental health.

I remember somebody meaning very well, coming in my office; I think it might have been the one-year anniversary of George Floyd, asking me if I was okay and offering condolences. And at that point, it didn't even register to me because I can't constantly keep thinking of those things because I would just perpetually be in a negative state. And so, I definitely agree with you on having to take a step back and just appreciating life and where we are as individuals. But then also giving back to the community to make sure that we are advancing different causes, which is really what Juneteenth is really about.

In our third excerpt that we're going to talk about from the book, Reed writes:

"As painful as it may be, recognizing, though not dwindling on, tragedy and the role it plays in our individual lives and in the life of a state or nation is, I think, a sign of maturity. Disentangling those threads and viewing

them critically has been, in fact, a good thing in the context of our national history, broadening our understanding of who we were and who we are."

Excerpt from "On Juneteenth"

And so this question is for both of you guys and Kerry; I'll let you answer first. Reed gives us an opportunity to really reflect on our own personal origin stories. She challenges us to examine the complexities of history and to explore relationships, power dynamics, intent, impact, and all of those things. And so, through doing this, we can really create a better understanding of ourselves and the world around us. And so we may learn more about who we are, who we were, and who we want to be, and why are we the way we are. How might you continue, or how do you plan to continue to embrace the opportunity for exploration and action?

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Kerry Cummings: Well, I hate to bring up my niece and nephew again, but they are my cute little pumpkins! Farren, like you, I actually grew up in a suburb of Fort Lauderdale. I'd say I was pretty protected down here. We had a nice, diverse group of friends. It's pretty much a melting pot down here. So my niece and my nephew are also having that same type of experience. But there are things I think, even exploring more Black and brown and types of foods, more soul food, things I didn't experience as much as a child. And even going through that journey of exploration now, taking my niece and nephew too, so that they will have these experiences. I'm kind of growing myself through them, essentially.

Farren Davis: I completely agree. I am a huge advocate on "you don't need a title to grab a towel." I say that to say that so many times, people feel like you need a title to do these things, but you are a mentor every single day. You don't punch in; you don't punch out. When I'm in the grocery store, and there's a teenager behind me that I can see them like scrambling for change to buy some candy, I'm going to buy that candy. So there's just different things that you can do. And even from when I'm at my grandmother's house for Thanksgiving, and I'm on my laptop, and my little cousins ask, "oh, what are you doing?" and being an annoying for most people, I don't say, "grown folks business." I let them see what I'm doing. And I explain to them, "oh, I'm doing this, I'm preparing this." People think that kids, you talk to them like kids. I think you have to start talking to them about the real world, what you're doing because you have to grow, and that's how you grow.

Camille Bryant: I'm going to throw another question to you guys that I didn't give you beforehand. We talked about what you guys personally are going to do to embrace this opportunity to really further the community. But what suggestions, advice would you give for someone who wants to be an ally or an advocate that they can do, on Juneteenth or beyond, to really help some of the issues that the Black community may be facing?

Kerry Cummings: Have a frank conversation with your friend, your Black or brown friend. If you have questions, talk to them about it. There's nothing wrong with that. I have a lot of diverse friends, and we have conversations all the time, and they're very frank. I appreciate that they're honest with me, and they're comfortable to ask the questions, and also that they're educating themselves.

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I really feel strongly about being a leader every single day. I think especially becoming a defense lawyer; you equate time with money. And so, I had to learn that those selfless acts equate more than money could ever mean. I'm always making sure that I'm not a deer in headlights, that I'm always assessing a situation, and if there's something that I can do, I'm ready to do it.

Farren Davis: I would definitely say, first and foremost, be genuine. That goes a long way, even if you don't know what to say, right? And sometimes you don't know what to say when things happen. But if you're genuine, your intentions will always shine through. Like you said, Kerry, have that conversation with your friend, like, "look, I really don't know how to even word this. I don't know if I'm saying this right. But like, I want to help." I think it starts there. And if you're in a metro area like New Orleans, there's a plethora of things to do! I promise you; there's a laundry list of things to do.

So I think really tapping into your community, again. I know we keep talking about community involvement, but there's so many things that you could touch, whether it's housing or mentoring children, or if it's putting on a back to school even just finding out what you like to do and what aligns with that. There's so many initiatives with juveniles and so many things to do. So start there, start in your community. Let's take the small bite of the apple first. Let's try to work with your surroundings first before we try to call someone else.

Camille Bryant: I definitely agree with you. It's one of those things that to really see change and affect change. It's going to happen incrementally over time. No one person is going to change the face of a community or the world, for that matter. And so I definitely wanted to encourage everyone to do something on Juneteenth. Even if it's just reading the book "On Juneteenth" by Annette Gordon-Reed to get a little bit more perspective on what does this holiday really mean, why are we celebrating it, why was it made into a national holiday? Even if it's just educating yourself and starting there.

And if you want to purchase the book, I would encourage you to seek out any [Black-owned bookstore](#) in your community. Thank you again for joining us in today's discussion, and please stay tuned for more from McGlinchey's African American Affinity Group, as well as other employee resource groups.

Kerry and Farren: Bye!

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