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Commentary: Annette Gordon-Reed: On Juneteenth

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Professor Annette Gordon-Reed, speaking at the 169th CityLaw Breakfast. Image Credit: CityLand

Annette Gordon-Reed, our friend and colleague for 17 years at New York Law School, has just published *On Juneteenth* (Liveright 2021), a personal and readable story of her growing up in Texas in the 1970's. Gordon-Reed grew up in Conroe, Texas where her family regularly celebrated Juneteenth. Gordon-Reed was the first Black child to integrate a White elementary school in her city. Through her personal story Gordon-Reed annotates and re-calibrates the conventional story of slavery in the United States, and the history of Texas as taught in her public school and as portrayed in novels and movies.

Gordon-Reed graduated from Dartmouth College, Harvard Law School, and in 1992 joined the faculty of New York Law School. While at New York Law School Gordon-Reed researched and wrote two celebrated books on Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings. The second book, *The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family* (2008) won both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. In 2010 Harvard University honored Gordon-Reed with an offer to join its faculty. Gordon-Reed most recently returned to New York Law School on October 2, 2020, where, at a [CityLaw Breakfast](#), she provided a measured commentary on policing.

In *On Juneteenth* Gordon-Reed, with both charm and a clear historical eye, examines what it means to be both a Black woman and a Texan. Gordon-Reed disavows 1619 as the start of slavery in the United States, recounts the origin of Black people in Texas, examines the Republic of Texas's constitution that made Black slavery permanent, sets out the original racist words of the song The Yellow Rose of Texas, and points out the ambiguous history of Indians.

How, Gordon-Reed asks herself, can I look at the history of Texas and still love Texas? Texas history is complicated she repeatedly states. It is her home and family. Gordon-Reed writes that "I don't feel hostage to others' conception of what Texas should mean to me, or accept that Texas 'belongs' exclusively to any group of people who lived, or live, there. Being a Black person and a Texan, then, are not in opposition."

Juneteenth, Gordon-Reed writes, is "a good thing in the context of our national history, broadening our understanding of who we were and who we are now." This is a welcome and positive message from one of our keenest contemporary observers.

By: **Ross Sandler** (Ross Sandler is a Professor and New York Law School and the Director of the Center for New York City Law.)