

Annette Gordon-Reed: We have to know the condition of our society, of our history before we can really think about making changes or keeping the things that are good, changing the things that are bad.

[MUSIC INTRO]

Nicole Pullen Ross: Good morning. My name is Nicole Pullen Ross. I lead the New York Private Wealth Management business for the firm. And am the very excited host today to have the opportunity to spend some time with our special guest, Annette Gordon-Reed. Annette's one of the most important American historians of our time. Gordon-Reed has won 16 book prizes, include a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Award for her 2008 book *The Hemingses of Monticello*. Her latest work *On Juneteenth* recounts the nation's road to Juneteenth, which will be celebrated this Saturday, June 19th. Its origins in Texas. And importantly, sheds a light on who we are as Americans.

Annette, thank you so much for being here.

Annette Gordon-Reed: I'm very glad to be here, even from a hotel room in DC. Thank you.

Nicole Pullen Ross: So, your most recent book, which was a wonderful recount, part memoir, part history in terms of Juneteenth, it really, in my opinion, served as a bit of a reflection of the Black experience, including your own of course, where in Texas you were born and raised. The essays in the book serve as an origin of the long road to June 19th, 1865, when Major General Gordon Granger announced the end of legalized slavery in Texas.

And before we delve into those themes, can you just share your own story of what life was like growing up in East Texas?

Annette Gordon-Reed: Well, I was born in Livingston, Texas, which is in East Texas, part of the "Big Thicket." Many people think of Texas as a desert. It is, in fact, East Texas is part of a gigantic forest called the Big Thicket. Enormous diversity in the environment of the place.

And when I was about six months old, I moved to Conroe, Texas, which was another small town in Texas, somewhat south of Livingston, closer to Houston. And I always, for as far as I can remember, we celebrated Juneteenth in the summers. And that consisted of, for us as children, running around, drinking red

soda water, which is pop, usually strawberry soda, throwing firecrackers. I can't believe we were allowed to play with matches and throw firecrackers below the can. But we were. But that was a different time. My grandfather bought these for us. I mean, it was amazing. Sparklers.

And it was sort of, to us, to me, it was like a Black 4th of July. I mean, we celebrated the 4th of July as well. This was sort of the one-two punch, beginning with Juneteenth and then July 4th. But this was a holiday that when I was growing up was mainly about Black Texas. There may have been whites who celebrated as well, but definitely Black Texans.

And then when it became a state holiday in 1980, it was more, you know, everyone celebrated it then. But I would say it was sort of a small town, celebratory, fun day for people of African descent in Texas.

Nicole Pullen Ross: Well, I want to talk a little bit about to the people of Texas. And I think when people think about Texas, they often think about the cowboy, the rancher, or the oil man. Yet, there's a fourth figure that you talk about in your book, which is the slave plantation owner who really helped make Juneteenth necessary. And although this figure no longer remains, describe the role that he played in Texas origins?

Annette Gordon-Reed: Well, I mean, Stephen F. Austin who is the father of Texas, who's called the "Father of Texas," took up the mantle of his father, Moses Austin, who had been given the right to bring settlers into Texas. Moses died and Stephen F. Austin carried on.

The idea was to have people come to the state, it wasn't a state then, but come to the territory as part of Mexico, the province of Mexico. And extend the cotton empire into this area. This was Austin's vision. He styled himself anti-slavery, not because he, you know, necessarily cared about Black people and the morality of it, but because he was concerned about so many Black people and white people living together. It was a racial thing much more than being anti-slavery. And he had also said he understood that if white settlers came to Texas, and they didn't have the opportunity to bring their enslaved people, he said they would be poor for very long if they tried to do this on their own.

I mean, this vision of Texas as part of a cotton empire fueled the culture of Texas. As you said before, you know, people think about the oil man, which is the 20th century incarnation. Or

cowboys, and cowboys, certainly, there were Black cowboys as well. But the state is seen almost as a white man. And that's what I say it is. And what I try to do in this book, what I want to do, is to talk about all the other people who were there and how slavery, this part of Texas that most people don't think of, when people think of slavery they might think of Mississippi or Alabama, Virginia, something like that. They know slavery is there in Texas. But they don't see it as shaping the state in any way. But it did. And it continues to do so.

Nicole Pullen Ross: Your parents moved you to what was known as a "white school" when you were in first grade, towards the end of Texas resistance to the Brown v Board decision. Yet, this move as you recount, wasn't always welcomed by those in the Black community, which I found to be really interesting. Why do you think it was seen as threatening?

Annette Gordon-Reed: Well, just by way of background, I went to Anderson Elementary School, which was a white school. It was an all white school. All teachers and all students were white, under what was called the Freedom of Choice Plan. To get around Brown, Texas and other jurisdictions came up with these Freedom of Choice Plans. And Freedom of Choice sounds great. Right? You know? You can do what you want. But the idea was that white parents would choose white schools and Black parents would choose Black schools. And my parents decided to send me to a white school.

My older brothers remained at Booker T. Washington, which was the Black school where my mother taught because they were already settled there and had been part of things. I was going to real school that I would be connected to this particular school. And they thought it would be better for me to try it, to do that.

And they sent me. And it was something that was an intense time for me. But it troubled many in the Black community, mainly later, I should say, when the Supreme Court struck down Freedom of Choice Plan and Black parents and Black students had to move to white schools. And they felt they lost something. And I think they did lose something. Booker T. Washington was the nerve center of the Black community in Conroe. The teachers were role models. They were respected individuals. They lived in the communities with their students. They went to church with them. They would have socialized. The parents would have socialized. And so, all of that was lost then.

One of the things that happened in my town and across the South was that the kids were integrated, but the teachers were not. In my town and all across the South a number of Black teachers were moved out of the classroom. And moved either into do subjects that were not their area or not in the classroom at all or administration. And so, Black students lost role models. And it changed the balance of the community when you have teachers who live in the community with you; and I can recall playing with my friends after school. And then all of the sudden they would disappear. And I'm thinking, what's going on here? And then I would realize one of their teachers, they spotted one of their teachers driving down the road. And they didn't want to be seen outside playing instead of doing their homework or whatever. Well, you know, that kind of thing.

School was not just in the classroom. It was all in the community because they were one. And so, they lost that. And they felt that very, very keenly.

And I talk in the book about many of them in the town, not everybody, but many of them in the town being actively hostile towards me because they saw me as if I had caused all of this. But I really didn't. It was the Supreme Court that struck down the Freedom of Choice Plans and then said at that point everybody had to change schools, Black people had to change schools.

Nicole Pullen Ross: I mean, it's so admirable. You talk about the interaction that you had with some people in the Black community. And in your book, you talk about some of your friends who were friends with you in school, but if they saw you out with the family, would be reluctant to engage. And I thought the point that you made in terms of the poorer family and the kids who played with you often, really underscored for you early on that not all white people were the same. And that sounds like a place where you got a little bit of balance and perspective, just trying to navigate all of those worlds.

Annette Gordon-Reed: Yes. I mean, as I said, it was intense. I understood that I was doing something that was important for the town. It was historic for the town. There would be delegations of educators who would come and stand in the door watching me in class. Watching us in class. Because it was not just me, but I think it was the idea of how do Black people and white people interact? And I was the only one. So, it's not a really good experiment there, but I had a sense that this was something that was important and that it had something to do

with the past. I understood that it had to do with the traditions of the town.

When I went to the doctor, there was a waiting room for Black people and a waiting room for white people. When we went to the movies, Black people had to sit in the balcony. So, I knew even before I went to school that there was a racial divide. But it's not until I went to school and that I started to think about why. You know? What's going on here? Why is it a big deal that a Black kid is in this class? And that led me to thinking about the past. It led me to thinking about slavery later on.

And so, I think that experience probably accounts for why I'm a historian. From pulling all of these things together and trying to figure out what is this about.

Nicole Pullen Ross: I want to talk a little bit more about that, kind of what is this about, and just the counternarratives that you talk about in your book. A lot of your work looks at the complexity of history and the tendency to omit those counternarratives from the official record, the stories of Joe Winters and Bob White who were Black men accused of raping white women. And they were later executed. In both those situations, the men offered alternative visions, which were, effectively, ignored. And even today we talk a lot about the Tulsa massacre and we're seeing efforts to start to unearth some of those counternarratives. Why do you think it is that we as Americans are still struggling to bring these important truths to light?

Annette Gordon-Reed: Well, you know, I would say, I don't think it's just Americans. I think that this is sort of a human tendency, a national tendency, for people who see themselves as a people with a history, to want to present only the good things that happened in the past. To try to minimize or to hide the things that were, problematic doesn't even describe it, tragic things that happened in the past. I mean, all of the world now, I think that people are grappling this. How do you bring the sore points of history to the fore? And I think it has to do with the fact, almost like a lack of faith in a way, people think that if you don't tell a completely pristine, wonderful story, then that means you hate the place. Or it means that people, young people in particular, because I think people always think "what does this mean for the children? How will the children take this?" They don't think that young people have the capacity to develop love for or allegiance to places if they know that there were bad things that happened there. I think that's very shortsighted. And from engaging young people, as my

students and so forth, I think that they're pretty good about understanding that nothing is perfect. And understanding that people thought a lot of strange things in the past. And you know, some of them were good. And some of them were bad. But the purpose is to try to figure out how we can be better. But you can't do that if you don't know the condition of your craft.

We have to know the condition of our society, of our history, before we can really think about making changes or keeping the things that are good, changing the things that are bad.

Nicole Pullen Ross: Right. Great point. I want to talk a little bit about the Alamo. You also write that the heroes in the battle for Alamo were, themselves, slave owners with shady pasts. Yet, these men are still idolized in popular culture. What does this say about our need to have the myths and the legends? And can, or should we, strive to change this?

Annette Gordon-Reed: Well, again, there are national mythologies. And I say in the book, and I think its true, that maybe we have some kind of psychic need for that. I mean, we need myths because, particularly for a country that is as large and diverse as ours, some points of reference to hold people together. Myths serve that, to sort of give you some sense of an origin story. Where we're from. Who we are. What kind of people we are.

And the Alamo myth, it's very interesting the way this works, as I mention, as you mentioned, that the people who were fighting in the Alamo are people who want a republic. And they created a republic that explicitly protected slavery. And as I said before, stopped Black people from coming to live in Texas. And all of those things. So, they're fighting for principles. But their principles are not things that we adhere to today, I hope we don't adhere to them today.

But the idea of standing firm on your beliefs, standing your ground, it's fascinating. A couple of weeks ago or probably last month, Texas Democrats walked out of the legislature to deny them a quorum when they were voting about these voter suppression measures and so forth. And one of the people who walked out said, "This is our Alamo, we're making our last stand." And I thought what irony in that. But you can see how that concept, Texans take that concept and use it in different contexts altogether.

But the Alamo, this idea of a last stand, of a brave stand, is

still important to people who, even if you know, and I'm sure most of these people know the real history of the Alamo, that it was this last stand that spurred people onto the Battle of the San Jacinto and they eventually, you know, win this struggle. So, we have to know about the Alamo. But I doubt that people will forget the Alamo or do away with the idea of the Alamo, not the actual factual Alamo, but the idea of it and what it means in Texas and for Texans.

Nicole Pullen Ross: I want to go back to when you actually wrote about or started this book Juneteenth and the summer of 2020 when there was so much going on in this country. It was during the depths of the pandemic and in the middle of this ongoing wave of civil unrest triggered by the murder of George Floyd. When we look back at that period, are you optimistic that we'll be more truthful and accurate as we recount these events?

Annette Gordon-Reed: Well, I try to be optimistic all the time. I think what's different now is we have way more people of color who are writing and telling these stories. And it isn't just people of color. Many of the outstanding scholars of slavery and of race are not Black people. They're white people. So, there are all different kinds. But I think we've been in a move, in the historical profession, really since the 1950s, actually, to talk about slavery and the aftermath of slavery and race in the 20th century.

Some of the reasons things were hidden before is that you had sort of a lock on the historical narrative. And that lock doesn't exist anymore. There will be a diversity of people writing about these topics. So, I think it's going to be hard to hide things the way things were hidden in the past. Like the Tulsa riot. I was reading somewhere that someone cut out articles about Tulsa from the newspaper before it was sent, in this particular place, before it was sent for microfilm so that things were literally excised from the record. That's hard to do now. That's very, very hard to do now.

But the thing we may have to worry about is people putting false stories. That's the other side of it. But I think that there's enough vigilance now, and we know what to look for. I'm optimistic that we won't be able to hide all of the things that happened in the way that was done in the past when we had much tighter control over the narrative, which we don't have today.

Nicole Pullen Ross: Well, share with us, bring us into this moment of history yesterday. You were in the room where it

happened, if you will. Share with the audience what it was like to be part of yesterday's event. Give us just a little bit of insight into that historic moment.

Annette Gordon-Reed: Well, it happened so fast. Like, I got an invitation and, like, 8 o'clock in the morning. And the next thing I'm on a flight at 10:45 down to Washington for the signing. And it was a festive occasion. Everybody was happy there. These are members of the Black caucus, white senators, people from Texas were there as well. And it was a festive occasion, as I said.

I was really keen to have Miss Opal Lee, who is the 94 year old woman who has been pushing this for years now. I asked her, "How did you get started on this?" She said, "Well, when I was about 89, I decided." I have to stop you right there. You know? Stop right there. I want to get to 89. Then I want to be an 89 year old who goes on quests. Right? And a successful one.

And I was wondering if she was going to make it. And she walked into the room. And it was really electric because many of the people knew her, knew of her, even if they'd never met her. We've done a couple of events together over the past few weeks. And it was wonderful to see her. And the President was very, very kind to her and was solicitous of her and pointed her out and invited her up for the signing and gave her a pen. And this is really her doing in lots of ways.

It was just great. I was privileged to be there. I'm glad I came down. And I think the speech by the President and the Vice President capsulated the moment very, very well.

It was a surprise. Monday, there was no inkling in my head that anything like this was going to happen. I thought it might happen in a few months or something, within the next year it would be. But this was a lightning result here in the span of just a few days. And so, I'm very glad I got the chance to see it.

Nicole Pullen Ross: Well, thank you. It is a privilege to have had the opportunity to spend some time with you this morning. Thank you for all you're doing. And I hope your celebration this weekend is more memorable than others may have been in the past, or as memorable. And we look forward to continuing to have you shine a light on some of the really important aspects of our history and our future.

Annette Gordon-Reed: Thank you for having me. This has been a lot of fun.

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