

Discussion Guide
On Juneteenth
Written by Annette Gordon-Reed

Suggested Format: Groups of no more than 10-12 gather for 60-90 minutes for self-directed conversation. This discussion guide may be distributed ahead of time. Each group should have a facilitator, or two team members could share the responsibility. The guide includes excerpts from the book followed by specific questions related to the text.

Excerpts from Book and Questions

Question 1

From pages 44 and 45

Excerpt: “For the most part, however, I took it as a given that Black people and White people were, for reasons I didn’t understand, at odds with one another. Or more precisely, I had the impression that the root of the problem was that ‘they,’ meaning the Whites, didn’t like us, and that is why we didn’t get along - in much the same way one might say ‘dogs don’t like cats, and that’s why they don’t get along.’ When we see a particular dog and cat getting along - like me and the girls wearing homemade dresses from the same material - we can chalk that up to the truth that there are exceptions to every rule. The general rule stands, nevertheless. One thing I *never* thought, however, was that there was anything wrong with me, something for which I will always be grateful to my parents. I knew I had not done anything to the store owner or the kids who were unkind to me. It was clear in my mind that this was a problem of their own making. The real puzzling thing for me was why they were making the problem.

Looking back - and I would not have thought of this then - it is very likely that what was going on in the world outside of our town made the angry store owner, and the many others like him, even angrier. Black People in the United States, even ones in our area, were demanding changes to the way things were done in society. Their challenges were meeting with success nationally with the passage of legislation and court decisions that dismantled *de jure* segregation. It must have appeared that the floodgates were opening, and all the old verities that had held southern society in place would be swept away. This was far from the truth, but they must have felt the balance of power was shifting in society. And this was the sixties. Even young Whites were protesting the war in Vietnam, a particularly sore point

among Whites in my area, and creating a 'counterculture.' A White man of this sort, in particular-not-a southern grandee, but a storeowner who worked in his own store - had much to lose. Empowered Black people made the intangible benefits derived from Whiteness less valuable."

Question 1: Annette starts with the presumption that Black people and White people were at odds with each other, although she doesn't know why. The store owner starts with the presumption that he is going to lose something as society changes. Can you think of a presumption that influenced your interactions or choices that you eventually realized was based on a bias or limiting belief? Do you identify with this idea that changing power dynamics in society mean that some people will lose out?

Question 2

From pages 62 and 63

Excerpt: "All of this was the result of a nationalist-oriented history, with an intense focus on what was going on within the boundaries of the United States and seeing what was going on almost totally from the perspective of English-speaking (and White) people. The world enclosed in that way left out so much of the true nature of life in early America, about all the varied influences that shaped the people and circumstances during those times. It closes off the vital understanding about contingency, how things could have taken a different turn. Very significantly, it helped create and maintain an extremely narrow construction of Blackness.

Under the conventional narrative with which most Americans, it is safe to say, are familiar, Blacks came to North America under the power of the English from places that were never clearly defined, for where they came from didn't matter much. They went from speaking the languages of their homelands 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 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 of the feelings, talents, failings, strengths and weaknesses - all the states and qualities that exist in human beings - remained in them. There has been too great a tendency within some presentations of enslaved people to lose sight of that fact, in ways obvious and not."

Question 2: What stories about American history did you learn as you grew up? What was left out? As you have learned more history (like that in this book), how does it change your sense of what you want to do?

Question 3

From pages 99 and 100

Excerpt: In referring to the assassination of President Kennedy, Gordon-Reed writes the following:

“I could tell from the conversation of the adults around me that their regret that this had happened - and had happened in Texas - was profound.

The television was on all the time in those tragic days, bringing news of events as they unfolded. I recall standing before it in the living room while my grandmother was in the kitchen cooking. We were the only people in the house on that Sunday morning. I saw men, wearing the same kind of Stetson hat my father wore, escorting Lee Harvey Oswald. Then, suddenly, he was shot. For a split second, I was deeply confused. 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 proceed in an orderly fashion, I couldn't fathom how this could have happened. I've watched the tape of those moments as an adult. Even though I am much more aware of the unpredictability of life and have the knowledge of hindsight that this did happen, the moment still feels a bit unreal.

I was not old enough to think of the events in Dallas as fitting into any 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 at all. 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 another.”

Question 3: We have recently observed the 100-year anniversary of the Tulsa Massacre, the Insurrection in the U.S. Capitol, and have seen many other acts of violence. Have these events changed your perception of America? How can we avoid being desensitized to violence?

Question 4

From page 29

Excerpt: “As painful as it may be, recognizing - though not dwelling on - tragedy and the role it plays in our individual lives, and in the life of a state or nations, 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 now.”

Question 4: Annette Gordon-Reed gives us an opportunity to reflect on our personal origin stories. She challenges us to examine the complexities of history and explore relationships, power dynamics, intent and impact. Through doing this, we can create a better understanding of ourselves and the world around us. We may learn more about who we are, where we are, and why we are how we are. Consider how you might continue to embrace this opportunity for exploration and action?

Include additional questions/topics/exploration as the group determines.

Consult with the [Office of Human Resources](#) should you need assistance.