WABASH CENTER
For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion

On Teaching Juneteenth

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Blog Series: Changing Scholarship
June 19, 2024
Tags: curriculum | liberation | Changing Scholarship | Juneteenth | Freedom | Black History

I am not a scholar of Religion or Theology. However, my work as a creative writer and professor of Creative Nonfiction often involves identifying everyday divinities; finding the sacred in small things, the flawed, and the profane. Many of the readers/contributors to this blog might recognize my name as a kind of curator for this space. I serve the Wabash Center as an Educational Design Manager, a job that has brought me great opportunity to learn, share and reflect approaches to teaching and the teaching life. When I became aware that one of our blog publishing dates would fall on Juneteenth, I wanted to take the opportunity to write about it and perhaps encourage others to learn and teach more about the subject…

Juneteenth: What is it?

- June 19, 1865: Gordon Granger of the Union army arrived in Galveston, Texas, to inform enslaved African Americans of their freedom and that the Civil War had ended. General Granger's announcement put into effect the Emancipation Proclamation, which had been issued nearly two and a half years earlier, on January 1, 1863, by President Abraham Lincoln.
- Juneteenth is an annual commemoration of this event and the end of slavery in the United States after the Civil War. It has been celebrated by African Americans since the late 1800s. It is the longest running Black holiday. Also known as *Freedom Day, Jubilee*

Day and Cel-Liberation Day.
- The day was first recognized as a federal holiday in 2021, when President Joe Biden signed the Juneteenth National Independence Day Act into law after the efforts of Lula Briggs Galloway, Opal Lee, and others.

I grew up knowing nothing about Juneteenth. This history was not taught to me in my public schools. I first became aware of the day and its significance in college, thanks to my first African American literature professor, and the book by Ralph Ellison. When I heard the story, I was angry. Understandably, I think. The idea that slavery in the United States continued quite a while after the Emancipation Proclamation was deeply frustrating. But I was also upset with the fact that this event seemed whitewashed from my education. Why wasn't this major moment in African American history discussed every Black History Month? Why wasn't this made a part of the curriculum I was given?

Another part of me was unsurprised. As a Black person in America, I am familiar with the ways my homeland can defer its promises of equality, and how inconvenient histories can be overlooked in order to affirm narratives of American exceptionalism. The story of Juneteenth complicates our understanding of the Civil War, Lincoln's legacy, and the 13th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

I wouldn't encounter Annette Gordon-Reed's *Juneteenth* until I was a teacher myself, assigning it to myself and my graduate students to read together. Together, along with other supplementary texts, we'd learn more details about the factors which led chattel slavery to continue in America years after it was said to have ended…

- States with little or *no* Union Soldier presence refused/ignored the order to free enslaved people.
- Border states, including Delaware, Maryland, Kentucky and Missouri, and of course Texas, ignored emancipation.
- Slave owners threatened to kill slaves if they tried to leave. Some slavers moved to Texas to keep people enslaved. Galveston, Texas was the last stronghold.
- The Emancipation Proclamation didn't apply to Indian tribes. The five "Civilized Tribes" (Cherokee, Choctaw, Muscogee, Chickasaw, Seminole) owned Black, Mixed and Indigenous slaves. Chattel slavery among these tribes was not officially ended until 1866.

These factors demanded considerable time and effort to navigate and prompted questions that were uncomfortable for the learners and for me as well. But I believe more was gained by engaging with Juneteenth in the classroom—a greater understanding of ourselves in relation to our citizenship, our communities of belonging, and one another.

I wish I had the opportunity to have learned about the event sooner in my life and more often throughout my matriculation through academia. Even if it would have been awkward at times. I wish to have been able to observe this commemoration of freedom earlier, and the chances I might have had to unpack its significance with teachers and fellow students.

Published by the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion
301 West Wabash Ave, Crawfordsville, IN 47933
(765) 361-6047 (800) 655-7177 fax (765) 361-6051
Fully Funded by Lilly Endowment Inc. and Located at Wabash College

There is no real discussion about freedom in America that does not invoke the lived experience of Black people. As the poet Terrence Hayes suggests, Black people *share a historical and constant relationship to freedom*. To take this further with a question: in lessons about the liberation found through God's grace—the freedom from fear discovered in faith and divine will—why wouldn't we center the lived experiences of a systemically subjugated population? Why not ask students to engage with a moment that signifies a turn toward a more moral universe? I would like to make a case for making Juneteenth a point of discussion in classrooms across all fields of study, but especially in theological and religious education with its potential to position scholars who lead communities and shape public thought. There is so much to be gained in the teaching of Juneteenth.

Here is a resource, a Juneteenth Reading List cultivated by the Smithsonian's National African American History Museum: CLICK HERE. As we consider how we might craft lessons around this holiday, making sure to read as much as we can on the subject feels imperative.

If there are readers who have had success teaching Juneteenth and would like to share a reflection on their experience, reach out at quistd@wabash.edu.

https://wabash.center/2024/06/on-teaching-juneteenth/

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