

What, to a Slave Descendant, is your 4th of July?

By Shawnta S. Barnes – July 4, 2017



Without fail, when certain U.S. federal holidays come around each year, the debate begins about whether or not the holiday should be celebrated especially by minorities. Franchesca Ramsey, host of MTV Decoded, details in two videos, [“Everything You Know about Thanksgiving is Wrong”](#) and [“Columbus was a Genocidal Rapist”](#) some of the reasons we should think about what

we are truly celebrating. This debate isn't new. On July 5, 1852 Frederick Douglass delivered a speech referred to as either "The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro" or "What, to a Slave, is Your 4th of July?" in Corinthian Hall in Rochester N.Y.

At the end of June before Independence Day, I find myself rereading the unabridged (not shortened) version of Douglass' speech and I reflect upon his words. He begins his speech praising Americans for their courage to break free from the British and gain their independence, but reminds them, "I remember, also, that, as a people, Americans are remarkably familiar with all facts which make in their own favor. This is esteemed by some as a national trait — perhaps a national weakness." Today, I think about this weakness. Some Americans choose to overlook the injustices happening today because they are not being affected and are not suffering. Last year, I had a poem published in Words Dance reflecting those thoughts:

Progress

emancipation

civil rights

affirmative action

Obama

generational

progress

is a blindfold

to mask

the dead bodies

Yes, we are not shackled and picking cotton, but as Douglass stated in his speech way back in 1852, "The sunlight that brought life and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth of July is yours, not mine" is still relevant today because stripes are still coming down on black bodies and we are still dying daily.

What, to this slave descendant, is your 4th of July? It is a day to spend with my family. Because the 4th of July is a federal holiday, it is one of the few times we all can gather together. My twin sons, who are now six, have learned all of our people didn't gain freedom from slavery until the slaves in Texas were informed on June 19, 1865 slavery had ended. This was almost two years after President Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. For the last few years, I have taken them to a Juneteenth celebration which celebrates our freedom and the date when the slaves in Texas learned about the Emancipation Proclamation. I want them to know our story which is weaved into all aspects of our American history. Not only do I want my children to know, I also want my students to know what our plight was even if it means being reported.

When I was teaching 8th-grade middle school English, our department decided we would teach our English standards using either a historical text or a historical fiction text. Everyone in my department decided to teach Anne Frank: *The Diary of a Young Girl*. Don't get me wrong; I'm not knocking this text. Instead, I decided to use the historical fiction text *Chains*, part of *The Seeds of America* trilogy, by Laurie Halse Anderson. My students had learned about the American Revolution in history class which meant they had background knowledge I didn't have to teach. This story followed Isabel, a slave, who was trying to figure out which side she should support during the American Revolution in hopes she would gain her freedom. Spoiler alert: Neither side cared about her freedom. My classes were majority minority and I believed this was a good text to use. Although I was reported for not using the same text as my colleagues, I was still allowed to use this novel.



James and Lisa Stockton, parents of Shawnta S. Barnes

The 4th of July is a time to enjoy my family. My parents were married on July 6, 1985, so we always celebrate their wedding anniversary; my parents will be married for 32 years this year and that's remarkable. That's my focus – love and the strength of my family. It is also a time to reflect on where we were as a people and how far we have to go for all of us to truly enjoy freedom. No, I do not believe we should condemn minorities for celebrating this holiday, but they need to be well informed about our history and not deceived about the injustices we are still fighting today.

1 thought on “What, to a Slave Descendant, is your 4th of July?”



Tony Richardson says:

[July 5, 2017 at 1:11 am Edit](#)

Very thoughtful cuz. Please keep up the great work...
