

Book Review: *How the Word Is Passed*

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Essentials in Historic Preservation and Cultural Resource Management

13 November 2024

Clint Smith's *How the Word Is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America* serves as a powerful exploration of the ways in which the legacy of slavery continues to shape American society today. His book embarks on an ambitious journey through the landscapes of American memory, confronting the historical narratives that have long been sanitized or overlooked. With a blend of personal narrative, historical research, and poignant commentary, the book expands the conversation about slavery beyond the confines of academic texts, incorporating the voices of the living legacy of slavery into public discourse. Through a carefully crafted narrative that weaves personal reflection with historical analysis, Smith embarks on a journey to various sites of historical significance, each revealing different facets of slavery's pervasive impact. The book is not just a reckoning with the past; it is an urgent call for truth and accountability in the present. This review will delve into Smith's method, the themes he explores, and the broader implications of his work.

The author, Clint Smith, an African-American who grew up in New Orleans and received a Bachelor's in English and a Doctor of Philosophy in Education.¹ He is also a poet who authored the collection "Counting Descent."² Smith divides his book into nine chapters, with eight chronicling his visits to different locations significant to America's history of slavery. From the Monticello plantation, the home of Thomas Jefferson, to New York City and even abroad to the Gorée Island in Senegal, each site serves as a lens through which Smith examines the complexities of memory, historical narratives, and ongoing racial injustice. His writing style is approachable yet profound, combining lyrical prose with stark realities that evoke empathy and thoughtfulness in readers. His book is an ode to those docents, public historians, and tour guides

¹ Clint Smith, "About," Clint Smith, n.d., <https://www.clintsmithiii.com/about>.

² Poetry Foundation, "Clint Smith," Poetry Foundation, April 29, 2021, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/clint-smith>.

doing such important, remarkable work. Smith's most commendable aspect is his ability to humanize history without losing sight of its often brutal nature. He intertwines personal anecdotes with historical context, creating a tapestry of voices that represents the past and the present-day implications of that history. The narrative often oscillates between personal reflection and historical analysis, which keeps the reader engaged while deepening their understanding of slavery's legacy.

A significant aspect of Smith's work is his unwavering commitment to confrontation, confronting not only the facts of historical enslavement but also the ramifications that persist in contemporary society.³ As the author states, "it is not irrelevant to our contemporary society; it created it."⁴ Each site Clint visits, whether Monticello or Whitney, he encounters people who would extend incredible grace and generosity to folks who came to these sites, and were not in any shape or form condescending to those ignorant of slavery; they would not judge anybody for not knowing the information.⁵ However, while there is grace and generosity, there is also a sense of accountability and responsibility to sit with the information given, even when it is hard, uncomfortable, threatens or calls into questions the very ideas what the United States is, and thus who each individual is in relationship to the country. Each museum, plantation, memorial, cemetery, monument, and prison he visits serves as a microcosm of the complete national narrative, revealing how people have curated, contested, and often whitewashed the memory of slavery. For instance, he challenges the romanticization of Monticello, insisting that the legacy of

³ Clint Smith, *How the Word Is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America* (London: Dialogue Books, 2021), Apple Books, 189, 191, 200.

⁴ Smith, *How the Word Is Passed*, Apple Books, 205.

⁵ Smith, *How the Word Is Passed*, Apple Books, 159, 209.

Thomas Jefferson cannot be separated from that of the enslaved people who built and maintained his estate.⁶

Smith's ability to lay bare the contradictions of American historical figures invites readers to reflect on their complicity in perpetuating these myths. This confrontation extends beyond the historical figures themselves to societal structures that continue to uphold systemic inequalities rooted in slavery. By positioning slavery as an indelible thread in the fabric of American life, Smith encourages a reckoning that extends into present-day racial injustices. Through his visits, Smith's travelogue highlights the importance of truth-telling in education and seeks to address the gaps in how slavery is taught nationally. The importance of museums and historical sites in educating the public, advocating for an honest reckoning with America's past is critical to fostering understanding and healing. Smith's spatial reflections on the educational system reveal how a lack of comprehensive education about slavery can perpetuate ignorance and denialism. It calls for a more inclusive curriculum that acknowledges the complete history of America, emphasizing the need for students to learn not just about the triumphs of historical figures but also about the struggles and injustices that accompany their legacies.

However, there are historical sites that do present a full, factual story of slavery. Whitney is one of the only plantation museums in Louisiana and the country that focuses the story it tells of itself singularly on the perspectives and lives of the enslaved people who were held there.⁷ It exists as a part and surrounded by a constellation of plantations in Louisiana where people continue to hold weddings, debutante balls, formal ceremonies, get-togethers predicated on celebration, joy and happiness. Whitney fundamentally rejects the idea that anyone can

⁶ Clint Smith, *How the Word Is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America* (London: Dialogue Books, 2021), Apple Books, 11, 14, 19.

⁷ Smith, *How the Word Is Passed*, Apple Books, 49–50.

understand a plantation as anything other than an intergenerational site of torture and exploitation. Its curatorial process offers people an intimate sense of what slavery was like through the perspectives of men, women, and children, resistance and rebellion that took place in the 1811 slave revolt, which was the largest slave revolt in American history.⁸ However, it does not receive the same level of attention as other slave revolts, notably Nate Turner or John Brown's revolts.⁹ The Federal Writers' Project conducted interviews of former enslaved people from 1936 to 1938, and the exhibitions at Whitney incorporate many of those stories.¹⁰ They do it efficiently by stripping slavery of the idea that it is an abstraction.

A central theme throughout *How the Word Is Passed* is the conflict between collective memory and historical accuracy. In many of the places he visits, Smith encounters narratives that have been shaped by selective memory or outright denial. For example, at Monticello, he reflects on how the legacy of Thomas Jefferson is often sanitized nationally, with the pain and suffering of enslaved people marginalized.¹¹ Contemporary discussions surrounding historical monuments and how people memorialize them make this theme particularly resonant. At Blandford, Jeff and other members of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, go to the cemetery, sing songs about Old Dixie, and tell stories about the brave men buried in the soil and who did not fight a war for slavery; they fought a war to protect their families, loved ones and to save the South.¹² However, when confronted with the reality that the Confederacy fought to preserve the institution of slavery, Jeff replies slavery was "just a very small part."¹³ Jeff's response is "reflective of

⁸ Clint Smith, *How the Word Is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America* (London: Dialogue Books, 2021), Apple Books, 48–50, 62–63.

⁹ Smith, *How the Word Is Passed*, Apple Books, 43.

¹⁰ Smith, *How the Word Is Passed*, Apple Books, 43, 60.

¹¹ Smith, *How the Word Is Passed*, Apple Books, 13, 18–20.

¹² Smith, *How the Word Is Passed*, Apple Books, 90, 98–100, 114.

¹³ Smith, *How the Word Is Passed*, Apple Books, 110.

decades of Lost Cause propaganda.”¹⁴ History teaches that the Civil War was fought over slavery. The primary sources, such as the declarations of the Confederate secession, the Constitution of the Confederate States of America, Alexander Stevens’ Cornerstone Speech, and the Crittenden amendments, inform the posterity of slavery’s centrality in the war.¹⁵ Americans cannot understand secession and the Civil War as anything other than being about slavery when it was very clear from the things that people who were part of it were saying lays out. Nevertheless, history is not about empirical evidence or primary source documents for so many people—it is a story they are told. It is a story that they tell. The story is an heirloom that is passed down across generations.

Throughout the book, Smith intertwines personal narratives that enhance the emotional resonance of his reflections. His exquisite storytelling invites readers to understand the impact of history on individual lives and identities. Moments of vulnerability reveal Smith’s grappling with his ancestry as someone of African descent. He shares conversations with his grandparents, describing his mistake as: “I had forgotten that the best primary sources are often sitting right next to us.”¹⁶ He illustrates that history is personal, ingrained within African-Americans, and reflected in their family’s stories and legacies, as he shares with readers, “my grandparents’ stories are my inheritance; each one is an heirloom I carry.”¹⁷ These contemplations add depth to the narrative, echoing the broader theme of how personal stories interweave with collective memory. Smith invokes the idea of specters haunting the nation—the legacies of slavery that

¹⁴ Smith, *How the Word Is Passed*, Apple Books, 110.

¹⁵ Clint Smith, *How the Word Is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery across America* (London: Dialogue Books, 2021), Apple Books, 110–112.

¹⁶ Smith, *How the Word Is Passed*, Apple Books, 192.

¹⁷ Smith, *How the Word Is Passed*, Apple Books, 204.

linger in the collective consciousness. This concept poignantly encapsulates the idea that the lessons of the past not relegated to textbooks; they manifest in the everyday lives of Americans.

While the book provides a vital contribution to the discourse on slavery and its lasting impacts, there are moments where the broader narrative feels somewhat fragmented. The shifts between locations and interviews, while illustrative of the widespread nature of slavery's legacy, occasionally disrupt the flow of thought. Readers might desire a deeper exploration of specific themes, such as the nuances of reparations or the specific effects of the historical narratives on contemporary policy. In a work that is inherently about confronting the past, balancing personal reflections with critical historical discourse is crucial to painting the entirety of slavery's impact. However, these critiques do not diminish the book's overall significance. Instead, they prompt necessary discussions about how public historians and writers can navigate personal and collective narratives while providing a clear-eyed view of history. The strength of Smith's writing lies in its ability to provoke thought, encourage introspection, and inspire dialogue regarding the complexities of American identity.

In *How the Word Is Passed*, Clint Smith offers a vital examination of slavery's enduring legacy. He challenges readers to engage with uncomfortable truths often obscured in American discourse through deft storytelling, historical analysis, and personal narrative. By doing so, he not only honors the memories of those who endured the horrors of slavery but also mobilizes a contemporary audience to reckon with the past and its implications for the present and future. As the nation grapples with its racial history, Smith's work stands as a critical reminder that the road to understanding and reconciliation is fraught with complexity. His call for honesty and reflection serves as both a literary achievement and a moral imperative that this generation must heed to ensure a fuller reckoning with the multifaceted history of slavery in America.

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