

Book Review

Critical Sociology
1–3

© The Author(s) 2022

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/08969205221078890

journals.sagepub.com/home/crs

How the Word Is Passed by Clint Smith, New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2021. 336 pp. with index. \$29.00 (hardcover). ISBN: 9780316492935

In *How the Word Is Passed*, author, poet, and New Orleans native Clint Smith travels to eight historical sites (seven in the United States and one abroad) of American slavery to investigate how each site grapples with its history. From 2017 through 2020, Smith utilizes rich ethnographic research to demonstrate that Black liberation is dependent on an accurate, holistic account of American history being taught to all Americans. He finds that while some of these locations tell historical truth, others rewrite and erase history, and others do something in-between. By centering the humanity and experiences of enslaved people, Smith connects the history of slavery to the country's current racial realities, detailing the historical circumstances and ideologies that fostered and maintained the system of slavery.

Smith divided the book into nine chapters, each covering a different location. In the chapters that he visits Monticello, the Whitney, Galveston Island, and the National Museum of African American History and Culture (NMAHC), he discovers sites attempting to tell honest history. By providing holistic narratives that center the perspectives of enslaved people, not just the perspective of those in power, integrity is restored to American history. The chapters that detail Smith's visits to Blandford Cemetery and Angola Prison highlight active movements to rewrite and erase history. His visits to New York City and Gorée Island revealed sites that are somewhere between truth and nostalgia. Smith makes these distinctions because they offer an intergenerational explanation of how the history of slavery has shaped our daily lives.

The timing of this book is important, as it draws on an inflection point spawned by current events, such as the White supremacist who murdered nine praying people at a Black church in Charleston (SC), the violent neo-Nazi march in Charlottesville (VA), and the killing of George Floyd by the Minneapolis (MN) police department. Smith believes that the current US consciousness is at a point that allows it to more fully grapple with the history of slavery and how it has shaped the world we live in today. The choice to organize his book by area is important in that it focuses the reader's attention on the social characteristics that are specific to each location. Smith takes an interesting approach to engaging with each of these sites as he starts his trek in the southern region of the United States before heading to the east coast (e.g. New York City) and then ultimately traveling abroad, which is the reverse order that many enslaved people were brought to this country.

In the chapters that he visits Angola Prison, Blandford Cemetery, and Liberty Island, Smith discovers a commitment to rewriting each location's history. During a tour of Angola Prison, the Assistant Warden orates a history of the land that the prison sits on by 'discussing Indigenous communities and French exploration of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries straight to post-Civil War America—skipping the period in which Angola existed as a plantation worked by

enslaved Black people' (p. 94). This erasure of history is telling, given that Black inmates are currently paid 7 cents an hour to pick cotton in the same fields their enslaved ancestors did. At Blandford Cemetery, Smith encounters a Sons of Confederate Veterans celebration, which attempts to rewrite history by proclaiming that the confederacy was built on the idea of fighting for state rights and not upholding the institution of slavery. During Smith's trip to New York City, he visited the Statue of Liberty, which was gifted to the United States by France following the Civil War. The statue's creator and passionate abolitionist, Édouard René de Laboulaye, originally designed Lady Liberty to have a pair of broken shackles in her left hand, as a nod to the ending of slavery. But when the statue arrived, the shackles were replaced by a tablet and were moved to her feet, hidden and barely visible under her hanging gown. By erasing the history of slavery and the subjugation of Black people, Americans are prevented from learning their history and acting to address systemic inequalities based off of accurate information.

During Smith's visits to Monticello, the Whitney, and the NMAHC, he finds that these sites tell accurate historical accounts and confront visitors who have learned whitewashed history lessons. In the chapter on Monticello, the author puts the contradictions of Thomas Jefferson on full display. By detailing a holistic account of Jefferson's life and not one solely based in nostalgia, Smith points out that the same man who famously wrote, 'all men are created equal' also owned and sold enslaved people, separated families, raped enslaved women, and enslaved his own children. To emphasize the prevalence of misinformation in this country, Smith quotes Niya Bates, the Director of African American History at Monticello:

So many people come here without an understanding of the primary cause of the Civil War. . . there are just so many ways that our public education is failing people by just not giving them the context to understand that Monticello is a plantation, and that slavery was a system that created the economic prosperity that enabled our country to exist. (p. 48)

The chapters that cover Smith's visit to New York City and Gorée Island show history is being taught somewhere between truth and nostalgia. On Gorée Island, a small island off the coast of Senegal, Smith visits the House of Slaves, which still tells the story of millions of Africans passing through the notorious 'Door of No Return' into slavery. Smith notes that recent scholars have estimated around 33,000 Africans passed through the Door. Eloi Coly the curator of the house states,

The number of slaves is not important . . . we have to stand in the principles. One slave is too much . . . If you're going to purport to tell the history of a place, you need to have a relationship of trust in the place. (pp. 252–253)

Smith's visit underscores that when it comes to the transatlantic slave trade, there is much we don't know and much that still needs to be discovered.

A real strength of the book is the rich imagery the author evokes in his description of each location. Smith, who is the winner of the 2017 Literary Award for Best Poetry Book from the Black Caucus of the American Library for his poetry collection, *Counting Descent*, uses his magnificent poetry skills to bring his racialized experiences to life. In one regard, the book feels like a piece of art, almost like watching a canvas being painted. In another way, the imagery that his descriptions provide made me feel as though I was present as he was confronted by hostile Southerners following a Sons of Confederate Veterans commemoration celebration. Smith also has a unique ability to evoke tangible emotion when describing each visit. For example, while in the room where lethal injections take place at Angola Prison, he writes, 'A hot rush of blood pulsed behind my ears, as I felt the shame of being alive in a room built to kill' (p. 97). These colorful descriptions allow the

reader to not only visualize the horror of an execution room, but to share in the recognizable feelings Smith experiences.

This book provides a rich history lesson and uncovers the very problematic misinformation campaign that continues to propel White supremacy and the minoritizing of Black Americans. By concealing an accurate and holistic account of US history from all Americans, it has perpetuated the problems related to race and racism in America. This book is valuable to the discipline because it shows the importance of which historical accounts are told through the American education system and who the country honors through monuments, street names, and building names. In addition, it points out how much work needs to be done to uncover hidden truths about structural racism in America, so that history can be taught more holistically and accurately around the topics of the Civil War, transatlantic slave trade, and general American history.

In *How the Word Is Passed*, Clint Smith travels to eight historical sites of American slavery to investigate how each site grapples with their connection to American chattel slavery. As a Black American, this book was difficult for me to read at times due to the weight of Smith's experiences. I had to take breaks while reading because learning this history evoked real anger, pain, and embarrassment for the things I didn't know. It made me question my relationships with the White people and institutions in my life. However, learning and realizing how much has been intentionally hidden from Black Americans empowers me and gives me hope for the future. Smith's ethnographic research required him to have genuine interactions with and live in the minds of racists while writing this book. I have an immense amount of respect for the courage and emotional fortitude that it must have taken to visit and encounter these spaces. This is a great book for learning how slavery continues to shape the United States and would be useful for teaching classes on American history, race, and ethnographic research.

Marcus L. Smith
University of Cincinnati, USA