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In the 1990s, the late Tony Horwitz crisscrossed the US South studying the minutiae of Civil War memory. Perhaps blinded by the patina of Confederate buttons and distracted by eccentric living historians, Horwitz barely noticed a budding discussion at historic sites connected to slavery. Public historians at Monticello, for instance, had already initiated the Getting Word project, an ongoing effort to search for descendants of people enslaved by Thomas Jefferson. A generation later, when Clint Smith visited Monticello on an international tour centering slavery, these public historians had traveled forty thousand miles and interviewed two hundred descendants. Decades of academic and public conversation about slavery and historic sites is part of what makes *How the Word Is Passed* possible. As Smith argues in his striking prose, though, too many gaps remain in reckoning with the legacy of slavery at historic sites in the United States and beyond.

In researching *How the Word Is Passed*, Smith traveled to Virginia, Louisiana, Texas, New York, and Senegal. His site visits included plantations—from Monticello to Whitney Plantation to the Angola Prison—as well as Blandford Cemetery, Wall Street, Galveston, and Gorée Island. “Each chapter is a portrait of a place but also of the people in that place—those who live there, work there, and are the descendants of the land and of the families who once lived on it,” Smith writes. “They are, formally or informally, public historians who carry with them a piece of this country’s collective memory” (p. 7). While citing few works from the field of public history, Smith interweaves what amounts to an essential reading list for the history and memory of slavery.

Participant observation provides the method of Smith’s fieldwork and the rhythm of his book. Smith listens at historic sites, asks questions, and reflects on the conversation. The representations of slavery Smith finds fit into the classification framework proposed by Jennifer L. Eichstedt and Stephen Small two decades ago (*Representations of Slavery: Race and Ideology in Southern Plantation Museums* [2002]). Trapped between a perpetual eulogy and white supremacist cultural act-
ivism, Blandford Cemetery erases and evades the issue of slavery as the primary cause of the American Civil War. Smith saw these tactics on full display at a Memorial Day event hosted by the Sons of Confederate Veterans in 2019. “For many of the people I met at Blandford, the story of the Confederacy is the story of their home, of their family—and the story of their family is the story of them,” Smith writes. “So when they are asked to reckon with the fact that their ancestors fought a war to keep my ancestors enslaved, there is resistance to facts that have been documented by primary sources and contemporary evidence” (p. 172).

Smith finds more evasion and discordant memories at Angola Prison. While prison administrators present Angola as a forward-moving story of progress, Smith looks backward and sees a flattening of time. The fields of Angola are witness to slavery by one name and then by another, passing through the clausal complexity of the Thirteenth Amendment.

Monticello, at least when Smith visited, uses a strategy of segregating slavery into a special tour. This slavery tour uses Jefferson as a portal into a national reflection on slavery and freedom. It marks the product of a decades-long intensive study of slavery at Monticello, including a frank discussion of the settled and unsettling questions surrounding Sally Hemings and her family. So far so good. Yet the regular tours, the tour taken by 80 percent of visitors, continues a celebratory story of Jefferson that whitewashes slavery. This strategy at historic sites goes back to the last century when Eichstedt and Small conducted their fieldwork in the 1990s. It has grown as public history institutions face crosswinds: pressure to revise and pressure to resist revision. Smith offers a softer critique of Monticello than Angola or Blandford, but his disappointment is clear. This strategy evades slavery and the contradictions of Jefferson’s life by modularization.

Galveston, Whitney Plantation, and Wall Street offer more promising strategies. The Juneteenth ceremony in Galveston, reminiscent to Smith of church service, centers one of slavery’s uneven endings. In contrast to Monticello’s segregated approach, Galveston focuses on Black experience from the colonial era to the present. “The project of freedom, Juneteenth reminds us, is precarious,” Smith observes, “and we should regularly remind ourselves how many people who came before us never got to experience it, and how many there are still waiting” (p. 206). In a similar way, Whitney Plantation, which had a visitation of sixty-eight thousand in 2018, reimagines the historic site connected to slavery as a memorial that centers the “story of the enslaved” as the “core of the experience” (p. 56). Slavery tours in New York City connect the nation’s financial capital to slavery while indicating that reckoning can take place without historical fabric. If ghost tours and the journalistic impulse toward so-called hidden history are any indication, visitors enjoy learning about the invisible, the effaced, and even the speculative. It pushes boundaries of history and memory, and it encourages personal introspection and discovery.

Smith concludes his survey with the House of Slaves on Gorée Island, off the coast of Dakar, Senegal. Controlled successively by the Portuguese, Dutch, English, and French, Gorée Island has become a memorial to the transatlantic slave trade. Smith approaches difficult questions, such as local collaboration with European slave traders and the total number of enslaved Africans to pass through the island, with caution. He defers authority to Senegalese public historians who present the House of Slaves as a symbol of colonization and Atlantic slavery. “The physical place, the land people come and stand upon,” Smith reasons, “is an entry point to a much broader history, of which any location is but one piece” (p. 252). Place can have power because it creates a sense of continuity between past and present. It can also serve as an emotional and intellectual door of no return into the deep ocean of history and memory.
While the Maison d’Education Mariama Bâ, a female boarding school on Gorée Island, is the only school Smith visits, the tension between formal and informal education is a recurring theme. From the New York City tour guide to the Confederate mourners at Blandord, broad agreement exists in *How the Word Is Passed* that historic sites and memorials fill gaps in formal education. In these moments, Smith and others have an incredible memory of what teachers taught or did not teach years ago. “I thought of how I had grown up in Louisiana and had never been taught that the largest slave rebellion in US history happened just miles from the city that had raised me,” Smith remembers. “I had never been taught that the Louisiana Purchase was a direct result of the Haitian Revolution, the uprising that laid the groundwork for all the slave revolts that followed in its wake” (p. 84). Scholars of historical memory might treat statements like this with caution. How does one separate out what was taught, learned, and remembered from what was not taught, not learned, or forgotten? Public historians and formal educators alike might be wary of historic sites and museums as an educational panacea. Not everyone has equitable access to public history sites to supplement their education or their children’s education. And there is only so much one can learn in an hour or two.

This book combines elements of history, journalism, and autobiography in an engaging first-person narrative. Smith centers his positionality as a Black man on an intellectual journey to reckon with the legacy of slavery. It matters, for instance, that Smith’s grandparents grew up under the Jim Crow regime and one of his grandfather’s grandfathers was born into slavery because it shows a compelling, Faulkneresque proximity to the past. While other elements of Smith’s positionality, such as class, fade into the background, *How the Word Is Passed* offers a compelling introduction to slavery and historic sites. The greatest limitation of this book is that Smith cites very little written work by professionals in the field of public history. In fact, one can walk away from this book with the misconception that Smith is trailblazing a link between academic scholarship and public history sites. There have been symposiums, articles, edited volumes, theses, dissertations, and monographs about slavery and public history. Smith cites almost none of this work and it shows. This is a disappointing omission for an important book about memory and the transfer of knowledge.