Clint Smith. *How the Word is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2021. Pp. 336. Paper $18.99.

For all of America's progress since 1865, how have historical memories and public education of chattel slavery remained so muted writ large? This is the curiosity guiding *How the Word is Passed.* Clint Smith selectively surveys eight places associated with American slavery to convey how certain sites have (or haven't) leaned into confronting and explicating this legacy. Like debates over Confederate monuments, this acknowledgment of historical symbolism embedded within physical environments is paramount to national reckonings with the history of slavery and its reverberant impacts into the present day.

Smith, a staff writer for *The Atlantic* with degrees in English and Education, provides the novel perspective of a public historian. Each of the book's eight chapters spotlights a location associated with slavery and how that history is imparted to Smith and other visitors. The sites include Thomas Jefferson's Monticello Plantation, the Whitney Plantation and Angola Prison in Louisiana, and Texas' Galveston Island – the purported birthplace of "Juneteenth." At a fundamental level, *How the Word is Passed* relies heavily upon Smith's encounters and conversations at these selected historical sites themselves. He recounts the visiting public's curiosities about subjects such as the reconciliation of Thomas Jefferson's standing as a forefather of American democracy and a financial beneficiary of enslaved human livestock. Employing poetic language complementary to his writing background, he also vividly describes how each historic site is self-presented, what tour guides articulate about the property history, and what the surrounding landscape says about the site's role in the history of chattel slavery. This firsthand accounting of the eight sites accompanies the excerpted scholarship of preeminent historians of the Civil War and

antebellum slavery, such as David Blight, Annette Gordon-Reed, and Drew Gilpin Faust.

Smith also draws upon a rich range of primary sources to explicate how the selected historic sites and the historical figures associated with them related to the institution of slavery. Among these are excerpts from published works authored by slaveowners and slavery sympathizers, nineteenth-century written correspondences, and manuscripts and transcribed oral histories taken from formerly enslaved people as part of the New Deal-era Federal Writers' Slave Narratives Project. Despite his lack of academic training in historical research and writing, Clint Smith effectively interweaves personal experience, historical context, and source-based evidence to spotlight what forums of public history convey about chattel slavery as an institution.

The book narrows its focus in privileging sites in the American South, given that chattel slavery was an enterprise with transnational and continent-spanning impacts. Smith's travels take him to various southern sites normatively associated with the institution of slavery, such as plantation lands and a confederate cemetery. He only briefly pays attention to New York City and Dakar, Senegal, in two respective chapters immediately preceding the epilogue. If Smith wished to punctuate his urgent call for a nationwide historical reckoning, he may have benefitted from expanding the book's geographical scope. Such an adjustment would put added pressure on historical sites beyond the South to more forcefully recognize culpability or a relationship to slavery, no matter how tangential.

How the Word is Passed is an insightful interrogation of the nation's commemorative landscape and its relationship to one of the most impactful, enduring institutions in its history. It illuminates a framework for other public historians and scholars interested in the convergence of myth, memory, and history. Smith's infusion of subjectivity into his writing – through transcribed conversations at the sites, as well as personal reflections on his family lineage – makes for an accessible and easily relatable book. Through illustrative writing, insightful commentary, engaging fieldwork, and a demonstrated mastery of historical knowledge on the subject, *How the Word is Passed* lays out the vision for how Americans can leverage their collective past to craft a better future.

Dylan Williams