HOW THE WORD IS PASSED

A RECKONING WITH THE HISTORY OF SLAVERY ACROSS AMERICA

CLINT SMITH

"We need this book." —IBRAM X. KENDI

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For my children

Our past was slavery. We cannot recur to it with any sense of complacency or composure. The history of it is a record of stripes, a revelation of agony. It is written in characters of blood. Its breath is a sigh, its voice a groan, and we turn from it with a shudder. The duty of to-day is to meet the questions that confront us with intelligence and courage.

—Frederick Douglass,
"The Nation's Problem"

You know, they straightened out the Mississippi River in places, to make room for houses and livable acreage. Occasionally the river floods these places. “Floods” is the word they use, but in fact it is not flooding; it is remembering. Remembering where it used to be.

—Toni Morrison,
“The Site of Memory”

Author’s Note

The visits I describe in this book took place between October 2017 and February 2020. I visited some places on multiple occasions, others only once. All quotations were captured with a digital recorder. Some names have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals.

I would like to note that while this book is focused on the places where the story of slavery in America lives on, the land upon which many of these historical sites sit belonged to Indigenous communities before it belonged to anyone else. Of the eight US-based sites I visited for this book, New Orleans sits on Chitimacha and Choctaw land; Monticello sits on Monacan land; the Whitney Plantation sits on Choctaw land; Angola prison sits on Choctaw land; Blandford Cemetery sits on Appomattoc and Nottoway land; Galveston, Texas, sits on Akokisa, Karankawa, and Atakapa land; New York City sits on Munsee Lenape land; the National Museum of African American History and Culture sits on Nacotchtank (Anacostan) and Piscataway land. It should be noted that Native territories often overlapped and had malleable borders that shifted over time. This list is not definitive but is one attempt to acknowledge those who first traversed this land, and to do so as accurately as possible.

“The whole city is a memorial to slavery”

Prologue

THE SKY ABOVE THE MISSISSIPPI River stretched out like a song. The river was still in the windless afternoon, its water a yellowish-brown from the sediment it carried across thousands of miles of farmland, cities, and suburbs on its way south. At dusk, the lights of the Crescent City Connection, a pair of steel cantilever bridges that cross the river and connect the east and west banks of New Orleans, flickered on. Luminous bulbs ornamented the bridges' steel beams like a congregation of fireflies settling onto the backs of two massive, unbothered creatures. A tugboat made its way downriver, pulling an enormous ship in its wake. The sounds of the French Quarter, just behind me, pulsed through the brick sidewalk underfoot. A pop-up brass band blared into the early-evening air, its trumpets, tubas, and trombones commingling with the delight of a congregating crowd; a young man drummed on a pair of upturned plastic buckets, the drumsticks in his hands moving with speed and dexterity; people gathered for photos along the river's edge, hoping to capture an image of themselves surrounded by a recognizable piece of quintessential New Orleans iconography.

After the transatlantic slave trade was outlawed in 1808, about a million people were transported from the upper South to the lower South. More than one hundred thousand of them were brought down the Mississippi River and sold in New Orleans.

Leon A. Waters came and stood next to me on the riverfront, hands in pockets, lips compressed, overlooking the Mississippi's slow bend between the two shores of the city. I had been introduced to Waters by a group of young Black activists in New Orleans who were part of the organization Take 'Em Down NOLA, whose self-espoused mission is "the removal of ALL symbols of white supremacy in New Orleans as a part of a broader push for racial & economic justice." Waters has served as a mentor to many members of the group—they see him as an elder statesman of their movement and credit him for being a central part of

their political education.

Waters—in his late sixties with a greying mustache sitting over his lips—wore a black sports coat over a grey-and-white-striped shirt with the top button undone. A navy-blue tie hung loosely below his unfastened collar and swung over the waistband of his faded blue jeans. A pair of thin-framed, rectangular-shaped glasses sat high on the bridge of his nose, the left lens with a slight smudge in its bottom corner. His voice was low and unvarying in its tone. Waters might be mistaken for surly, but his disposition is simply a reflection of the seriousness with which he takes the subject matter he often is discussing, the subject of slavery.

We were standing in front of a plaque, recently put up by the New Orleans Committee to Erect Markers on the Slave Trade, outlining Louisiana's relationship to the transatlantic slave trade. "It's doing its job," Waters said of the plaque. "All through the day people come in, they stop, they read, take pictures…It's another way of educating people to this."

In recent years, markers like this began to go up throughout the city, each documenting a specific area's relationship to enslavement—part of a broader reckoning. After years of Black people being killed by police and having their deaths broadcast in videos streamed across the world, after a white supremacist went into a Black church in Charleston, South Carolina, and killed nine people as they prayed, after neo-Nazis marched in Charlottesville, Virginia, to protect a Confederate statue and reclaim a history born of a lie, after George Floyd was killed by a police officer's knee on his neck, cities across the country have begun to more fully reckon with the history that made such moments possible—a history that many had previously been unwilling to acknowledge. Waters, who identifies as a local historian and revolutionary, was not new to this. He and others like him have, for years, been working to illuminate the city's legacy—and by extension the country's legacy—of oppression.

Only recently, after decades of pushing by activists, amid the larger groundswell of national pressure, have city officials begun to listen, or perhaps feel like they finally have the political capital to act. In 2017, New Orleans removed four statues and monuments that, it had determined, paid tribute to the legacy of white supremacy. The city removed memorials to Robert E. Lee, the general who led the Confederacy's most successful army during the Civil War, a slaveholder; Jefferson Davis, the first and only president of the Confederacy, a slaveholder; P. G. T. Beauregard, a general in the Confederate Army who ordered the first shots of the Civil

War, a slaveholder; and a monument dedicated to the Battle of Liberty Place, an 1874 insurrection in which white supremacists attempted to overthrow the integrated Reconstruction-era state government of Louisiana. These monuments are gone now, but at least a hundred streets, statues, parks, and schools named after Confederate figures, slaveholders, and defenders of slavery remain. On a cool February afternoon, Waters, the founder of Hidden History Tours of New Orleans, promised to show me where some of these vestiges of the past remain.

Waters drove me past two schools named after John McDonogh, a wealthy slave-owning merchant after whom dozens of schools, filled largely with Black children, were named until the 1990s; we drove past shops and restaurants and hotels where there once had been the offices, showrooms, and slave pens of more than a dozen slave-trading firms that made New Orleans the largest slave market in antebellum America—like the Omni Royal Orleans Hotel, built on the site of the St. Louis Hotel, where men, women, and children were bought, sold, and separated from one another; we drove past Jackson Square, in the heart of the tourist-filled French Quarter, where rebellious enslaved people were executed.

Even the street on which Waters dropped me off at the end of our tour, where my parents now live, is named after Bernard de Marigny, a man who owned more than 150 enslaved people over the course of his lifetime. The echo of enslavement is everywhere. It is in the levees, originally built by enslaved labor. It is in the detailed architecture of some of the city's oldest buildings, sculpted by enslaved hands. It is in the roads, first paved by enslaved people. As historian Walter Johnson has said about New Orleans, "The whole city is a memorial to slavery."

New Orleans is my home. It is where I was born and raised. It is a part of me in ways I continue to discover. But I came to realize that I knew relatively little about my hometown's relationship to the centuries of bondage rooted in the city's soft earth, in the statues I had walked past daily, the names of the streets I had lived on, the schools I had attended, and the buildings that had once been nothing more to me than the remnants of colonial architecture. It was all right in front of me, even when I didn't know to look for it.

It was in May 2017—after the statue of Robert E. Lee near downtown New Orleans had been taken down from its sixty-foot pedestal—that I became obsessed with how slavery is remembered and reckoned with, with teaching myself all of the things I wish someone had taught me long ago.

Our country is in a moment, at an inflection point, in which there is a willingness to more fully grapple with the legacy of slavery and how it shaped the world we live in today. But it seems that the more purposefully some places have attempted to tell the truth about their proximity to slavery and its aftermath, the more staunchly other places have refused. I wanted to visit some of these places—those telling the truth, those running from it, and those doing something in between—in order to understand this reckoning.

In *How the Word Is Passed* I travel to eight places in the United States as well as one abroad to understand how each reckons with its relationship to the history of American slavery. I visit a mix of plantations, prisons, cemeteries, museums, memorials, houses, historical landmarks, and cities. The majority of these sites are in the South, as this is where slavery was most saturated over the course of its nearly two-hundred-fifty-year existence on these shores, but I also travel to New York City and Dakar, Senegal. 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. They are people who have tasked themselves with telling the story of that place outside traditional classrooms and beyond the pages of textbooks. They are, formally or informally, public historians who carry with them a piece of this country's collective memory. They have dedicated their lives to sharing this history with others. And for this book, many of them have generously shared that history with me.

“There’s a difference between history and nostalgia”

Monticello Plantation

HEADING OUT FROM MY HOME in Washington, DC, in the morning, I drove against traffic, moving from the new condos of an increasingly gentrifying DC, through the single-family-home suburban landscape of Northern Virginia, and into the vast green expanse surrounding I-95 South. As I drove to Monticello, I observed how Virginia is largely a tale of two states. Northern Virginia, those incorporated municipalities that serve as suburbs to the District of Columbia, has always felt somewhat distant from “the South” in the ways I grew up understanding it. But beyond the suburbs, once I started driving past the diners and gas stations with Dixie flags hanging in their windows, I was reminded that this state was once the bastion of the Confederacy.

As I made my way down the highway, finding myself on cruise control—both in the car and in my mind—I saw a sign in my peripheral vision indicating the entrance to a plantation. Assuming it to be Monticello, I put my blinker on and began to turn, only to jerk the car back onto the highway when I realized this was not Thomas Jefferson’s plantation but that of James Madison—Jefferson’s dear friend, confidant, fellow Virginian, and successor to his presidency.

Madison’s Montpelier plantation, less than thirty miles northeast of Jefferson’s, is almost a prelude to Monticello. Not simply as a result of their relative proximity, but because the two men share similarly contradictory relationships to the aspirational documents they ushered into existence while enslaved people worked on their plantations. The Madison family held more than three hundred enslaved people over the course of

their time on that property. Both of the men inscribed words that promoted equality and freedom in the founding documents of the United States while owning other human beings. Both men built a nation while making possible the plunder of millions of people. What they gave our country, and all they stole from it, must be understood together. I did not turn into Montpelier, but there was something about driving past it on the way to Monticello that reminded me that Jefferson was not singular in his moral inconsistencies; rather he was one of the founding fathers who fought for their own freedom while keeping their boots on the necks of hundreds of others.

Within a few miles of Monticello, the highway transitions into a one-way road lined with white pines and hemlocks. I pulled into the dirt parking lot and made my way up the concrete stairs to see if tour tickets were still available.

One of the first things I noticed about Monticello was how the vast majority of its visitors seemed to be white. It's not so much unexpected as it is markedly conspicuous, to see a plantation that has had its ratios reversed. There were a few tourist groups from different Asian countries, but they were the small exception. Two hundred years ago Monticello, like most plantations, was populated largely by the enslaved descendants of Africans, while white laborers and Jefferson's family were a much smaller proportion of its inhabitants. At any given time at Monticello there were approximately 130 enslaved people, far outnumbering Jefferson, his family, and the paid white workers.

I walked toward the stately mansion, which sat just a couple hundred feet ahead of me. Waves of heat rose from the dirt path, and mulberry trees spread themselves out across the land, creating intermittent pockets of cool respite for visitors. Underneath a lush sugar maple on one side of the house was a group of about a dozen people all sharing what city they had come from. The group ranged in age and geography, spanning generations and state borders.

"And what about you, sir?" the guide said as I scurried under the tree where the rest of the group was standing. I had chosen the tour that began ten minutes after I arrived, one that focused specifically on Jefferson's relationship to slavery.

"From DC," I said.

"Right down the road!" he responded, nodding his head and giving a smile that was as courteous as it was practiced.