

Why America Is at War Over the History of Slavery

Wesley Lowery and Clint Smith discuss the "battle happening about how we tell the story of this country."

BY WESLEY LOWERY

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Image may contain Face Human Person Glasses Accessories Accessory Head Musical Instrument and Guitar

Illustration by Simon Abranowicz. Photograph courtesy of Carletta Girma.

This interview is part of Year of the Brave, a series celebrating the artists, activists, and agitators whose radical courage defined 2021.

A few years ago, Clint Smith told me about a new project that would take him to a series of historical sites—from Monticello to Angola prison to the Door of No Return in Senegal—to reexamine how these sites commemorate, and too often obfuscate, their role in the horror that was American slavery. Smith's aim, he told me, was to search for meaning in the way we tell the story of ourselves. Now, four years later, that project, *How the Word Is Passed: A Reckoning With the History of Slavery Across America*, is the breakout non-fiction book of 2021, a No. 1 New York Times best-seller (and top 10 book of the year) and one of President Obama's annual picks, too. "In 2017, I was watching several Confederate statues come down in my hometown, New Orleans," Smith said recently about the impetus of his undertaking. "Statues of P.G.T. Beauregard, Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, these leaders of the Confederacy. I was thinking about what it meant that I grew up in a majority Black city, in which there were more homages to enslavers than there were to enslaved people. What are the implications of that?"

The project couldn't have been more prescient. As half of the country earnestly searches for a new understanding of our racial history, the other half violently denies it. Half of our neighbors are demagoguing critical race theory, while the other half are busy reading it. Smith has bravely stepped into that fray, asking a large swath of the country to soberly consider how their communities, and even their own families, contributed to our nation's original sin. "You have millions of people who are recalibrating their understandings of what America was and what America has been and what America is today," Smith told me. "And as a result, you have this incredible amount of pushback from people for whom asking questions of American history is an existential threat to them because then they have to ask questions of themselves." He spoke with GQ about the history wars, a golden age of Black intellectuals, and what he learned while writing *How the Word Is Passed*.

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GQ: Your book really meditates on the idea of memory—what we remember, what we memorialize—and how through that memory, we pass on our own history and we empower ourselves to live in our present. Why do you think that framework was so resonant this year?

Clint Smith: I think part of it is certainly that we are in this moment where we are having the “history wars,” which are sort of embedded within the cultural wars. And there are these conversations around Critical Race Theory and how that is shaping the educational landscape, even when we know that Critical Race Theory is being used as a boogie man to instill fear and a sense of a threat to one’s position within the larger American project. It taps into the worst existential fears of many people across this country. And so there is this battle happening, as has happened throughout American history, about how we tell the story of this country, who are we including in the story, and what are we leaving out of the story, and what are the implications that that has through the landscape of our society today?

I think part of what's happened is over the past several years with the Black Lives Matter movement, there have been more people—not everyone, but certainly more—whose understanding of the history of this country has been complicated, has been nuanced, has been expanded, and people are being more honest about what that history is.

I think the implication of that is that you have millions of people who are in the ongoing process of recalibrating their previous understandings of what America has been and what America is today. As a result, I think you have this incredible amount of pushback from people for whom asking questions of American history is an existential threat, because then they have to ask questions of themselves. And they have to reassess their own sense of who they are and how they fit into that. When you have been told a specific story your entire life about how you and your family and your community fit into the American story, and then people come in and tell a different story of America, or a story that includes a lot of facets that were previously left out, then it threatens your sense of self, it threatens your identity.

David Thorson, who’s one of the docents at Monticello, told me that when you tell a different story about Jefferson, then you’re telling a different story about America. And when people have to ask questions about, or reassess their understanding of Jefferson, they have to reassess their understanding of themselves.

Of course. Because people are invested in a very intimate and emotional way with the stories about the country that they live in and the standing that they have within that country. And so, as you note, we're in this moment where so many people are now reexamining that, and that reexamination is necessarily going to be a messy and complicated process that involves some lashing out and backlash.

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Absolutely. And I think that there are people who navigate these questions differently, right? You have a group of people for whom there's a sense of, they didn't know what they didn't know. There has been a systemic and structural failure in our education system that is in part tied to the success of historical and ideological projects, projects like the Lost Cause that have made it so that many people do not understand the history of slavery in any way that is commensurate with the actual impact that it has had on this country.

And I think when those people are confronted with new information, when those people go to Monticello, or on a walking tour of the Underground Railroad in New York, they are often confronting information that they have not previously encountered. But there is also an openness with which to receive that information and then to take that information on and have this history inform how they make sense of themselves and the landscape of inequality across this country.

There are also a lot of people with whom you can share all the empirical evidence, all the primary source documents, all the historical fact and it won't matter. Because the reason they believe what they believe is not because they don't have information, it is because that information threatens the position that they have taken on for themselves within their family and within society. It is a truly existential threat to how someone understands who they are in the world.

That is the thing that's difficult for a lot of people to accept, and so they push back against it. We see a 21st-century iteration of that today. We saw it after the Civil War. People attempt to distort history, distort information, distort fact, because it allows them to continue to tell a story about themselves and their community that they're deeply invested in.

It's also interesting to me at this time where there's almost an embarrassment of riches in terms of brilliant Black public intellectuals, journalists, writers, people who are pushing this conversation forward, there does seem to be, among the opposition, a sort of hyper focus, that is often either very semantic or pedantic. It's Nikole Hannah-Jones having to spend two years talking about one sentence in one essay of the 1619 Project, or the number of times people want to analyze exactly whether this diversity training does this thing, or what is Ibram X. Kendi really calling for when he talks about anti-racism? Oftentimes it doesn't feel like we're having a good faith conversation around these issues, despite the fact that there are so many people who are doing this work in extremely rigorous, intellectual, good faith ways.

I think that's intentional. I think some people intentionally sidestep the good faith conversations and the robust set of scholarship that would challenge, or at least add more nuance to their contentions. Part of it is picking out straw men. Part of it is gender. It is hard to imagine that the way Nikole has been targeted would happen if she was not a Black woman with red hair who was sort of unapologetic in the way that she presents herself to the world. It is hard to imagine that Ibram Kendi would become the sort

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of boogie man that he has, if he were not a dark-skinned man with dreadlocks, and if there wasn't an X in his name.

It's not to say that all those things singularly shape the reason that certain people become targets or don't become targets. But it is to say that those are inextricably linked to the way that people are turned into avatars and sort of two-dimensional caricatures of themselves. Because they also know that the way that certain people look signals to white America something that they should be concerned with or mindful of.

I have thought a lot, as well, about how much the public conversation has shifted and evolved since 2014 and Michael Brown's death in Ferguson. That so much of what is happening today would have been out of the realm of imagination back then. How, in a strange way, it can feel like the events of 2020 and 2021 have eclipsed what was happening back then, even as they were only possible because of it.

If we were to quantify a cultural impact and social impact, between Mike Brown and George Floyd... Clearly George Floyd is only possible because of what happened with Mike Brown. But I guess what's true, as I'm thinking through it, is that when Black Lives Matter started, there was no context in which a brand or a company was going to then take that on because it was too associated with riots in the street or whatever. But I remain so fascinated by the way the post-George Floyd stuff was so omnipresent, just how widespread it was. Everybody put out a statement. I was talking to some friends this weekend who work in corporate America and they were saying that so much of the stuff their companies are doing now would not have happened without George Floyd. Like tying diversity to how companies and managers are paid...

I think some of this stuff takes so long to actually get going that once you get the wheel going, it keeps spinning. You put in the process of doing this thing, so now it exists, right? I've been working on a project involving civil rights movement history, and also thinking a lot about how we underestimate the length of time that had to elapse before MLK showed up and then they were on a bus and then people could vote and John Lewis was there. This was a 15 year, 20 year span that built on top of other 15 and 20 year spans before and after. I think there was a time where the assessment in the culture was that Black Lives Matter was a two-year thing. I think the moment that happened last year was very much a reminder of how present everything still was. And so folks who had been reticent to jump in initially were now like, oh, wait, this is still here.

I've thought a lot about that as well.

At the beginning, a lot of these folks are probably like, ah, I don't know about these Black Lives Matter people. And what if that guy did deserve it? By the time we get to 2020, the conversation has played out

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so much further that the delineation between the two sides in the debate was very clear even to the average person. You know? And so it's been really interesting.

I think that's right.

What compelled you to write this book at this time?

In 2017, I was watching several Confederate statues come down in my hometown in New Orleans—P.G.T. Beauregard, Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, these leaders of the Confederacy. I was thinking about what it meant that I grew up in this majority Black city in which there were more homages to enslavers than there were to enslaved people. What are the implications of that? What does it mean that to get to school I had to go down Robert D. Lee Boulevard? To get to the grocery store, I had to go down Jefferson Davis Parkway. My middle school was named after a leader of the Confederacy. My parents still live on a street named after somebody who owned over 115 enslaved people.

Symbols and names and iconography aren't just symbols. They are reflective of the stories that people tell and those stories shape the narratives that communities carry and those narratives shape public policy and public policy shapes the material conditions of people's lives. That's not to say that taking down a 60 foot tall statue of Robert E. Lee is going to suddenly erase the racial wealth gap, but all of these things are part of an ecosystem of ideas and stories that help shape the story that we tell about this country's history.

The historian Walter Johnson says that New Orleans is a memorial to slaves—the slave people built the levees and slave people built the streets and slave people built so many of the buildings that stand in our famous French Quarter. I wanted to understand who was telling the story of New Orleans. And then I sort of broadened it out and started thinking about how other historical sites that are intimately tied to this history are telling the story, or failing to tell the story, of what happened there.

Who do you see as your constituency? Another way to ask that is, who are you writing a book like this for?

I believe that if you are going to spend four years working on anything, then in some ways you yourself have to be the primary audience. To write 120,000 words about something over the course of many years, it has to be something that you are obsessed with. It has to be something that, at least in my case, is attempting to fill in a gap that had been there.

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So I'm writing this for a 15-year-old version of Clint who grew up surrounded by these statues, who grew up in a city that people called the murder capital of the nation, and talked about the cultural decay of the public housing projects. So much of the language about what was wrong with New Orleans was implicitly a commentary on what people thought was wrong with Black people. Growing up in that context, I wished that I had the history and the language with which to push back against so much of this pathology and free myself from a sort of psychological or emotional paralysis that I felt.

You are not someone who necessarily has identified previously as a capital J Journalist before, although this work clearly is a work of journalism. Talk to me about how you see yourself as a writer and how journalism factored into telling this story?

I think part of what I loved about this book was talking to people for the research, but also I really loved how at the end of it, I felt like a much more dynamic and well-rounded writer. I had never done man-on-the-street interviews before, and the idea of going up to people on a plantation and asking them what they think about slavery is not something that comes naturally to me. I kind of have to psych myself up every time in order to do that. I just think of myself as a writer.

There's a version of this book in which I go to all of these different places and then offer sort of personal essayistic reflections on each of them. I think that book would've been fine, but I think what made the book what it was, was the history, in conversation with the conversations, in conversation with my reflections on both of those. What I wanted to do was write a book of narrative nonfiction and a book of history that felt like a novel.

That means I am the protagonist of the story, and you are on this literal journey with me to these different places. That demands that I reveal some level of interiority, in which you are getting my own moments where I'm excited, moments when I'm surprised, moments where I'm scared, when I'm sharing that with the reader. It also includes a cast of characters who add depth and perspective and a plurality of sensibilities to the story.

Now reporting is such a profoundly important piece of all of my writing. It has added something to my toolkit that I previously did not have that I think has made me a much better writer. The impulse to physically visit places and have conversations about the ideas that I'm wrestling with is as important as reading any book. It is as important as my own personal commentary. I love to write across genre and across discipline, whether it's using poetry or reporting. I think like so many in the Black intellectual tradition, I think you just use whatever tool you can to answer the questions that you're asking.

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What are you reading?

I just finished Ron Chernow's Ulysses S. Grant biography, which was incredible. When you write a book like this, you spend a lot of time reading a chapter or two of books that you wanted to spend more time on. I hadn't had the opportunity to do a real in-depth dive on Grant in the way that I would've wanted to, but I listened to this incredible podcast, 1865, and season two is focused on the presidency of Grant. I think Grant was always sort of overshadowed by the legacy of Lincoln, in the way that I had been taught. Writing the book and then listening to this podcast really piqued my interest. Grant is a really remarkable historical figure who I think is getting his due more now than he has in previous decades.

As the Union general, he beat the Confederacy, he beat the first iteration of the Ku Klux Klan. He arguably did more to support newly emancipated, free people than many other people in his position might have at that time. He wrote his memoirs while dying of throat cancer. He was basically a broke store owner or store clerk when he became drafted into the Union army or became part of the Union army. His entire story, the way he grappled with alcoholism—it's just so fascinating. It was just a beautiful, compelling narrative. That and David Blight's Frederick Douglass book are probably now my two favorite biographies that I've read.