

How the Word is Passed: Remembering Slavery and How it Shaped America

by Clint Smith and Adapted by Sonja Cherry-Paul



Vocabulary

| | |
|----------------|-------------------|
| Legacy | Emancipation |
| Narrative | Descendants |
| Commemoration | Historic Site |
| Erasure | Monument |
| Representation | Oral History |
| Preservation | Disparity |
| Reconstruction | Archive |
| Enslavement | Historical Memory |
| Auction | Collective Memory |

Teacher Content Notice & Classroom Considerations

This text explores the history of slavery in the United States and examines how its legacy continues to shape our world today. It includes discussions of racism, injustice, and the lived experiences of people who were enslaved, as well as how these histories are remembered and told. Some parts of the text may feel heavy or uncomfortable for students.

Because of the nature of these topics, it is important to intentionally create a classroom space that is emotionally safe, respectful, and supportive of all students. This text invites reflection, critical thinking, and connection across past and present.

You can use the following to support students:

- Establish Clear Norms Before Reading (respect, listening, multiple perspectives)
- Frame the Text Around Systems and Historical Memory (not individual blame)
- Provide Space for Reflection and Processing (journaling, turn-and-talk, quiet thinking time)
- Offer Choice and Flexibility (how students engage or respond)
- Affirm Student Identities and Lived Experiences
- Avoid Trauma-Based Questioning (do not ask students to relive or personalize harm)

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Identifying Cultural Behaviors

| Cultural Behavior | Examples from the Text |
|--|---|
| Field Dependence In some cultures, teaching and learning is best done in the context of groups' social and cultural experiences. Relevance is determined by contextualizing the learning, which is highly valued. | Understanding the history in this book requires looking at the context—the place, the people, and the systems surrounding it. Meaning is built through connections to culture, geography, and lived experiences, not just isolated facts. |
| Subjectivity The essential understanding of a topic or concept lies in the relativity, perspective, granularity and not just right and wrong; Multiple perspectives are allowed and valued. | The text constantly shows that history is not one fixed story. Different sites, guides, and communities interpret slavery in different ways. Students are pushed to understand that truth is shaped by perspective, context, and whose voice is centered. |

Possible Writing Prompts

Informative / Explanatory Essay

Explain how the way a historical site, monument, or location tells its story shapes people's understanding of slavery and its legacy. In your essay, describe the history of the site, how the story is presented, and what perspectives are included or missing.

Use evidence from *How the Word Is Passed* and your research to support your explanation.

Argumentative Essay

To what extent do you agree that historical sites and monuments should be changed to better represent the truth about slavery and its legacy? Write an argument that clearly states your position and uses evidence from *How the Word Is Passed* and your research to support your claims.

Research Project

Memory, Place, and Power Research Project

Driving Question:

How does the way we remember history shape what people understand about the past—and the present? Students will research a historical site, monument, or location connected to slavery or its legacy. They will analyze how that place tells its story, whose perspectives are centered, and what might be missing. Students will then evaluate how history is remembered and propose ways to make that story more complete and accurate.

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| Activity | CLR Protocol |
|----------------------------|--|
| <p>Vocabulary</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">Interview a Word</p> <p>Why not turn vocabulary acquisition into a game? Using the Interview a Word strategies, students will review and summarize learning to develop concepts and comprehension.</p> <p>Assign teams a key word and have them “become” it by answering interview questions in character. An interviewer asks the questions aloud, and the class guesses the word based on their responses.</p> <p><i>Validate and Affirm (VA) Sociocentricism, Collaboration, Spontaneity, Subjectiveness, Dynamic Attention Span, Build and Bridge (BB) Responsive Vocabulary</i></p> |
| <p>Literacy</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">Double Response Journal</p> <p>Students use a Double Response Journal to record key ideas or quotes from a text in one column and write personal connections or reflections in the other. After reading, they share and discuss their responses using a structured discussion protocol to build collaboration and deeper understanding.</p> <p><i>Build and Bridge BB Written, Individual, Prompted</i></p> |
| <p>Celebrations</p> | <p style="text-align: center;">Graffiti Talk</p> <p>To actively engage students in learning and allow for choice and spontaneity for reviewing content. Students walk around the room and respond to posted prompts/questions on chart paper. They do this activity silently or in quiet conversation. They do not have to work in order and they do not have to get to every question/chart.</p> <p><i>Validate and Affirm (VA) Sociocentric, Spontaneity, Movement, Collaborative, Sense of Immediacy</i></p> |