Dwayne Betts:

I live in New Haven, Connecticut, and I've passed the Amistad Memorial hundreds of times. Now, the Amistad was this, this slave ship that was coming to the United States, and those who had been taken captive took over the ship and they ended up landing in New England. It was John Quincy Adams who represented them, said that these men should be free. It is a particularly American story. It includes the legal drama that we're accustomed to, but it also happened during Antebellum slavery. So it was people in the States who said, "No, this it's not okay." I've become obsessed with monuments. Clint Smith is also obsessed with monuments. His book, How the Word is Passed, is about him taking a journey from Louisiana to New York City, all the while thinking about the impact and effects of slavery on this country as seen and viewed through monuments.

Clint Smith:

When I watched those Confederate statues come down in New Orleans in 2017, I recognized that I didn't understand the history of slavery in any way that was commensurate with the impact and legacy that it has had on my city, my state, and my country. As someone who is the descendant of enslaved people, as someone who grew up in New Orleans, the largest busiest slave market in the country at one point, the heart of the domestic slave trade at the mouth of Mississippi River, that I still didn't know.

Dwayne Betts:

Clint is also most recently the author of Above Ground, a collection of poetry. Like me, he writes poetry and prose. Clint is both a storyteller and a journalist. He's both somebody that's deeply committed to history and somebody that's committed to the present moment. Turns out Clint's obsession with history extends not just to the Antebellum Period, not just to Angola, the infamous Louisiana prison, but to Germany, to concentration camps. Here, we explore the connection between the two, and the connection is about monuments. The connection is about what book you should have read when you were 15 that didn't exist, what book he wished he'd read when he was 15 that didn't exist, and what it means to write such a book. From Emerson Collective, this is Almost There. I'm Reginald Dwayne Betts. Clint, how's it going, man? It's a pleasure to talk to you.

Clint Smith:

I'm good, man. It's good to be here with you.

Dwayne Betts:

You've done so many interviews, and I want to spend some time talking about audience and how you cultivated an audience in what feels like a singular time in our history. But before we do that, I want to ask you, what do you say to people when they say, "Clint, what is your book about? What is How the Word is Passed about?"

Clint Smith:

I say How the Word is Passed is about how different historical sites across the country reckon with or failed to reckon with their relationship to the history of slavery.

Dwayne Betts:

No, that's perfect. But it's hard to read, though, and it's easy to read 'cause you write well, but it feels like it's a persistent challenge to return to that subject, particularly in this American moment when we seem to be resistant to very kinds of conversations that you were having. So what I would like you to talk about is what this book taught you about cultivating a audience, because I want to begin to understand what your work is, if part of your work is passing the word.

Clint Smith:

I set out to write the sort of book that I felt like I needed in my high school American history class. I remember being a kid growing up in New Orleans in the '80s and '90s and being inundated with these messages about all the things that were wrong with Black people, that Black people in New Orleans were responsible for the crime, for the violence, for the poverty. There was something about Black people that made us disproportionately impacted and involved in those phenomena. I remember being inundated with those messages and not having the language or the toolkit or the information with which to push back against it. What happens is that you inundate a child with information, distorted set of historical facts or contemporaries societal analysis, the sort of logical, but also insidious endpoint is that that child is going to begin to internalize some of those messages.

I felt that happening to me, and I remember being confused 'cause I was like, "I know this is wrong, but I don't really know how to say it's wrong, so maybe it's not all the way wrong." It's a very confusing and paralyzing sense. So I remember when I first read the books and encountered the documentaries and the films and the art and the journalism and the scholarship in my 20s and in graduate school that transformed my understanding of this country and who I was in relationship to it, it's difficult to overstate the extent to which it was so freeing, it was so liberating because this country couldn't lie to me anymore. So I say all that because I wanted to write the sort of book that would've helped me understand my city, my state, and my country more effectively than I did when I was a kid.

Dwayne Betts:

My son is 15 and I'm going to give him me your book. I remember being a high school student. I remember how history was taught to me, and it was not taught to me through books. So I've actually never considered in the way that's deeply meaningful about saying, "Oh, read this book," in a way that I've told him to read Shakespeare or Toni Morrison or Marlon James. So I get it. You write this book for your 15-year-old self, and at least for me, you've pushed me to give it to my kid right. Now I'm wondering what is your next step to actually get the word out to the folks that you wrote it for and even to folks beyond the people that you wrote it for.

Clint Smith:

Yeah. So part of what I took seriously was that this project needed to include a range of voices that represented the multiplicity and the complexity and the heterogeneity of public memory in this country. So I had to include places that were very proactive in engaging in the memory of slavery at those historical sites, place like the Whitney Plantation, and include places that were doing the opposite, like the Blandford Cemetery, one of the largest confederate cemeteries in the country in Petersburg, Virginia. What it meant was that I had to talk to different people at all of these different places to get a sense of what this history meant to them. I was more interested in a narrative grounded in inquiry and a narrative grounded in curiosity and questions than I was in one that was grounded in assertion or being didactic or polemic.

This book was never meant to be, "Here are the 10 things you should have always known about slavery," because that's not honest, 'cause I began this project in large part because when I watched those Confederate statues come down in New Orleans in 2017, I recognized that I didn't understand the history of slavery in any way that was commensurate with the impact and legacy that it has had on my city, my state, and my country. As someone who is the descendant of enslaved people, as someone who grew up in New Orleans, the largest busiest slave market in the country at one point, the heart of the domestic slave trade at the mouth of the Mississippi River that I still didn't know.

Dwayne Betts:

Can you define descendant of enslaved people?

Clint Smith:

My grandfather's grandfather was enslaved.

Dwayne Betts:

Do you think that you have to be able to say that to fill it? I can't say that. Partly I think it's because we left the South, so I don't know my grandfather's grandfather's name. I don't know my grandfather's name. I was born in the '80s in a city that was disconnected from both history itself and literally its own familial history. Maybe this is just my family, but I feel like it's not just my family. I wonder, did that principle connection that you knew that you had and also that disconnection drive some of your inquiry?

Clint Smith:

What's interesting is I don't think I had a full sense of what my connection was. At the beginning of this project, I wouldn't have even been able to say that phrase, "My grandfather's grandfather was enslaved," 'cause I didn't know. I knew so little in the way that so many Black people know so little about the history of our families beyond 1860. Black people weren't included in the census until 1860, and so many of us there is this sort of-

Dwayne Betts:

Oh, you weren't included in the public record at all unless you owned property or were locked up.

Clint Smith:

Yeah-

Dwayne Betts:

Which is wild 'cause you looking for your folks and you like, "Man, I hope I don't find them."

Clint Smith:

Yeah.

Dwayne Betts:

"Hope I don't find ... 'cause if I find them, that just means that it extends my history with incarceration even longer."

Clint Smith:

Yeah, no, that's telling. Part of what this book did for me is that I set out to learn more about our collective physical proximity to the history of slavery and how the scars of slavery are etched into the landscape all around us. But in doing so, I think I got a clearer sense of our collective temporal proximity to the history of slavery, how this history that we tell ourselves was a long time ago just wasn't that long ago at all. That's why the last chapter or the epilogue of the book is about my grandparents.

My granddad born in 1930 Mississippi, and my grandmother born in 1939 Florida, and I interviewed them and had these conversations with them that we had never had before. In doing so, I got a clear sense of my own proximity to both their history and the history of slavery that my grandparents were growing up at a time where they were raised by and in community with many people who were born into chattel slavery. You born in the 1930s, and there's still thousands, hundreds of thousands of people who were born into chattel slavery in this country. So my proximity to that history was made more clear to me through my conversations with my grandparents on that.

Dwayne Betts:

This makes me think about Germany and the piece you wrote in The Atlantic about going to Germany and visiting these Holocaust sites. You and I both share something else, an experience that I think a lot of people don't have, which is that we've been inside of Angola, because I know you had an insight about Angola and the fact that it is a prison in the state of Louisiana built on a plantation, and what does that mean for this country? But first, can you talk about just Germany? I want you to tell me a little bit about what motivated the trip to Germany and what you learned as it relates to who should have a say and what monuments get created to make sure that a country remembers.

Clint Smith:

So yeah, after How the Word is Passed came out, I was doing all these virtual events, I probably did a virtual event every day, every weekday for a year. A question that kept coming up when I was doing these events was, "Okay, well, you're talking about all the ways that America has largely failed to reckon with its past, the way that America has largely failed to account for what it has done in the context of slavery and how it shaped our public consciousness or public memory. What are some places that are doing it well?" I would often invoke Germany. I would say, "Oh, Germany has this memorial and Germany has this monument, and Germany's doing this, Germany's doing that." I kept talking about the monuments in Germany.

Then I had this moment where I was like, "I've never been to the monuments in Germany. I've never seen these memorials that I keep talking about." So for me as a writer, as a scholar, as a journalist, it felt really important for me to go to this place to have a more textured, three-dimensional understanding of what was happening there rather than doing what I realized I was doing, which was flattening the conversation and talking about a place that I've never been as if I was familiar with the specificity and granularity of what was going on there. So I went to Germany, and I took two trips there. One of the places that I went was Dachau. Dachau was the first concentration camp that the Nazis built. I remember walking into those gates, walking through those gates, and it's this vast haunting expanse of empty gray land.

You look to the left, you see the remnants, the crematorium. You look to the right, you see the skeletons of the barracks. I closed my eyes and did this thought exercise. This is years after I had visited Angola. I remember when I first visited Angola just being struck by what it meant that the largest maximum security prison in the country, 18,000 acres wide, bigger than the island of Manhattan, a place where 75% of the people held there are Black men, and 70% of them are serving life sentences was built on a former plantation. So when I went to Germany, when I went to Dachau I was standing on that concentration camp. I closed my eyes and I just tried to imagine what it would be like on that land, in that place we built a prison, and in that prison, the vast majority of the people held there were Jewish.

It was so unfathomable. It was so viscerally upsetting. It was so abhorrent to imagine the possibility of that ever happening because it would be a global emblem of anti-Semitism. It would be abhorrent in every sense of the word, run counter to any notion of justice or morality that we believe in, rightfully so. Yet here in the United States, the largest maximum security prison in the country where the vast majority of people are Black men serving life sentences, many of whom work in fields picking crops, many of whom were sentenced by non-unanimous juries, which has since been rendered unconstitutional by the Supreme Court of the United States for being an explicit vestige of white supremacy, and many of whom were sentenced as children.

The United States, as you know, is the only country in the world that sends children to life without the possibility of parole, picking crops in fields that we're once a plantation while someone watches over them today with a gun over their shoulder on horseback. So part of what I'm examining in that chapter on Angola and when I go to Germany is what are the ways that a history of white supremacy not only enacts physical violence against people's bodies, but also creates of a violence of distortion, a violence of silence in the way that something like prison being built on a plantation does not offend our sensibilities in the same way it would in a different geopolitical context like it does in the context of Germany.

Dwayne Betts:

When you say our sensibilities, who do you include in that our? 'Cause I think that that collective pronoun might be the center of the conversation. So I wonder who do you include, and that doesn't offend our sensibilities.

Clint Smith:

I think I mean it purposefully in an aggregated way. I think I do mean it in the holistic our, holistic we, only because I do think it is a collective issue that our country has failed to account for the violence of what slavery was, our temporal proximity to the history of slavery, that in the scope of human history, this thing was just yesterday. As we were talking about, there are people alive today, right now who knew, loved, were raised by people born into chattel slavery. So the idea that you would have the largest prison in the country built on land that was once a plantation, and that you have Black men serving life sentences who still work in those fields for virtually no pay. Part of the reason that is allowed to happen, I think, is because as a country, there is a failure of us to establish that connection between our contemporary carceral state and the way that as Saidiya Hartman talks about, this is the Columbia Scholar, how the afterlife of slavery continues to shape our social, political, economic, and in this case, carceral infrastructure.

Dwayne Betts:

I think that that point about Auschwitz or Dachau becoming a prison and having 40, 50, 60% of people that be Jewish is so profound because it is not trying to argue that prison would be an extension of the Holocaust. It's making a point that this is just a profoundly unsettling thing for a nation to do. I think that this is a profound framing of it. I want to turn to poetry, then I want to ask about your life as a teacher.

Clint Smith:

Yeah.

Dwayne Betts:

It's this one point, you got this book out Above Ground, which is a dope book. It's really interesting because I think poets are still working on how to carve a larger space in the public consciousness. Yet, what I find in your poetry is you bringing all of these things to bear that motivated How the Word is Passed, but also some of the philosophical questions that undergird How the Word is Passed. So you have poems for your son in here. You have poems about what it means to be a poet in here, but you also have poems looking at existential questions. You got this poem, I had somebody do this to me once, so I'm going to do it to you. He read one of my poems on air, and I was like, "Man, he about to mess my poem up." I was like, "He read it better than me."

Clint Smith:

Oh, man.

Dwayne Betts:

"So when people say we have made it through worse before, all I hear is the wind slapping against all the gravestones of those who did not make it, those who did not survive to see the confetti fall from the sky, those who did not live to watch the parade roll down the street. I have grown accustomed to a lifetime of aphorisms meant to assuage my fears, pithy sayings meant to convey that all ends are fine in the end, but there is no solace in rearranging language to make a different word tell the same lie. Sometimes the moral arc of the universe does not bend in a direction that comforts us. Sometimes it bends in ways we don't expect, and there are people who fall off in the process.

Please, dear reader, do not say that I am hopeless. I believe there is a better future to fight for. I simply accept the possibility that I may not live to see it. I have grown weary of telling myself lies that I might one day begin to believe we are not all left standing after the war has ended. Some of us have become ghosts by the time the dust has settled." When I read that and then I later read this poem in there where you were talking to your kid about what a poem is, and he says, "Can it be about Pluto?" You say, "There are many poems about Pluto." I wonder, and I think about the audience for How the Word is Passed, I wonder how you reconcile the sentiment or that poem with continuing to do the work that you do.

Clint Smith:

Well, thank you for reading it. Like we said, you just read it better than I think I read it, so-

Dwayne Betts:

Nah.

Clint Smith:

... it's such a fascinating exercise to hear somebody else, especially in hear another poet read your work, so I appreciate that very much. There are a couple of different ways that my projects are all in conversation with one another. I think that in How the Word is Passed, one of the things that I think about all the time and that I was thinking about is I was working on that book is how there are a group of enslaved people who came to the British colonies that would become the United States in 1619. Slavery didn't end formally till 1865. But what that means is that from the moment enslaved people arrived on these shores, they were fighting for freedom. They were fighting for liberation. They were fighting for emancipation.

What that also means is that the vast majority of people who fought for freedom never got a chance to experience it for themselves, but they fought for it anyway because they knew that someday someone would. I think about how my life is only possible, how my children's lives are only possible and my son's, who's almost six, and my daughter who's four, our lives are only possible because of generations of people who fought for something they knew they might never see, but who fought for it anyway because they recognize that possibly someday somebody else would. I think so much of what's in that book are these moments of attempting to capture and archive just moments, feelings, ideas, language that comes from my children. So there's poems in there about having dance parties with my kids, making French toast with my kids, going to the park with my kids, just walking down the street with my kids.

I'm constantly thinking about how those moments are only possible because of these generations of people who fought to make those moments possible, who struggled to make those moments, who couldn't even necessarily conceive of who I am, who my children would be, but that these moments, they're like French toast with my kids on a Saturday morning is only possible because of generations of struggle. I think part of what that poem that you just read is talking about and wrestling with is like the intergenerational nature of how this happens, that sometimes we are fighting for something, whether it be an end to mass incarceration, whether it be an end to poverty, whatever the case may be, an end to the decimation of our climate.

We feel like if it doesn't happen immediately or it doesn't happen when we can see it, then the fight has not been worth it, that the effort has not been worth it. I think it's important. I think that that's a very A, historical conception of how change has ever happened and how struggle has ever taken place. So I think that part of what that poem is trying to do is trying to remind me in moments where I have tried to say, "We're going to make it, this is going to be okay. We're going to see the fruits of our labor. We're going to make it to the end." It's like, well, you might not be working for something that you might never see in the same way that there are generations of people who were working for something that they would never see, but whose work made possible what we are now living through today.

Dwayne Betts:

To be real, the quote that you riff on from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., "The arc of the universe is long, but it bends towards justice," also comes from a man who says, "I've seen the mountaintop and I may not get there with you." So I think what you are able to do with that poem is to bring these two moments together. It is two essentially important moments and significant moments because I do think that if you write a book like How the Word is Passed, you run the risk of scaring people, of reminding people that as far as we've come, we haven't nearly gotten to the place that we think we are even as we sit in these

moments. For you, all of this started as being an educator. This connects us again, because I grew up in PG. For folks who don't know, PG is the Prince George's County, Maryland.

Clint Smith:

Do you still call it PG?

Dwayne Betts:

I still call it PG.

Clint Smith:

Some people feel very strongly when it's not PG, it's Prince George's so I'm just curious where people fall down.

Dwayne Betts:

Yeah, no, man. You know what I don't call it? I don't call it the DMV.

Clint Smith:

Okay.

Dwayne Betts:

I'm like, "I grew up in PG." So my question is, where did you teach out there? What grades were you teaching? What subjects were you teaching?

Clint Smith:

Oh, man, I was at Parkdale High School, right off of-

Dwayne Betts:

Yeah, that's-

Clint Smith:

... off of Good Luck Road.

Dwayne Betts:

That's PG.

Clint Smith:

Yeah, Prince George's County, PG. I taught 10th and 12th grade English, and man, it was, everything about what I do now is shaped by those years in the classroom. It was such a incredible job. It was such a hard job, too. I'm not trying to look at it with rose-colored glasses. It was probably the most rewarding job I ever had and the most difficult. But I think that sitting around and talking about literature with teenagers is just such a good gig.

Dwayne Betts:

I never had teachers like you when I was in school. I don't want to denigrate my teachers, I'm just saying that one of the other things that has happened is that the ability for educators to bring their interests into their work, I appreciate you saying that it's an extension. Everything you do now is an extension of that because I think it's a way in which your work is intended to loop back into those classrooms; hence, this notion of you writing it for your 15-year-old self and me giving the book to my 15-year-old son today.

Clint Smith:

Yeah, no, absolutely. I think that one of my primary commitments as a writer is in effort to reject the idea that artistic integrity or intellectual rigor has to come at the expense of legibility and has to come at the expense of accessibility. Fundamentally, I don't buy the idea that making something accessible to a larger group of readers or to young readers or to readers who may not be, quote, unquote, "typical book-buying audiences," or may not typically in jest this sort of information, which I think there's a lot to unpack within that also, that you can maintain the scholarly rigor of the project and also ensure that you are trying to meet people where they are.

I hosted this YouTube series called Crash Course: Black American History, 51 episodes that are 10 to 12-minute episodes about different parts of Black history. It's a different kind of tone, and part of it is animated and it's different. But part of what felt really important to me is this idea of so many of the things that I was teaching in that series were things I didn't learn until I went to graduate school. I remember learning so many things when I was getting my PhD, and I was like, "Why am I learning this as a 20 something year old PhD student when this would've been so transformational for me and so helpful for me to learn in my eighth grade social studies class?" this goes back to what you were talking about before, how do we pass the word?

Dwayne Betts:

Yeah, I was about to just say that.

Clint Smith:

Yeah, it's like you got to meet people where they're at. Some people will pick up a book, some people will listen to a podcast, some people will watch a YouTube video. For me, I'm less interested in only doing one thing or trying to get people to engage with history or poetry or inequality in one way. It's like there are all sorts of ways to meet people where they are. Then ultimately, I think you can make people in invested in the multiplicity of your work. There are people who come to me through Crash Course and then read the poems and then read How the Word is Passed. There are people who buy How the Word is Passed and then start watching the Crash Course videos and then reading the poem, they all exist in the same ecosystem.

Dwayne Betts:

So that makes me go to my final question, and I hope that in us doing a overview of How the Word is Passed, talking about your poetry, talking about Crash Course, but also beginning and ending with this question of audience and audience being in some ways, beginning with what it meant to provide something that your 15-year-old self needed, and then recognizing that and providing that you were

able to write something that exists amongst the highest skilled writers in the poetic genre, in the genre of journalism, but also in that long-form nonfiction that is truly a feat. It's honestly really challenging to write something like this, and so I'm impressed that I appreciate you spending some time with me. But this podcast is called Almost There, and I've taken to asking the guests who come on and speak to me, what do they hear when they hear me say the phrase, "almost there?"

What does that mean to them? I ask you that in the context of the poem, in the arc of the universe, but also the context of these journeys that you've taken, the ones that we've discussed going to these different sites of slavery really, but also the ones that we haven't discussed like fatherhood, like being in a committed relationship and trying to have a family in a world where sometimes our successes require us to not be home. What does being almost there mean in the context of all of those things that we've discussed and haven't had time to discuss?

Clint Smith:

That's a great question. I think what that brings up for me more than anything is I think there's sometimes this sense that, and this comes up a lot in my public memory work, my work around memorialization iconography, there can be this sense that when you do a thing, when you lay down a monument or when you put down a stumbling stone in front of the home that a Jewish person once lived in in Berlin, or when you build a monument on your campus to the enslaved people who built it, or when you take down a statue of Robert E. Lee or any of these things that there can be this sense that you did the thing. You took down the statue, you renamed the building, you hired the DEI coordinator, you picked up and read that book, or you listened to that ... you did the thing. You have now crossed the threshold, so to speak, of consciousness, of getting it, of understanding.

The way that I've come to think about all of this, whether we're talking about in the context of American history or just what it means to be a person in the world, is that there's no threshold you cross. There's no finish line. There's no, "I did the thing, and now I can wash my hands and I'm done with it." When you put up a monument that is the entry point and serves as a daily reminder for you to be constantly reexamining, interrogating, recalibrating your relationship to the history of the space that you're in, the history of the world that you live in. Every day we wake up and try to be a better, more thoughtful, more curious, more empathic version of ourselves. There's no moment in which as a parent that you as a partner, as a friend, as a writer, as anything, any of the different parts of my life, there's no moment at which you cross a threshold and you're like, "I'm good. I did the thing. I'm the fullest version of myself in any of these spaces."

I think that almost there is, you get up and you try to be a little bit better every day, and life is constantly ... in that way, it's a perpetual almost there, but not in an insatiable way, not in a way that you're chasing this thing you can't ever grasp, 'cause I think that's the worst version of it. But I do think there's something beautiful about saying every day there's an opportunity to be a little bit better version of yourself. Sometimes it's the one step forward, two steps back, or three steps back and two steps forward. It's inelegant, and it's not linear, but our lives are full of almost there-ness. That is something, I think, to be embraced rather than to be overwhelmed by.

Dwayne Betts:

Yeah, no, I appreciate that. I'll end with this. You have a passage in the book, I think you talk about you encountered this a lot of times where people were confronted with our history that they didn't know and it led them to weep. I like to think that that was for them, a realization that we almost there, which,

a day or two later might inspire them to become a part of that thing that happens to get you there. One real tragedy is to live a life in what you imagine that you're there and so you stop working. I think sometimes that's what monuments do.

We built this monument as if the monument suggests that we are there, and it's like, "No, we not there. We read this book as if it suggests that we're there, but the book is a step. So I thank you for your time, man. Always, it's a pleasure to talk to you. I know that you have mastered the art of showing up, not just for us, but for your family as well. I know that it's exhausting, but it's absolutely needed. You have showed us how the word has passed, not just in writing a book, but in being here. Thank you.

Clint Smith:

I appreciate it. Do it anytime.

Dwayne Betts:

Almost There is produced by Jesse Baker and Eric Nuzum at Magnificent Noise for Emerson Collective. Our production staff includes Eleanor Kagan, Paul Schneider, and Kristin Mueller, along with Patrick Darcy, Alex Simon and Amy Lowe from Emerson Collective. Special thanks to Nia Elliot. I'm Reginald Dwayne Betts. Thank you for listening.