

Slavery Isn't Just Black People's Burden

Margaret Wrinkle, author of the acclaimed historical novel Wash, says it's time to bring an end to "white innocence."

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I don't have much of a poker face.

This became obvious this spring when I toured Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's mountaintop home in Charlottesville, Va., for the first time. I watched a 60ish white tour guide stumble over a question about Jefferson's black descendants, then awkwardly change the subject.

I cocked my head to the left. WTF! Creased my brow.

After the tour was over, I asked him where Sally Hemings, Jefferson's black half-sister-in-law and mother of his children, slept. He blithely tossed a finger in the direction of a small structure off the main wing of the **iconic building featured on U.S. nickels.**

Novelist Margaret Wrinkle recalls reading my face. "You stood out because you and your daughter were the only black people on the tour," she told me later. "I looked over and you were like, 'Hmmmph.' Oh, my goodness. I didn't know you, but I had this solidarity bond with you."

It wasn't until later that evening, when Wrinkle and I met at a reception, that we realized we were both writers presenting at the **Virginia Festival of the Book.** We'd both ditched the festival to see Monticello. Wrinkle is white. I am black. We both wanted to see the full story.

Monticello is "a microcosm of what people are ready to see," Wrinkle said. "How complicated a story are people ready for? Some people have been dealing with complexity their whole lives."

In the months since meeting in Charlottesville, Wrinkle and I also bonded over **Wash**, her penetrating and lyrical novel that explores the multilayered interior lives of a master and his stud, or "traveling Negro." On Tuesday, Nov. 12, in Washington, D.C.'s Busboys and Poets restaurant, **Wrinkle and I will**

discuss (pdf) the book, which was just released in paperback. We will also talk about Solomon Northup's memoir, *12 Years a Slave*, which she used in part for research, and the larger topic of racial reconciliation.

It is a conversation I am eager to have with white people. As anyone who has seen Steve McQueen's life-changing film adaptation of *12 Years a Slave* can tell you, it's heavy. But I just wish black people would stop carrying so much of the weight. It's white people's story, too.

To Wrinkle—also the filmmaker behind *Broken\ground*, an award-winning film about race in her native Birmingham, Ala.—it is about bringing an end to what she calls “white innocence”: “It's the relationship between the myth and the truth. Whiteness and white privilege keep those two things separate for a longer time.”

In Wrinkle's book, the stories of master and enslaved are intertwined to startling effect.

The title character, Wash, was reared on an island along the banks of North Carolina until he was 15. He was raised by a kind and absentminded master and under the tight grip of his West African-born mother, who filled him with stories of the spirits of his ancestors. When Wash leaves that enclave and is loaned out to various owners, he chafes at plantation life. He does everything to sabotage himself and, thus, their efforts to control him.

Wash's owner, Richardson, a Revolutionary War hero with money problems, decides to take him out of the fields and breed him with other enslaved people all around the region. Wash accepts and even embraces the role. The power struggle between these two highly intuitive men—one young and black, the other old and white—is the main thread passing through the dehumanizing string of horrors that was plantation life.

Wash spreading his seed across Southern plantations becomes a meditation on the survival of black people. It's about their ability to reconcile the spiritual world they left in West Africa, and will reunite with after they die, with their new reality in America.

Wrinkle, who previously taught fifth-grade history, said that researching slavery gave her insight into current racial dynamics. “I wrote the book as a way to be able to understand the genocidal situation of black men today,” she said.

“The thing about *12 Years a Slave*: All these white people are seeing [the brutality] as a huge revelation. That is bizarre to me. What did you think happened? How else do you think so many people were controlled to this degree?”

After the primary tour of the main Monticello building concluded, Wrinkle and I did begin to see the fuller picture on a truly illuminating tour of the slave quarters, which was offered separately. (I highly recommend it.)

Susan R. Stein, senior curator and vice president at Monticello, said the staff are trained to integrate the story of slavery into the house tour, too. “Getting balance is sometimes challenging,” she said. “For an individual who has 30 minutes with people to convey a topic with this level of complexity is difficult. What we as an institution have done is, we weave the subject of slavery, ... including the subject of the Hemings family, in every aspect of our interpretation. Our intention is for them to be seamless and integrated.”

That’s a complex task, and one some interpreters understandably struggle to fulfill. But there is still a tour of the main house, and one can elect to see the separate tour of the slave quarters.

This is not just Monticello’s struggle. How can we simultaneously reveal the realities of both master and enslaved? Their separation is part of the myth of race in this country: that it’s the black person’s burden, one that white people may choose to avoid.

For some white people, avoiding talk about slavery “is a way of protecting their ancestors,” Wrinkle said. “It is ultimately a mistaken belief. Ancestors [mess] up like everyone else. I think the [mess]-ups are part of what is handed down. If that gets blocked, it’s all been wasted.”