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Stephanie E. Smallwood. *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007. 261 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-02349-9.

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In 1919, Carter G. Woodson critically reviewed U. B. Phillips's *American Negro Slavery* and found it severely lacking in its recognition of African American historical subjectivity. "In just the same way as a writer of the history of New England in describing the fisheries of that section would have little to say about the species figuring conspicuously in that industry," charged Woodson, "so has the author treated the negro in his work."[1] The historiography on slavery and the slave trade in 2007 is worlds away from Phillips's early twentieth-century study. Yet the heavily quantitative and European-centered nature of the evidence on the transatlantic slave trade still poses difficulties for historians who desire to write, as Joseph Miller phrased it, "in warmer tones," not only of aggregate numbers, but of the impact of the market on human lives.[2] Stephanie Smallwood's visionary *Saltwater Slavery* rethinks the route from Africa to the Americas from the perspective of forced African migrants. In terms of both argument and methodology, Smallwood has carved a groundbreaking intellectual pathway through the historiography of the Atlantic World and the transatlantic slave trade.

Focused on the British slave trade from the Gold Coast between 1675 and 1725, *Saltwater Slavery* offers a broadly relevant exploration of the processes of commodification and forced migration. Drawing on both the business records and the voluminous correspondence of the Royal African Company (RAC), the book's seven chapters follow the trajectory from West African captivity across the Atlantic to the expanding plantation complex of the Americas. Fully engaged with West African, British, Caribbean, and North American historical scholarship, Smallwood illuminates the market forces that bound the African coastal dungeons of El Mina to London shipyards and Jamaican slave markets. At the same time, she exposes the Atlantic World as a European construction of time and space, given definition by maps, financial networks, and sailing ships. At the heart of this book lies the argument that for most African captives, the Atlantic World was not a coherent geographic entity, but a space of saltwater terror. The Atlantic passage, then, was not a "Middle Passage" but an "experience of motion without discernible direction or destination" (p. 122).

Saltwater Slavery is first and foremost a profound meditation on the historical process of commodification in early modern Atlantic markets. Although this point is oddly downplayed in the book's introduction, Smallwood has elsewhere described herself as writing the "cultural history of economic systems."[3] As such, the book joins other notable studies, such as Walter Johnson's *Soul by Soul* (1999) that transcend conventional boundaries between economic, social, and cultural history. Compared to existing seventeenth-century systems of African servitude, Smallwood argues, the Atlantic slave trade institutionalized the distinctly alienating process of transforming persons into commodities. Chapters 1 through 4 detail the process of commodification. Building on Orlando Patterson's notion of "social death" (*Slavery and Social Death*, 1982), Smallwood reads between the lines of RAC ledgers to show how West African slave factories massed individual captives into the "full complements" that slave traders were required to accumulate before embarking on voyages to the Americas. Despite a steady history of escapes, uprisings, and other acts of resistance, the forces of the Atlantic market permeated the West African littoral, inexorably moving captive Africans into European hands. In coastal incarceration points as well as the holds of slave ships, Smallwood contends, slave merchants turned captives into commodities by determining the outer limits of suffering that captive Africans could endure without endangering the profits of their captors. Here, Smallwood's innovative readings search the familiar ground of death and suffering to find new insight into the embodied meanings of enslavement. For example, rather than count the total captives taken on board the *Edgar* in 1681, Smallwood imagines the voyage from the perspective of the growing number of men and women who languished in the ship's hold over the course of two months, as the *Edgar* sailed between West African ports attempting to fill its hold. Similarly, Smallwood reads Pe-

ter Blake's narrative of the 1675 voyage of the *James* not for aggregate mortality statistics but instead to illuminate the meanings Akan-speaking captives might have placed on the daily accretion of deaths at sea, unassisted by proper funerary ritual.

Having traced the rupture of West African identities and social relationships past the "point of no return," chapters 4 through 7 turn to the question of reconstituting African identity in the Americas, where the forces of the Atlantic market were no less overwhelming. Smallwood complicates the recent debates between "creolists" who posit a synthesis of African cultures in the Americas and "slave route" advocates who argue for specific African ethnic continuities.[4] Rather than discussing specific African survivals, Smallwood first explores in detail the "multivalent" identities of Akan-speaking people and then suggests that such a complex understanding of identity challenges "the erroneous assumption that shared culture traits automatically constitute community"(pp. 115, 119). Referencing Sidney Mintz and Richard Price's 1976 *Birth of African American Culture*, Smallwood insists that men, women, and children chained in the holds of ships constituted neither "groups" nor "crowds." Rather, she argues, they were "a mutilated assemblage" of alienated persons, a "novel and problematic social configuration," and "the antithesis of community"(pp. 121, 101). Smallwood's final chapter on "life and death in the Diaspora" disrupts historians' sometimes over-eager search for community among traumatized persons. At the same time, Smallwood calls attention to the enormous energy required by Africans who managed to reverse even partially the relentless current of commodification by reestablishing new social relations under American slavery. Compared to voluntary immigrants' social networks that served to connect past and present, Smallwood argues, enslaved African communities in the Americas faced the "serial repetition of one-way departures" in which the "voices of saltwater slaves, could not reverberate back to Africa" (p. 201).

Bringing "the people aboard slave ships to life as subjects in American social history" (p. 3) is no easy feat given the nature of Smallwood's evidence. At times, Smallwood provides original interpretations of familiar evidence, such as ex-slave Charles Ball's account of an African-born father who placed a canoe and paddle on the grave of his son to allow the son passage back across the sea to Africa. Instead of the familiar interpretation that this evidence shows the survival of African cosmology, Smallwood uses the anecdote to deepen her argument of the impact of the "saltwater" passage that required enslaved Africans to innovate ritual "to meet the particular needs of slave life in the Atlantic system" (p. 190). At other times, Smallwood relies heavily on secondary literature about Akan kinship, culture, and politics to piece together the way captive Africans may have strained to understand the long Atlantic voyage. The richness of Smallwood's discussions of Gold Coast cultures and societies contrasts starkly with the absence of direct evidence from captive Africans and emphasizes the void of meaning that transatlantic enslavement created. Occasional arguments call for further evidence and elaboration. Two such examples arise in chapter 7 in the brief discussion of the importance of women in reconstituting social relations and the many references to the disruptive potential of "new Africans" arriving in tentatively established slave communities. For the most part, however, gaps in the evidence derive from the nature of extant sources and Smallwood's bold readings illustrate both the risks and promise of reading traditional sources against their grain.

Situating issues of diasporic identity within the political economy of the slave trade, Smallwood provides a new look at the history of forced migration whose legacies have yet to be fully confronted. With its unflinching analysis of the violence of slave markets, *Saltwater Slavery* contributes to a larger shift in the interpretation of slavery towards an emphasis on trauma and loss. From Nell Painter's landmark essay, "Soul Murder," to Saidiya Hartman's recent travel memoir *Lose Your Mother* (2006), scholarship calling for a "fully loaded cost accounting" of slavery has countered the earlier weight placed on resistance, autonomy, and community strength.[5] Despite her recovery of numerous acts of African resistance and resilience, Smallwood nevertheless asks readers to confront the irreparable violence of early Atlantic capitalism. Furthermore, like Jennifer Morgan's *Laboring Women* (2004), *Saltwater Slavery* explores the question of African subjectivity in the early centuries of the slave trade despite a near total absence of first-person voices from enslaved Africans. Though some of the questions Smallwood raises may not ever be answered, the eloquent and sophisticated framing of her inquiry sets the terms of discussion for future studies of transatlantic slavery.

Notes

[1]. C. G. Woodson, "*American Negro Slavery* by Ulrich Bonnell Phillips," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 5 (March 1919): 481.

[2]. Joseph C. Miller, *Way of Death: Merchant Capitalism and the Angolan Slave Trade, 1730-1830* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), xv.

[3]. Stephanie Smallwood, "Commodified Freedom: Interrogating the Limits of Anti-Slavery Ideology in the Early Republic," *Journal of the Early Republic* 24, no. 2 (2004): 294.

[4]. Kristin Mann, "Shifting Paradigms in the Study of the African Diaspora and of Atlantic History and Culture," in *Rethinking the African Diaspora: The Making of a Black Atlantic World in the Bight of Benin and Brazil*, ed. Kristin Mann and Edna G. Bay (London: Frank Cass, 2001).

[5]. Nell Irvin Painter, "Soul Murder and Slavery: Toward a Fully Loaded Cost Accounting," in *U.S. History as Women's History: New Feminist Essays*, ed. Linda K. Kerber, Alice Kessler-Harris, and Kathryn Kish Sklar (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 125-146.

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