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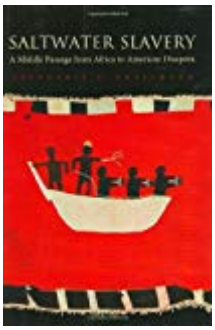

Stephanie E. Smallwood. *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007. 261 pp. $29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-674-02349-9.

Reviewed by Amy Long Caffee

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Commissioned by Dennis R. Hidalgo (Virginia Tech)

In his far-ranging work, *The History of Jamaica,* eighteenth-century Jamaican planter Edward Long claimed that creole slaves on the island abhorred new African arrivals, holding them "in the utmost contempt, stiling [*sic*] them 'saltwater Negroes,' and 'Guiney birds'" (p. 7). It is in this observation that Stephanie Smallwood finds a way to conceptualize the dynamic nature of the forced migration of Africans to the Americas. The linear progression of African bodies from the interior of West Africa to the Americas continued with the regularity of the tides' ebb and flow on the shores of the West Indies and the North American colonies. Using sources such as the aforementioned text, captains' journals, travelogues, and the extensive records of the British Royal African Company (RAC) pertaining to the Gold Coast trade in slaves primarily during the years of 1675 -1725, Smallwood weaves a compelling narrative that challenges historians to interrogate the meaning and significance of terms such as "diaspora," "creolization," and "middle passage." According to Smallwood, the never-ceasing flow of forced migrants to the New World shaped the way that Africans defined themselves and their communities in the midst of the intense trauma and violence that attended American slavery.

Smallwood endeavors to answer several important questions about the African experience of captivity and bondage. She cleverly uses anthropological sources and European accounts to tease out the story of captives who are largely silent in the historic record. Archaeological findings about shifting pottery styles, for example, indicate that Akan-speaking peoples migrated into the forest region encompassed by the Ofin and Pran rivers in the eleventh century. The subsequent development of social structures in the region were largely shaped by their increasing involvement in the gold trade, which led to the development of a sophisticated system of weights and measures that predated their involvement in transatlantic commodity markets on the coast centuries before the arrival of the first Europeans (p. 13). The RAC transatlantic records help Smallwood to recreate a detailed seventeenth-century picture of the re-

gion's "day-to-day commerce in human beings" (pp. 4-5). By pairing quantitative sources such as account ledgers and bills of lading with internal correspondence that circulated throughout the Atlantic world, Smallwood is able to shed light on the processes by which West Africans became Atlantic commodities, and eventually, American slaves. She also explores the way that Africans' actions, particularly in response to captivity on the African littoral and during the middle passage, were dictated by the need to preserve the self and to rebuild kinship communities to reclaim some semblance of humanity despite their recent transformation from African to Atlantic commodity. She is careful to consider the role of Gold Coast social structures in shaping the African experience of captivity and bondage, and is attentive to the way those structures changed to allow for the rise of an Atlantic-bound trade in slaves prior to the period under study, which focuses on the years 1675 to 1725, when the RAC was most deeply involved with the slave trade on the Gold Coast.

Smallwood argues that the unidirectional, unending progression of Africans to the Americas constituted a forced migration that only increased migrants' profound sense of dislocation and alienation. The process of what Orlando Patterson has called "social death," began at the moment of captivity in the interior of Africa, when Africans were ripped away from families, matriclans, and other kinship units that shaped the structure of communities on the Gold Coast at that time.[1] In Africa, where communities were organized around kinship rather than kingship, the vast number of captives who waited to embark for the Americas did not self-identify as members of the African nations that Europeans often associated them with. Smallwood notes that the state, or kingship among Gold Coast peoples in the seventeenth century, "existed both within and between communities of ethnic belonging" (p. 117). Ethnic belonging was based on kinship, and Africans in the Gold Coast at this time would have had ethnic and cultural affiliations that were defined by clan membership rather than any connection to state structures. The demographic landscape was far more complex than has previously been acknowledged, and encompassed multiple, overlapping ethnic affiliations. Here, Smallwood's analysis of ethnic affiliation patterns on the Gold Coast indicates that captives awaiting departure did not likely identify with the ethnic labels that Europeans assigned to them. Given this, models of diasporic creolization should not rely exclusively on records of embarkation and disembarkation, but must employ more creative analytical tools to make confident claims about ethnic identity among Africans.

Another strength in this study is Smallwood's insightful analysis of the correspondence of the RAC to show in striking (and horrific) detail, the measures and language employed by British slavers, captains, and trade officials to transform human beings into Atlantic commodities. In these records Smallwood exposes the cold calculation with which British slavers sought the limits of violence, neglect, and abuse that could be inflicted on African captives without killing them. The "scaling down" of human life is reflected in records that show the scientific approach of "balancing the cost of the slaves' maintenance against their purchase price" (pp. 43-44). RAC officials increased political economy by calculating the smallest amount of nutritional sustenance and physical space required within the ship's hold that would sustain life until slaves reached American markets. Political economy dominated the nature of the enslaved African's experience on the arduous journey to the coast, in the slave factories, and in the dank, dark holds of the slave ship. Thus, Smallwood shows that, in notations that callously indicated the death of slaves at sea and calculations for determining the minimal subsistence required to keep their valuable commodities breathing, those who facilitated the slave trade used passive constructions and terminology that masked their active role in the complete dehumanization of thousands of people.

Smallwood also observes that the designation of a person as a commodity began when they were removed from their kinship circle. As notions of kinship (over kingship) defined communities in interior West Africa, the alienating process of commodification began at the moment when one was ripped from their circle of kin. The trade in slaves in West Africa was well developed and once captives found themselves in unfamiliar terrain with no connections or ties, they were indelibly marked as exchangeable commodities. Smallwood notes that the market was everywhere, and that escape from one's enslavers could not mask one's exchangeability, for "only with great difficulty or great luck could the prisoners' 'commodity potential' be masked or converted back to social currency" (p. 52). In the absence of one's kinship group, captives on the Gold Coast experienced a consummate form of social alienation that rendered escape among unknown clans virtually impossible.

Thus, Patterson's concept of social death began once Africans no longer had kinship networks to employ for protection and affiliation, and was attended by feelings of alienation and the profound loss of a sense of belonging. Though some captives who remained in Africa might find some semblance of community within the kin network in which they were enslaved, those who were sent to the coast experienced a form of social death akin to complete social annihilation. Smallwood notes that for a slave who boarded the slave ships at the littoral, his or her death was understood "to be the uniquely dishonorable death associated with murder or cannibalism," as they would never be seen again. Thus, the captive's unidirectional movement westward doomed him or her to "the perpetual purgatory of virtual kinlessness" (p. 61). This perception was likely confirmed on the horrific journey across the Atlantic, where feelings of alienation and dislocation reached their zenith.

The ethnically diverse social structure of interior West Africa shaped the enslavement process on the littoral as multiple competing ethnic groups vied for goods in the Atlantic market. This ethnic diversity ensured that the experiences of the many thousands of captives who poured into the Atlantic were distinct from one another in many ways. Similarly, the reconstitution of self and community in the Americas was dictated by the distinct experiences of the Africans who reached the Americas alive. Upon disembarking, Africans made choices regarding cultural practice and the rebuilding of kinship networks that were "organized around solutions to the specific problems they faced" (p. 190). In order to survive and regain a sense of social identity, diverse enslaved Africans made equally diverse choices in a variety of different situations across the New World. For Smallwood, fluidity, plurality, and dynamism are in fact the defining characteristics of the slave trade, the experience of its African captives, the middle passage, and the American diasporas that fanned across the New World. Indeed, she writes, "the signal feature of the Atlantic slave trade was its creation of not one diaspora, but many, each having its own distinct features, and each taking on a new configuration in the Americas" (p. 187).

Note

[1]. See Orlando Patterson, ***Slavery and Social Death*** (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

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