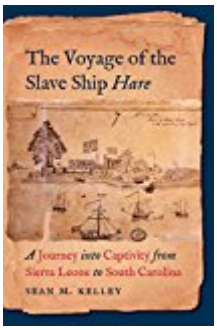
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Sean M. Kelley. *The Voyage of the Slave Ship Hare: A Journey into Captivity from Sierra Leone to South Carolina.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016. 304 pp. $30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4696-2768-7.



Reviewed by D. Andrew Johnson

Published on H-SC (October, 2016)

Commissioned by David W. Dangerfield (University of South Carolina - Salkehatchie)

Sean M. Kelley's new monograph, *The Voyage of the Slave Ship* Hare*: A Journey into Captivity from Sierra Leone to South Carolina*, is an impressive microhistory of a single transatlantic slaving voyage from 1754 to 1755. In framing his narrative around a single journey, Kelley ties together the vast array of forces and peoples who worked in conjunction to produce the transatlantic slave trade between Africa and the Americas from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. Scholars often describe the slave trade as a monolithic entity, a barrage of asymmetries in transcontinental economies, and/or the insidious exploitation of African societies for the benefit of a Euro-American colonial system. For Kelley, though, the slave trade, in toto, was the accumulated result of innumerable series of individual historical actors making decisions in their particular socioeconomic contexts. In short, *The Voyage of the Slave Ship* Hare uses a microhistorical lens to explore the connections between Rhode Island, Sierra Leone, Barbados, and South Carolina in the mid-eighteenth century. Kelley simultaneously narrates the transatlantic slave trade on the human level, while admitting in the first sentence of the book that we do not know the names of the seventy-two people captured and commodified in West Africa and eventually sold in Charles Town.

One major reason there are not more studies like *The Voyage of the Slave Ship* Hare is the lack of sources. Ironically, the major extant sources for many slaving voyages, ship's journals and logs, are not available for the *Hare*. But for this particular voyage there is a wealth of other materials for Kelley to use for reconstructing the worlds of the participants, including the seventy-two captives. As Kelley observes, the *Hare*'s 1754–55 voyage "is the most thoroughly documented slaving voyage to eighteenth-century North America and is among the best documented for any time or place" (p. 5). There are ship accounts, payment records for the crew, a collection of letters written by Captain Caleb Godfrey from Sierra Leone, and a list of sellers along the Upper Guinea coast who sold captive peoples to the ship, in addition to an extremely rare sales record listing the names of

purchasers from Charles Town merchant Gabriel Manigault. By using these sources and placing them in the context of each site of the voyage, Kelley meticulously reconstructs the circumstances within which his historical actors found themselves maneuvering.

Kelley's chronological structure works well for tracing the slaving voyage. Beginning his study in Newport, Rhode Island, Kelley unpacks the investors' motives for planning the journey, the role of the man who decided to captain the ship, and the methods for obtaining a crew. Newport's economy (and more broadly, New England) was ripe for ships to undertake such journeys to the coast of West Africa. The Vernon family of Newport decided slaving was worth the obvious risks of staging a transatlantic voyage. The ***Hare*** carried rum distilled locally in Rhode Island as a means for purchasing captive African peoples in Sierra Leone. In this way, New England served as a conduit between slave-made commodities in the Caribbean and the continued transatlantic shipment of captives bound for the Americas. These conclusions place this work alongside a growing literature on the connections between slavery and the colonial New England society and economy.

The second part of the book concentrates on attempts by Godfrey and his crew to obtain enough captives at different trading locales among the islands and waterways within twenty miles to the east of the Sierra Leone Peninsula, from both British slave merchants at Bance Island and indigenous traders in the vicinity. European slavers had to accommodate local trading cultures. New Englanders were often at a disadvantage compared to British traders because they had less to offer than the vast array of manufactured goods from the imperial metropole. Sierra Leone's economic organization meant that there were many more possible dealers with whom to bargain in a small-scale private trade. Consequently each transaction was much more likely to consist of fewer people, necessitating a longer stay in Africa for the transatlantic slavers. Godfrey purchased seventy-two people for the ***Hare***, but they came from twenty-four separate slave traders. Another disadvantage for this particular voyage was the cargo; there was a large Islamic population in the vicinity, so demand for distilled spirits was lower than would otherwise be expected. Conversely, the powerful Futa Jallon theocratic state to the east began a jihad in the 1720s and provided a steady flow of non-Muslim captives to sell into Atlantic slavery nearer the coast. Kelley deftly uses the geopolitical situation in the region to argue for the likely ethno-cultural makeup of captives sold for shipment on the ***Hare***. The majority of captives came from the Futa Jallon jihad and "probably spoke Mande languages," and were more likely to be male, while a small minority of non-Mande people from nearer the coast had a greater likelihood of being female (p. 102).

Following a short—but still deadly—voyage to Barbados of twenty days, the ship sailed to Charles Town. Once in South Carolina, the captives were put up for sale by Manigault using the scramble method, and for those captives who did not sell, Manigault attempted to market the rest privately. In the end, "twenty-six different men and women purchased at least one captive from the ***Hare***" (p. 142). Kelley then follows the captives to their destinations in South Carolina, whether they remained in Charles Town or were forced to move to rural plantations. About a quarter stayed in the city, mostly women, and the rest went to plantations, where Kelley posits that these enslaved people would have been likely to find other people from Upper Guinea with similar cultural backgrounds. Interrogating the moniker "Mandingo," Kelley concludes that "identity among Upper Guineans in the Carolina Low Country was developing simultaneously along three tracks" (p. 173). Initially, "Mandingo" was an ethnonym used by Mandinka speakers from Senegambia. Then, other Mande-speaking peoples of Upper Guinea adopted the identity ("Mandingization"), and ultimately "cooperation between

Upper Guineans and people from other parts in Africa" was eroding the importance of individual language and ethnic identity (p. 173). Unlike most other scholars of slave ethnogenesis, Kelley is more concerned with the cultural milieu the captives from the *Hare* faced than the eventual creole culture, in this case Gullah, these people helped create. One question the book raises is how does studying the milieu of specific enslaved individuals change the way scholars should think of the broader implications of cultural formation? Even though he is not explicitly concerned with the origins of Gullah, Kelley has managed to add to the discussion through his fine-grained tracing of individuals from the *Hare*.

The Voyage of the Slave Ship Hare is an innovative and timely addition to the historiography of the Atlantic slave trade. By tracing the people involved in a single slaving voyage between Sierra Leone and Charles Town, Kelley has written a historiographically significant monograph that also works as a synthesis of the vast and intricate worlds across continents that produced one of the great tragedies in world history. *The Voyage of the Slave Ship* Hare should be read by experts in the field and will be useful for undergraduates as well as readers outside the academy with interest in the transatlantic slave trade.