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Author

Curiale, Julian M.

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Book Review: Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

By Julian M. Curiale

The birth and maintenance of the Atlantic world hinged on the enslavement and commodification of African peoples, a process that rendered human beings into property and, in doing so, stripped them of their capacity to be recognized as people. Stephanie E. Smallwood's *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* recontextualizes the Middle Passage as a cold, almost scientific mode of turning human beings into slaves, into commodities meant to be stocked, stored, and sold as such. Smallwood intends to peer past the foreground and give her audience a closer look at the mechanics of slavery: an end-to-end view of the physical infrastructure, economic calculations, gross violence, and bureaucratic machinery that carried captives from the Gold Coast to the New World. The foundation of Smallwood's research is predicated on the distinction between documents and ledgers of the Royal Africa Company and the internal correspondence of officials and company agents. Methodologically, she reads these company documents against the grain in an attempt to uncover a semblance of enslaved African experience. Her book essentially argues that commodification facilitated the social death uniquely complete for saltwater slaves. *Saltwater Slavery* is a scholarly masterclass that effectively exposes the deeper implications of human commodification and the deprivation of agency, dignity, and humanity from those commodified, revealing how the Middle Passage and the African diaspora across the Middle Passage were built on the violent erasure of personhood.

Smallwood's primary aim in *Saltwater Slavery* is to reconstruct the Middle Passage, not as the mere transportation of the enslaved across the sea to the New World, but as a process of commodifying human beings. She makes it clear that long before enslaved Africans would see

the shores on the other end of the Atlantic, the system of enslavement was designed to break captives down and remove their humanity, reducing them to goods to be sent to market. Her use of the term “saltwater slaves” is poignant and suggestive of a grander scale of slavery that reaches across the sea—she highlights the anguish and terror-sustained nature of African dispersal. The impact of such vocabulary reflects a profound understanding of her subjects and speaks volumes about her ability as a writer to evoke such emotion in her readers. Smallwood juxtaposes herself against the detached, benign “political arithmetic” of the slavers and gives a voice back to those who were kept silent by oppression. By restoring the presence of enslaved people, she simultaneously solves the problem of how to write a history of a people whose commodification was meant to erase their personhood, and she does so with plenty of grace. The book's overarching goal is to trace the story of enslaved people from capture, confinement, subjugation, and finally commodification and embarkation to the Americas.

The backbone of Smallwood's research is the transatlantic records of the Royal African Company in the form of ledgers, invoices, and bills of lading. She employs their own ostensibly anodyne quantitative documents that reduced human beings to “cargo” and “units” in order to glean a more nuanced and humane view of events. Evocative historiography, coupled with strong exegesis, achieves a far more robust elucidation than purely analytical narrating of the past. Smallwood distinguishes between the company's public-facing ledgers and the internal correspondence between London officials, Cape Coast agents, and American factors—letters discussing escaped slaves, food shortages, insurrections, and deaths that never appeared in official accounts. By contrasting the relevant information, she is allowed to read them against one another, exposing the human stories that the ledgers purposefully left out. She further buttresses her study with supplementary sources of European travelers (de Marees, Bosman,

Barbot), Akan oral traditions, and the enslaved testimony of Equiano and 'Sibell. Additionally, she surveys the English fort where slaves were held, assessing the level of cruelty inflicted upon its captives by way of inhumane dungeons made purposefully to break the spirit. Smallwood's sources function as a means to trace captives continuously from African purchase to American sale within a single bureaucratic system and furthers the goal of re-humanizing enslaved peoples.

Smallwood's methodology and analytical approaches in the scholarship of *Saltwater Slavery* are, in large part, what make her arguments and assertions so compelling. Beyond a simple surface-level reading of historical documents, she reads beneath the text, seeing what they unintentionally disclose: starvation, resistance, despair, and trauma. Within each banal document of the Royal African Company's invoices, reports, or correspondence is a real human story, and Smallwood makes a deliberate effort to work in favor of that humanity. She points out the empiricism that slavers employed to keep slaves on the edge of: "conditions adequate to support life" as evidence of starvation and desperation; when captors report escapes, she finds signs of resistance (Smallwood 51). Through phenomenological analysis of the slave ships, she paints the gruesome picture that enslaved people had to endure in bondage and in crossing the sea. The horrid conditions of the slave ships were those of sensory deprivation, loss of temporal or spatial orientation, and often death without the basic human kindness of a proper burial. Once again, Smallwood elicits a visceral emotional reaction in the reader, one that they are not soon to forget.

Saltwater Slavery's execution is without a doubt thorough and detailed. Smallwood entices her audience with a gripping title and introduction and keeps them enticed throughout her book. Her use of strong gravity-inducing rhetoric turns the pages for the reader, while her eloquent erudition of the subject brings much-needed light and humanity to her work. Smallwood somehow manages to make a rough and dreadful topic, such as the transatlantic slave

trade, into a pleasure to read, like some morbid curiosity we are compelled to bear witness to. So much of the horror and evils that enslaved Africans were forced to endure have been either intentionally ignored, undermined, downplayed, or outright forgotten. Smallwood uses the power of scholarship to raise awareness and recognition of the plight of enslaved Africans, whilst providing some semblance of justice by disseminating that knowledge for the human beings who suffered along the way.

At its core, *Saltwater Slavery* is more than a history of the Middle Passage; it is an audacious act of recovery. Smallwood takes a system calculated to reduce human beings into commodities and, through meticulous scholarship and humane prose, forces it to yield back the stories it was meant to purge. She reconstructs not only what was done to enslaved Africans, but also illuminates what was taken from them—agency, dignity, the right to die properly, and the possibility of return. In doing so, she offers no easy redemption, no tidy narrative closure. The book ends where its subjects' stories too often ended: in fragmented silence. However, that is precisely where it draws its power from. Smallwood proves that writing history from the margins means sitting with what cannot be fully recovered, with wounds that never fully heal. *Saltwater Slavery* is a masterwork of a historian's craft, one that reminds us that the Atlantic world was built not just on forced labor and capital, but on the violent destruction of human beings.