

Reviews of Books

Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora. By STEPHANIE E. SMALLWOOD. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007. 285 pages. \$29.95 (cloth), \$17.95 (paper).

Reviewed by Saidiya Hartman, *Columbia University*

Stephanie E. Smallwood's *Saltwater Slavery* recounts the forced dispersal of African captives from the Gold Coast to the Americas in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries and, in the process, illuminates the epistemic violence necessary to conceive human life as a fungible unit. The many accomplishments of this remarkable book include its eloquent narration of the experience of the captives, its explication of the forms of reason that made possible the social annihilation of the Atlantic slave trade, its vivid description of the terror of captivity and enslavement, and its critique of the prevailing historical scholarship on the slave trade. "Historians have described the slave ship's lethal nature," writes Smallwood, "the same way the slave traders did: by calculating the number of dead . . . Mortality and its quantitative measurement have functioned as a key with which scholars have labored to unlock the secrets of the slave ship and expose to view the stories that played out belowdecks. By tallying the dead to measure the toll the voyage took on African life, we have made that body count the most potent symbolic measure of the horrors of the middle passage" (137). This quantitative approach to death fails to attend to the ways African captives experienced and understood mortality. Lest we mistake these incommensurable approaches to death as cultural, Smallwood makes plain that the issue is one of power—the power to make live and let die. The scientific enterprise of managing life was essential to the process of transforming humans into commodities. Merchants, Smallwood writes, "reduced people to the sum of their biological parts, thereby scaling life down to an arithmetical equation and finding the lowest common denominator" (43). Neatly arranged double columns of figures translated the captive's utter alienation from the norms of everyday life into debits and credits.

More than chains, guns and ships were required to produce captives. Life was negated through strategies of representation that transformed captive bodies into exchangeable units no different from other commodities. Mathematical reasoning—abstraction, calibrations of suffering, formulas of equivalence that transposed life into dead matter, rows

of figures that obscured destroyed worlds, and the seemingly passionless account table—"rationalized" (139) the economy of death. More surprising perhaps is the fact that the abolition of the slave trade did not result in the demise of this way of thinking. To our peril and at the expense of the dead, this mercantile logic or mathematical reasoning has enjoyed a long afterlife and continues to determine the character and concerns of historical scholarship. In this regard *Saltwater Slavery* marks an important shift in the study of the slave trade because of its imaginative rendering of the experience of captivity and its healthy suspicion of the terms of historical intelligibility.

Saltwater Slavery interrogates and transcends the conceptual limits of quantitative history through a critical examination of the making of "facts." Numbers are never raw data for Smallwood but rather emblems of social death, ways of producing expendable populations, and the countenance of violence, terror, and annihilation. For Smallwood, the ledger book functions not as evidence of the past but as a text of intellectual and social history. Such documents in her hands engender a host of far-ranging questions: If the violence of the trade entailed the transformation of people into commodities, then what modes of thinking and forms of representation made this violence possible? What are the constituent elements of commodification? At what point does the African become a commodity and the commodity become a slave? What is the role of markets in producing subjects? How has slavery defined the character of modernity? How does the status of the human commodity transform our understanding of capitalism and the character of the African diaspora? How can we think about slave cargo as a novel social formation without precedent in the communities that the captives left behind? How did commodified people fashion themselves as subjects?

Smallwood is not timid about venturing answers to such questions. The Atlantic slave trade, she contends, "marked a watershed in what would become an enduring project in the modern Western world: probing the limits up to which it is possible to discipline the body without extinguishing the life within" (35–36). If the guise of empiricism facilitated the "manage[d] . . . depletion of life" (36) and acts of destruction were licensed as trade, then shattering the veneer of neutrality and objectivity is essential to reconstructing the history of "the lower rungs" (30). While one of the significant contributions of *Saltwater Slavery* is its critique of the mathematical reasoning that produced the official account of the slave trade and consequently its willingness to cast in doubt the governing norms of the historical guild, the book endeavors to do more than that. No less important is the effort to disaggregate cargo into human subjects and social actors and to depict the lives and cultures created in the aftermath of social death.

How does one represent the stories and life experience of the captive? How does Smallwood accomplish this feat when so many others have failed in this endeavor? She strives to recover the voice and agency of the captives by reading against the grain of the archive. Informed by James C. Scott's *Domination and the Arts of Resistance, Saltwater Slavery* excavates the "hidden transcript" latent in the correspondence and marginalia of merchant and traders. This material "tells a fuller story—the human story of the Atlantic slave trade"—in contrast to the public transcript of quantitative history. The hidden transcript, Smallwood insists, "unwittingly reveal[s] part of the slaves' own stories" (5). Here the social historian overtakes the analyst of discourse and, fueled by the desire to recover the experience of the captive, treats the archive as a repository of as yet undiscovered and unheard voices rather than as the regulating apparatus that decides what can and cannot be said about the past. Along the lines of Ranajit Guha's "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency," in which he reads the colonial archive as predicating the will of the insurgent, so too Smallwood's reading of the hidden transcript discerns moments of captive subjectivity and agency.¹ Smallwood's effort to trace "African life within the commodity circuits of the Atlantic economy" (5–6) produces an account of the Atlantic slave trade that subtly reconstructs the captive's psyche, worldview, and networks of affiliation based on the shards of narrative, loosely wrought sentences, and tales of endless repetition. The detective, the storyteller, and the metahistorian are all summoned in the effort to unearth the trail of the captive's own testimony. Informed speculation, provisional assessments, and diasporic yearning engender an insightful and counterintuitive reading of the commercial archive. How does one find the stories of the captives given the "total annihilation of the human subject" (61) achieved by the process of commodification? Or rectify the "counterfeit representation[s]" (63) of capitalism? In reckoning with these questions, Smallwood straddles the divide between the reconstructive work of the historian determined to fill in the silences of the past and eager to hear the testimony of the dead and her own sober account of the Middle Passage and saltwater slavery as the space of the unnarratable. If the "terror of Atlantic memory" (207) cannot be integrated in a continuous narrative linking the past and the present, because an incoherent experience failed to produce a coherent story and the life stories of saltwater slavery did not yield narrative closure, then how does the crisis of narration or the impossibility of

¹ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven, Conn., 1990); Ranajit Guha, "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency," in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, ed. Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (New York, 1988), 45–86.

representation reverberate in the process of writing history? As Smallwood observes, “The individual stories of saltwater slavery form the antithesis of historical narrative, for they feature not an evolving plot of change over time but rather a tale of endless repetition that allows no temporal progression” (201–2).

Given this observation, what forms of historical narration are suited to the herculean task of rendering the Middle Passage? The triumph of romance, the rogue adventures of the picaresque, or the enduring temporal entanglements of the tragic? Is the history of disaster best conveyed by an unfinished narrative that is vulnerable to the violence that it sets out to describe? Or by a robust and hallucinatory account that strives to compensate for archival gaps by producing the coherent narrative that the captives themselves either failed to craft or produced only under the duress of needing “counterfeit representations” or critical fictions of personhood that would satisfy the demand to prove their humanity? *Saltwater Slavery* does not supply definitive answers to such concerns; however, it does provide an important example of historical scholarship unafraid to engage the politics of representation.

The Reaper’s Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery. By VINCENT BROWN. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008. 358 pages. \$35.00 (cloth).

Reviewed by Robert Olwell, *University of Texas, Austin*

Historians have long detailed the demographic facts of death in eighteenth-century Jamaica. Throughout this era neither the European nor the African populations of the island were able to grow (or even sustain themselves) through natural increase. In Kingston, through the middle half of the century, burials outnumbered baptisms among the white population by more than six to one. For Africans, the story was the same but on a far larger scale. From 1740 to 1807, Jamaica imported over a half million slaves. This huge influx, however, only increased the slave population of the island by about two hundred thousand.

Jamaica’s demographic difficulty was likely due to several factors. The sexual imbalance common among immigrant populations reduced fertility rates. Among Europeans, a fair share of new arrivals were “sojourners” who left the island. But the principal cause of the gap between arrivals and survivals (or survivors’ descendants) was death. The grim reaper’s scythe struck down Europeans and Africans alike and in