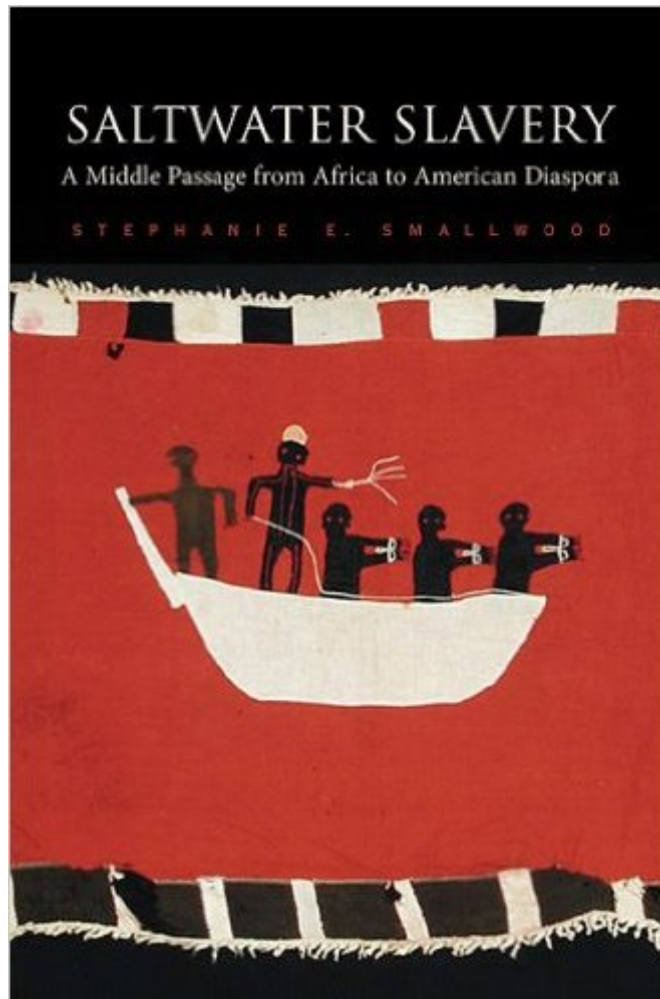


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Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora



Synopsis

This bold, innovative book promises to radically alter our understanding of the Atlantic slave trade, and the depths of its horrors. Stephanie E. Smallwood offers a penetrating look at the process of enslavement from its African origins through the Middle Passage and into the American slave market. Smallwood's story is animated by deep research and gives us a startlingly graphic experience of the slave trade from the vantage point of the slaves themselves. Ultimately, *Saltwater Slavery* details how African people were transformed into Atlantic commodities in the process. She begins her narrative on the shores of seventeenth-century Africa, tracing how the trade in human bodies came to define the life of the Gold Coast. Smallwood takes us into the ports and stone fortresses where African captives were held and prepared, and then through the Middle Passage itself. In extraordinary detail, we witness these men and women cramped in the holds of ships, gasping for air, and trying to make sense of an unfamiliar sea and an unimaginable destination. Arriving in America, we see how these new migrants enter the market for laboring bodies, and struggle to reconstruct their social identities in the New World. Throughout, Smallwood examines how the people at the center of her story—merchant capitalists, sailors, and slaves—made sense of the bloody process in which they were joined. The result is both a remarkable transatlantic view of the culture of enslavement, and a painful, intimate vision of the bloody, daily business of the slave trade.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Saltwater Slavery is an award-winning study of how the Atlantic slave trade worked to transform

human beings into commodities. Author Stephanie Smallwood takes the records of the Royal African Company and the correspondence between its employees and digs out their unintentional hints as to what enslaved Africans actually experienced during this process. It's not only a first rate piece of historical research, it's well written and compelling, which as a former graduate student I have to say is not always the case with academic books. I won't try to recount here all the things I learned about the slave trade, but there was one piece that has really stuck with me. Smallwood explains what is known about the spiritual beliefs of people from the Gold Coast and extrapolates the struggles they must have had dealing with death away from their communities and especially at sea, where there is no earth in which to bury people and no kin to carry out the rituals necessary to transport them to the realm of the ancestors. "In essence, a fully realized death could not be accomplished alone. Nor was it something one could attain at sea." This understanding makes it all the more haunting when we read a captain's account of the steady death toll on his ship the James during one Atlantic crossing. Although I knew that at least 20 per cent of Africans died during the Middle Passage, Smallwood's analysis adds another level to that horror: "For the collective of African captives remaining aboard the James, the death of one of their number left them with the burden of a tormented soul, trapped here among them because its migration to join the ancestors had been thwarted.

Smallwood's book should have been more interesting, unfortunately though the premise for her thesis is interesting she does not do a very good job of making her case. Her thesis is essentially that identity formation for African slaves in the new world really began at sea during the Middle passage. This is a good, promising thesis. She then simultaneously bites off more than she can chew academically while failing to actually explain what she does have a handle on. She begins by saying "scholars used to say THIS about Africa but actually it's THAT". Firstly what scholars "used to say" is barely relevant to her thesis, and this part of the book is a well intentioned effort to explain the complexities of life in Africa which are often overlooked or oversimplified the second part of this section, the "actually it's THAT" part, is so badly explained and full of specialist jargon that it comes across as though she just took every term she remembered from pre-colonial African studies and crammed it into her book arbitrarily. This is one of the worst written sections of the book, and as someone well versed in the subject myself I don't feel as though she actually understood what she was writing about, every late-20th-century revisionist line is forced into this section with no care taken to explain the connections between the facts being presented, why they're relevant to her overall thesis, or even precisely what she means when she references them which she does in a

way that is both hackneyed and vague. It comes across as though she expects the reader to not know enough about this part of the book to accurately judge what she's discussing, and to just be dazzled by her ability to bandy about unexplained references.

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