

**Food for Thought: Stephanie Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery:
A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora***

BEFORE YOU BEGIN—AND AFTER YOU FINISH

Most of the books written by scholarly historians are different from the textbooks you read in high school: rather than synthesizing vast quantities of information and conveying it efficiently, a book like *Saltwater Slavery* is a deep and extended analysis and meditation that synthesizes original sources produced in the past (primary documents) and builds an argument in a narrative fashion. So ask yourself, before you begin and after you finish the whole book, why did Stephanie Smallwood write this book?

INTRODUCTION

The Introduction is usually the most important part of a scholarly history book: in it, the author puts forward his or her argument, explains why his or her book is different from other works on the subject, and explains the structure of the book as a whole. Read this carefully.

What is *Saltwater Slavery* about? Which is to say, what does Smallwood state as the subject of her analysis?

What is Stephanie Smallwood's argument? Who is she arguing against?

What is "saltwater slavery"?

CHAPTER ONE: The Gold Coast and the Atlantic Market in People

[Note: In the various chapters, you don't need to read quite as closely as you did in the Introduction. There will be many details about West African society, or many accounts of correspondence between slave traders and their bosses in London, that are examples and illustrations. Read them, imagine them, soak them in, but don't feel you have to get all the details down.]

How did there come to be a "trade in people" along the Gold Coast in the period Smallwood writes about here?

Is 1492 an important date in this book? Is there another, more important date?

Why is there so much war in the region, and what is the relationship between "war, the state, and the consequences of captivity"? [20]

“The Atlantic market for slaves changed what it meant to be a socially, politically, or economically marginalized person.” [30] How?

CHAPTER TWO: Turning African Captives into Atlantic Commodities

How were African captives changed into Atlantic commodities? What does Smallwood mean by this distinction?

Why does Smallwood think this was a nearly inescapable process?

Smallwood uses sociologist Orlando Patterson’s concept of “social death” to analyze the place of “slaves in chains” in the social worlds of coastal Africa. What are your reactions to this concept?

CHAPTER THREE: The Political Economy of the Slave Ship

How do economic concerns—and economic interests—shape the actions of people involved in the slave trade?

If you haven’t already noticed by now, you should have: Smallwood almost never generalizes about “black people” and “white people,” about “Europeans” or “Africans” as single groups. How did divisions among different groups both shape and reflect the slave trade system?

If you’ve taken 14.01 or 14.02 (or even if you haven’t), what are your reactions to reading this chapter? How do we square notions of supply and demand with the experiences of slavers and the enslaved in the slave ship system?

THE FOOTNOTES: Yes, Read the Notes Too!

The stock in trade of the historians is evidence. What kinds of evidence does Smallwood use? What is available to her (or to us generally) in 2009? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the sources she uses? How does she make up for some of the silences in the historical record?

BEFORE PUTTING THE BOOK DOWN

Add in your own thoughts and questions and reactions. What questions remain after reading the first few chapters? What stories and anecdotes stick in your mind?

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