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## Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora.

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***Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora.***

**By Stephanie E. Smallwood. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007.**

Centering her work on a prodigious study in primary sources, historian Stephanie E. Smallwood explores the life and experience of the trans-Atlantic slave. Smallwood's *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* examines pre-colonial slave trade narratives, with the swift transition to a new Eurocentric mindset. She focuses on the invaluable stories and recollections of the trans-Atlantic slaves, told through slave trader primary source material. *Saltwater Slavery* approaches the trans-Atlantic slave trade through a "quantitative and textual" approach (4). She pursues a prominent archival body of evidence to help readers understand the trauma African slaves bore witness to during their voyages across the Atlantic. Smallwood astutely stresses the psychological trauma of the individuals from the Gold Coast in Western Africa, bringing their valued social history to the center stage of the trans-Atlantic slave trade narrative.

As a work for both academic and general readership, *Saltwater Slavery* conveys the drama and calamity of the transatlantic slave trade. Smallwood compellingly discusses the brutality of Cape Coast's selling and purchasing of human beings. In Chapter Four, she explains the unknown, or "anomalous intimacies," that took place along the drawn-out transatlantic passage by examining the social differences aboard the transport vessels. This demonstrates the cultural melting pot that came to the Americas (101). In the remaining chapters, Smallwood discusses the transformative events of turning Euro-African captives into American commodities, and their place in the transatlantic slave diaspora.

Utilizing a quantitative approach, Smallwood uncovers how the Gold Coast provided slaves to both North and South America. The sources would not only provide readers the opportunity to see the movement of slaves from their homes, but also a chance for their stories to come alive. The death accounts of slaves bring a heartfelt emotional thought while reading the text. Out of the thirty-four cases, Smallwood discusses during the chapter on “The Living Dead aboard the Slave Ship at Sea,” eighteen were cases regarding women and children. These cases demonstrate that half of the accounts Smallwood wanted to mention were the women and children aboard slave ships, hoping for an emotional narrative to arise from these statistics.

As Smallwood utilizes heartbreaking descriptions of the enslaved, her focus continues to stay on the negative spectrum of topics. In several places, the book concentrates on the abilities of slave resistance and the quantitative numbers of slave suicides. Smallwood suggests that suicides considerably discombobulated the economic system in place. “The man through his decisive act undid what the market quite deliberately had sought to produce,” says Smallwood after one account in 1687 (63). These negative themed examples help deliver a sympathetic message of the horrors that slaves experienced. Throughout *Saltwater Slavery*, primary and secondary source material help explain these negative stories, providing Smallwood a high inclination on slave life during the period of trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Smallwood utilizes several accounts from the slaveholders in Africa that hauled the enslaved to their death, both figuratively and socially. Several letters and correspondents by enslavers benefit the argument when viewing the rough life of a slave. The writings of Mark Bedford Whiting play a crucial role in Smallwood's work, especially when discussing the illnesses and diseases that ran rampant in congregations of slaves. While many view the various enslaver correspondents collected as irrelevant, their information benefits the narrative in her

book. One that African slaves were treated horribly, providing readers a look into their lives, even though there are few primary sources from the enslaved.

Dehumanization is a key aspect that is explored by Stephanie Smallwood. Her approach successfully conveys this negative connotation but also needs more exploration. While Smallwood does a fantastic job of pulling the reader into the subject by using artistic language not always seen in academic works, she could have explored other issues that were not as negative. Such as the rebellions and slave revolts aboard ships crossing the Atlantic. The horrific subjects need to be balanced with a more positive notion of slaves trying to earn freedom any way they could. While she did explore these topics briefly, further exploration would have merited better for the book.

As the winner of the Frederick Douglass Book Prize, Smallwood has given trans-Atlantic enthusiasts exactly what she promised. *Saltwater Slavery* sympathetically constructs itself into a monumental work to help students of history, both academic and popular, understand the sheer psychological trauma that over ten million slaves experienced while crossing the Atlantic Ocean. Overall, *Saltwater Slavery* conveys a positive message to its readers. One that suggests that even though trans-Atlantic slaves experienced horrifying psychological trauma, their spirit would not be ripped from them, offering hope and eventual freedom.

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### About the author

John R. Legg holds a Bachelor's of Arts in History from Middle Georgia State University and is currently awaiting admission decisions from eight graduate programs. He plans to continue studying the transformative events of Native Americans during the era of the Civil War and period of Reconstruction, with emphasis on the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862. With his love of photography within a historical realm, he self-published his first book, *Images of the Historic Southeast: The Carolinas*, with Dr. Niels Eichhorn, and is currently co-authoring a book with Dr. Carol Willcox Melton titled, *Through a Siberian Lens: A First-Hand Perspective of the Russian Civil War*. You can follow him on twitter: @thejohnlegg.

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