

Slavery At Sea: Terror, Sex, And Sickness In The Middle Passage

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Review

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Mustakeem, Sowande' M *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage*. University of Illinois Press, \$24.95 ISBN 9780252082023

Diving into the Wreck

For a century, docile mainstream American historians managed to dismiss race-based enslavement as the central cause of the Civil War—an amazing feat. And they also managed, for the most part, to avoid looking hard at the huge and long-lived Atlantic Slave Trade. But with the modern Civil Rights Movement all that began to change. One of its largest (and least acknowledged) triumphs involved demanding access not only to lunch counters, voting booths, jury boxes, and integrated public schools, but also to the long and inspirational black past. Before the 1960s, white citizens had largely denied or ignored the existence of African American history; only a scattering of intrepid pioneers, black and white, had pursued this hidden heritage with seriousness, depth, and integrity.

Since then, several generations of well-trained scholars, using new and old historical tools, have been rebuilding a more honest and inclusive national past. Unfortunately, despite the election of a two-term black president and the completion of the National Museum of African American History and Culture, much of this collective re-examination has remained inside the academic bubble. Among historians, both slavery and the slave trade have come in for decades of increasing scrutiny and debate, and scholars are slowly knitting back together these two distinctive areas of research. A new book by Sharla M. Fett, for example, reminds us again that, despite prohibitions, the profitable forced deportation of Africans to North America continued right up to the Civil War. In *Recaptured Africans: Surviving Slave Ships, Detention, and Dislocation in the Final Years of the Slave Trade* (2017), Fett quotes a speech by Frederick Douglass in 1858. He cautioned listeners that slavery and Atlantic slave trafficking remained deeply intertwined “—and the one is as hateful as the other. They are twin monsters,” the abolitionist thundered, “both hatched in the same

polluted nest.”

The great American painter Winslow Homer gestured toward these twin monsters in his 1899 masterpiece, *The Gulf Stream*, though white critics overlooked his subtle suggestion for nearly a century. Historian Sowande’ M. Mustakeem also sees this intertwining, as the title of her new book suggests. In *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage*, she rightly bemoans the fact that historians of the peculiar institution have generally picked up the story at the American shoreline, treating the horrific crossing as an inaccessible prelude, or separate research topic, rather than as the crushing formative transition that it was. Huge numbers never made it, while the innocent survivors entered lifetimes of incarceration in the slave labor camps of the Americas. “One cannot make sense of...Atlantic slave societies,” Mustakeem argues, without acknowledging that the “deep psychological scars...of the Middle Passage” worked to transform “bondpeople’s lives as well as the societies and communities into which they were imported.” (7)

Mustakeem follows in the wake of slave trade scholars Stephanie Smallwood and Marcus Rediker, whose important books appeared a decade ago, and she pays tribute to a long line of predecessors stretching back to W.E.B. DuBois. She acknowledges the pioneering quantitative work of Philip Curtin and the subsequent accomplishment of David Eltis and others in creating slavevoyages.org. (On the other hand, the four-volumes of slave trade documents compiled by the Wellesley economic historian Elizabeth Donnan in the 1930s go unmentioned in the text—and in many recent reviews—even though their republication by Octagon Books in 1969 offered inspiration to a whole generation of researchers.) From the start, the author makes clear that she hopes to get beyond, and in some ways offset, primary and secondary sources that have pushed to determine the numerical scope and economic profitability of the traffic.

“I came to explore,” Sylvia Plath wrote in her memorable poem, *Diving into the Wreck*. Like a determined swim teacher, Mustakeem urges us to forego endless wading around the edges of this tough topic and dive into deep dark waters, seeing for ourselves, as the poet put it, “the damage that was done.” Beyond grim evidence about omnipresent violence, sexual abuse, and sickness, she wants us to consider the massive prevalence of death at sea that is too often discounted. (The expression “thrown to the sharks” had its origins in this dehumanizing Atlantic traffic.) And for the saltwater survivors, she works

effectively to underscore the indelible and widely varied trauma—what historian Nell Irvin Painter has called the enormous “psychological hurt.” (123)

For Americans of all sorts, this difficult dive is becoming more accessible, and more necessary, every day. Not everyone will choose to tackle it in the same way. For those drawn to fiction, *Sacred Hunger* (1992), Barry Unsworth’s penetrating novel of a 1752 Liverpool slaving voyage, holds up well a quarter century later. For others inclined to follow a single voyage in detail, Robert Harms’ admirable work from a decade later unfolds the journey of an actual French slaving vessel in the 1730s. His book, *The Diligent: A Voyage Through the Worlds of the Slave Trade* (2002), does not appear in Mustakeem’s bibliography, but she makes good use of some of the jarring material from the later travels of a Rhode Island slaver, now well-documented by Sean M. Kelley in *The Voyage of the Slave Ship Hare: A Journey into Captivity from Sierra Leone to South Carolina* (2016). Whether you elect to take the plunge with Mustakeem or some other expert diver, the damage you survey may prompt you to think differently about African American history, the so-called Age of Enlightenment, and even the American Civil War.

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