

**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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Fall 2009

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Georges Adéagbo was born in Cotonou, Benin (West Africa) in 1942. He went to law school in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, and then continued his studies in France. When his father died in 1971, he returned to Benin. There, working in isolation from his family and society, he assembled materials into private installations and environments. By the early 1990s, his work began to achieve public recognition. In 1999 he won the Prize of Honor at the 48th annual Venice Biennale for The Story of The Lion. Adéagbo resists categorization: "I am not an artist, I do not make art, I am just a messenger."

Adéagbo's installations are created from items he has collected from different points of his lifetime. By juxtaposing one piece of his life with another, Adéagbo creates provoking stories with his work, which ultimately bring light and symbolism to objects that once seemed mundane. "I do not pick up just anything. All the objects I collect are part of the story of my life," he says. Adéagbo is an "artist-collector" who systematically organizes books, newspaper clippings, fabrics, sculptures and paintings. Out of this come large site-specific installations which bring out themes such as the relationship between Africa and Europe, the history of colonization, the drama of war and slavery, cultural cannibalism, religion, democracy, and art. His work transcends the geographic, social, and psychological barriers introduced by politics and intolerance in order to rethink our history with conviction that another's viewpoint might help us not only to understand the times in which we live, but also to see our past in a different light, placed into a context of relativity and dialogue.

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Some Questions to Consider While You Read *Caucasia*

1. In our discussion of *Slave Ship*, we deliberated about how and why the “Voice” is represented as white and conversely how whiteness is represented as a voice. We concluded that the privilege of whiteness lies in its inability to be seen. The invisibility of whiteness as a racial position prompts questions about the power, mystical force, privilege, and seeming ubiquity of whiteness. So what do you think Senna is trying to do in fashioning whiteness as a geographical body? What does it mean to think of this neologism, *Caucasia*, as a place, a home, a destination, a setting, or even a nation?
2. In class discussion, in the Childs article, and (for some of you) in your papers, we’ve explored the notion of “remix” in relation to the middle passage. The history of chain gang cages and the shameful rate at which blacks are incarcerated in America represent old and contemporary iterations of the middle passage – from the middle passage to middle passage 2.0, if you will. This kind of repetition with a difference seems to suggest that successors, in general, are inevitable. How might we view *Caucasia* as the *Sula* remix? How is *Caucasia* expanding on themes originally explored in *Sula*? How does *Caucasia* demonstrate that we have come full circle in this course? How is it also prescient – suggesting that “we ain’t seen nothin’ yet” when it comes to questions regarding race, identity, authenticity, and community?
3. There are many sections of *Caucasia* that are L-O-L funny. How does Senna teach us how to think not only about the serious and sober politics of talking about race in America but also about the pleasures of race talk? What role can laughter, fun, or the pleasures of reading the novel, in general, play in how we are being asked to understand racial matters and that race does indeed matter?

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1. **Read the assignment carefully.** You don't want to get a poor grade because you did not sufficiently answer the question.
2. **Never underestimate the power of a good outline.** Outlines help you organize and structure your ideas. In the long run, an outline will save you time when you write your essay and will help you remain focused.
3. **Pay particular attention to your introduction and thesis statement.** The thesis statement is the core of your argument. If your reader doesn't know what your thesis statement is, he or she will have a difficult time following your argument and understanding your essay.
4. **Read aloud every sentence that you write.** If you find the sentence difficult to read, or if you would be embarrassed to be caught speaking such a sentence to another human being, rewrite the sentence immediately.
5. **Your readers are as intelligent and as well-informed as you are;** they have already read the works about which you are writing, and do not need you to describe them, or to tell them when and where the author lived, or even that he was an author. Please do not try to convince them of the beauty, truth, greatness, or profound significance of the texts you are discussing. A vacuous opening sentence is inexcusable. Instead, papers should begin with a vivid, direct, complex, precise assertion, from which the rest of the essay flows inexorably. The best papers often are written by people who write their opening sentence AFTER they have finished the rest of the essay. An opening sentence should not contain an assertion of a universal truth; be wary of "always" and "in every society."
6. **A paragraph rarely consists of one sentence and always starts with a clear, focused topic sentence.** Most paragraphs contain at least three sentences. On the other hand, paragraphs longer than one page are not likely to be paragraphs. The first sentence of your paragraph, your topic sentence, should give the reader a good, clear idea of what the paragraph is about. Remember that topic sentences are there to help your reader understand where you are going.
7. **Make sure you move from paragraph to paragraph logically.** The weakest writers often fail to provide a transition from the end of one paragraph to the beginning of the next.
8. **"Truth is in detail."** Only assertions supported by specific, significant detail are acceptable. Make no generalizations that cannot be supported by referring to specific passages, phrases, words, in the text you are discussing. A paragraph should not consist entirely of unsupported assertions.
9. **A high proportion of sentences containing subordinate clauses** (not to be confused with run-on sentences) usually characterizes a thoughtful, interesting paper. Try beginning a sentence with "although" or "since" or "in spite of" (see No. 26).
10. **Each outright grammatical error** (case, concord, tense) lowers the reader's willingness to read further, as does each split infinitive and misplaced modifier, or the use of a transitive verb intransitively or vice-versa. If you want more help with grammar, please talk to me or visit the writing center.

11. **Commas, semi-colons, and periods function not as random decoration**, but to reduce the amount of energy a reader must expend to understand what you are trying to say. The proper use of semi-colons can be effective. No semi-colon should be followed by a sentence fragment.
12. **Avoid starting sentences with “This”**; since “this” and “these” are often used ambiguously, use them sparingly, and with extreme caution.
13. **Avoid starting sentences with “And” or “But.”** You do not want to write sentence fragments.
14. **Italicize the titles of books**; place the titles of chapters, articles, poems, and smaller works between quotation marks. List the books you have used at the end of the paper and refer to them in the body of the paper. Always cite your sources.
15. **Make sure you follow format guidelines.** Pay attention to what the assignment tells you. Are your margins correct? Has the professor asked for double-spacing? Have you numbered your pages if asked to do so?
16. **Proofread with care**; a paper should not have more typographical errors than pages. Normal human beings are unable to proofread their own papers. Make every effort to induce a friend or passerby to proofread for you. Abandon all hope that your inability to spell is an essential part of your personal charm. Sign up to meet with me; remember, my job is reading your paper.
17. **If you borrow other people’s words and ideas, give them credit**; otherwise you are plagiarizing. Cite your sources both when paraphrasing and using quotations.

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FIRST ESSAY ASSIGNMENT

DUE: Session 5, in class

LENGTH: 7-9 pages, typed, double-spaced

TOPIC:

After Jude's affair with Sula, Nel comes to the following conclusion: "Hell ain't things lasting forever. Hell is change." How does temporality (or time) function in the novel? For example, what does an enigmatic pronouncement such as Shadrack's whispering of the word "Always" to Sula mean to her development as a character? Why are the chapters of the novel organized according to a different year spanning from 1919 to 1965? Does time's changing *always* imply progress? How is Morrison encouraging us to challenge or question the promise and fantasy of eternity and continuity (i.e., "always") while also asserting its palpable influence on the lives of her characters? How is time simultaneously the bane and the delight of her characters' existence?

OR

What question still nags at you after finishing *Sula*? Answer that question using evidence from the text to make your case. You can use secondary sources too, if you like. But this first paper is not meant to be a research paper. What interested you most about the novel? Make an argument based on that interest. In other words, turn that interest into a point that you can argue in 7-9 pages.

FORMAT: Follow the guidelines as stipulated here: (<http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/>)

CRITERIA FOR GRADING

Each paper will be judged according to the following criteria:

1. Its demonstration of clarity, depth, and complexity of thought
2. It should be focused and coherent with transitions that help to unify, link and guide your paragraphs.
3. It should demonstrate ease with language
4. Its major ideas should be substantially developed.
5. It should make a cogent and persuasive argument. In other words, it should have a specific, thesis – i.e., the answer to the main question that you're hoping to raise, which you're posing of the text, which you think remains to be answered.
6. It should offer ample and solid evidence to support your claims.
7. It should include a title and a conclusion that not only summarizes your argument in one or two sentences but also offers me a sense of what work still remains to be done in light of the work that your essay itself has begun.
8. It should **not** be plagiarized! Plagiarism is cause for expulsion!

Plagiarism—use of another's intellectual work without acknowledgement—is a serious offense. It is the policy of the Literature Faculty that students who plagiarize will receive an F in the subject, and that the instructor will forward the case to the Committee on Discipline. Full acknowledgement for all information obtained from sources outside the classroom must be clearly stated in all written work submitted. All ideas, arguments, and direct phrasings taken from someone else's work must be identified and properly footnoted. Quotations from other sources must be clearly marked as distinct from the student's own work. For further guidance on the proper forms of attribution, consult the style guides available at MIT's **Writing and Communication Center** and useful citations links located here: <http://web.mit.edu/writing/Citation/index.html>

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BLACK MATTERS

SECOND WRITING ASSIGNMENT

This essay has three goals. First, you should reflect on the meaning of the early slave trade—to the people involved, to scholars who have interpreted it, and to you. Second, you should think critically about how historians make judgments about events in the past. Third, you should use specific evidence from historical sources to develop an argument.

After reading the questions and before writing, do some thinking. Try out an argument for each question; try disagreeing with yourself. Talk your ideas through with another member of the class, with your roommate, your mother, or the person next to you on the bus. If you can make sense to them, you're more likely to make sense on paper. Think of specific examples of events, statements, or life stories that would show a reader what you are trying to convey. Think through the supplemental questions that accompany the essay topics, but don't feel you have to answer them; build your own argument and your own essay.

QUESTION ONE

1. Is Stephanie Smallwood correct to argue that as “[a] product of violence, the slave cargo constituted the antithesis of community” (p. 101)?

Answering this question will require thinking hard about the meaning(s) of community. Don't just use the dictionary: what would constitute a meaningful definition of community to you? What is the opposite of “community”? How can the evidence that remains to us allow us to see community, or prevent us from seeing it?

QUESTION TWO

2. When was the Middle Passage over?

Answering this question will require thinking hard about the meaning(s) of the Middle Passage, and of what historians call periodization: what were the features of the Middle Passage that make it a distinctive moment? What were its continuities with what came before and after, and what were the ruptures and endpoints? Does the answer to this question vary depending on who you are talking about?

QUESTION THREE

3. Design your own topic.

If there's something else you'd like to write about, you are free to do so, but be sure to contact us ahead of time to work out the precise features of a topic that you can answer in the length this essay provides, and the time you have to write it.

HOW TO START THE PAPER

For class in **Session 10**, you do not have to write a finished paper. You do not even have to write a complete rough draft. What you should do is write the **first paragraph** of what would be an essay, and then, in **outline** form, give **examples or quotes** that support the argument that you have laid out in the first paragraph. (If you are inspired to write a full draft, you can do that, but you do not have to.) Bring two copies of the beginning work with you. We will spend part of Tuesday's class on peer editing.

HOW TO FINISH THE PAPER

At the beginning of class in **Session 12**, you should hand in a finished essay of **7 to 9 pages**. You should also hand in your original paragraph and any peer editing materials from the class the previous week. We won't grade those, but they can be really helpful in helping us understand how you write, and giving feedback if you choose to revise this essay.

In your finished essay, be clear in your view on the theme you choose, state it clearly in the opening paragraph, and use direct quotations from the original works to demonstrate your points. (The assigned readings for this course should be sufficient for building a good argument; don't feel you need to do additional research.) The paper should be double-spaced with standard margins; extensions will be granted only for good reasons explained well in advance. Keep a clean backup copy on your computer in case something goes missing. Proper academic citation is required, but you may use whichever standard style you know best. Adherence to standards of academic honesty is required; if you have any questions about how to go about your writing or cite your sources, don't hesitate to ask.

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CRITERIA FOR PRESENTATION EVALUATION

Name _____ Presentation Title _____

Presentation Skill	Poor (Score: 2)	Fair (Score: 4)	Good (Score: 6)	Very Good (Score: 8)	Excellent (Score: 10)
1. Maintains eye contact					
2. Speaks audibly and clearly					
3. Relates the presentation to Black Matters students					
4. Gives clear indication of the presentation's main ideas					
5. Gives ample and detailed evidence to support the presentation's points					
6. Uses visual or other aids effectively					
7. Summarizes key points					
8. Provides a memorable conclusion					
9. Provokes thought in the audience.					
10. Submits quality written, audio, or visual work in conjunction with the presentation.					

TOTAL SCORE divided by 100 = _____

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MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY**21A.114/21H.106/21L.008/21M.630/21W.714/24.912/SP.417J****BLACK MATTERS: INTRODUCTION TO BLACK STUDIES****Perspectives of Blackness: Time, Place, and Presence****SANDY ALEXANDRE, CHRISTOPHER CAPOZZOLA, THOMAS F. DEFRANTZ****FALL 2009****PRESENTATION INSTRUCTIONS**

WORKING IN GROUPS OF FOUR, CREATE A PRESENTATION THAT WILL EXTEND OUR EXPLORATION OF 'BLACK MATTERS' BEYOND THE PRESENT MOMENT. THE ORAL PRESENTATION should be a group project, developed in collaboration with all the members of each group. The group will assemble a fifteen-minute presentation on a topic from those below. The presentation should reflect an understanding of key concepts proposed by the readings and lectures that we have enjoyed together and build on those concepts, either in consent or dissent, with additional researched materials. Performance is welcome! The most successful presentations will include critical analysis, supporting materials, media examples drawn from beyond the course syllabus, as well as a performance of some sort.

The presentation cannot last more than fifteen minutes. This is a strict rule! Be sure to time your presentation and rehearse it carefully. There will be a five-minute response time for each group to respond to questions and comments from the class.

Before the presentation, the group should meet often to create a pathway through the material. On the day of the presentation, each student must email the faculty individual research notes for the presentation. These notes should detail the individual contribution to the group presentation; they should also provide documentation of the point of view pursued by the individual in the presentation. Your notes should document what you chose to present, and more importantly, why. You should account for the choices in the presentation and offer some context for the presentation from your point of view as one of the discussion leaders. **NOTE: Each presentation must include a mediated object as a trace of its event - a PowerPoint show, a short video, an mp3 file, etc. PRESENTATIONS WILL TAKE PLACE DURING CLASS TIME DURING SESSIONS 25 AND 26.** Each presentation will account for 20% of the final grade.

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PRESENTATION TOPICS

1. Film Response - PRECIOUS

Go and watch Lee Daniels's film *Precious* (2009), based on the novel *Push* (1996) by Sapphire. Compose a response to the film and working with your group, discuss the movie's relevance to questions we have raised or might raise in the future in the Black Matters course. Some questions you might consider: How does this film's narrative relate to themes raised in *Caucasia* or *Sula*? How are the performances evocative or explicit? What does the film offer as a depiction of black ways of being in the world? Of course, your questions and presentation should move well beyond these questions.

2. Film Response – DO THE RIGHT THING

Watch or re-watch Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989). Compose a response to the film and working with your group, discuss the movie's relevance to questions we have raised or might raise in the future in the Black Matters course. Some questions you might consider: How does this film's narrative relate to themes raised in *Caucasia* or *Sula*? How are the performances evocative or explicit? What does the film offer as a depiction of race relations in New York in the 1980s? Of course, your questions and presentation should move well beyond these questions.

3. Film Response – RIZE

Watch David LaChapelle's documentary *Rize* (2005). Compose a response to the film and working with your group, discuss how this film represents connections between popular culture and sexuality; men and women; innovations in African American performance. Connect the film's contents to the conversation that we had about Melville Herskovits and his work. Recall that he was the anthropologist whom we were introduced to in the beginning of the course through the documentary film *Herskovits at the Heart of Blackness* (2009).

4. Respond to Whitehead, Colson. "Satire on Post-Racial Living." *New York Times*, November 3, 2009.

Create a response to the Whitehead essay. Your response could be a satirical performance, a short film, or a bit of performance poetry. Or you could draw a time line that explains how we ended up in this so-called post-racial moment, and explain this time line to the class.

5. Walking Tours, Slave Ships, and Mapping Black Matters

Create a response to the walking tour of Harlem, the walking tour of Boston, and Stephanie Smallwood's accounts of the interior of the slave ships. Imagine a science-based fictional future of black movements. How will black families or communities be recognizably black in the future? How will blackness account for its many Asian, White, Latino, and Aboriginal elements as it coheres in a future of planetary travel? Your speculative presentation should build on accepted engineering theory and also include reference to Smallwood's accounts of previous modes of travel. Be creative and have fun with this one!

6. Your Choice

This is the hardest assignment of all! Based on themes raised over the semester, work as a group to create a presentation that extends ideas toward a future of Black Matters. Note Well: unlike the other topics, this assignment involves first choosing a topic, and then researching it and creating a presentation.

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