Sowande' M. Mustakeem, *Slavery at Sea: Terror, Sex, and Sickness in the Middle Passage*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. 2016. xvii + 262 pp. (Paper US\$ 24.95)

This is a difficult book to read. Difficult because of the unrelenting trauma it recounts, doubly difficult because it is so badly written.

Slavery at Sea focuses on the horrendous enterprise through which millions of human beings were captured, sold, transported to the Americas, and resold for their labor, adding usefully to a growing body of work that insists we recognize the ways in which the imprint of slavery's trauma began well before the enslaved arrived in the New World. It sheds light, moreover, on the organization, provisioning, and infrastructure of slave trading vessels; shows in passing the architectural and other modifications to ships necessitated by this most peculiar commerce; reveals how the workings of the enterprise were routinely disrupted by the vagaries of shipboard disease, slave insurrection, foul weather, and other factors; and graphically describes the barbarous rush of expectant purchasers in port cities of the Americas.

Sowande' Mustakeem's focus on the British slave trade in the closing decades of the eighteenth century is based on her examination of diaries and correspondence penned by seamen, ships' surgeons, captains, and merchants and their brokers, as well as ships' logs, cargo manifests, newspaper accounts, and testimonies before the House of Commons. Confronting readers with the trade's unspeakable horrors, she describes the arduous and often fatal conditions that the enslaved endured from the point of capture and their confinement and sale on the African coast, through the long seaward journey, to their landing and purchase in the Americas. While affirming the premium placed on young able-bodied males, *Slavery at Sea* affords special insight into the experience and fate of women, infants, children, the elderly, the disabled and ailing, and those deemed unmarketable—the "refuse." The book is filled with accounts of arbitrary and tortuous violence and sexual violation on the part of captains and crew, psychological distress, suicide and abortion on the part of overwrought captives, and vivid descriptions of infectious diseases. Mustakeem proposes conceptualizing the Middle Passage as a three-stage "human manufacturing process," involving warehousing, transport, and delivery, but this metaphor is fundamentally ambiguous. Asserting that the enslaved were at once *refined* and *unmade* by the Middle Passage, she never seeks to resolve these conflicting implications. Indeed, to equate the Middle Passage with manufacture, other than in a deeply ironic sense, stretches credulity. Manufacture, after all, implies a semblance of order, rationality, and productive accomplishment belied by Mustakeem's account. This was, as she herself recognizes, a chaotic system:

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fundamentally at war with itself. While it aimed to recruit and deliver fit, compliant, and capable laborers, the long delays in obtaining them, the selection of captives made available to buyers on the African coast, the environmental and health hazards of confinement, the constant and erratic abuse of slaves and their willful resistance all mitigated against fulfillment of these systemic aspirations. Enslaved workers-in-the-making, end products of the “manufacturing process,” arrived battered to market. Their mistreatment not only encouraged noncompliance, it often caused actual physical and psychological harm. Despite the conceits of the dominant, the enslaved could neither be wholly unmade from their prior selves nor refined to perform entirely as required by those they were expected to serve.

Mustakeem’s relentless account of this alienating trauma, her ill-conceived use of the mechanical metaphor of manufacture for making sense of the experience, and the book’s incessant reference to the bodies of the enslaved all serve to reinforce a disaggregated view of their personhood: bodies detached from mind and spirit, fatally uprooted from community. What this view fails adequately to consider is the significance of efforts on the part of the enslaved to “withstand the encroachment of oblivion and to make social meaning from the threat of anomie,” the ways in which, moreover, “a fleeting, makeshift community” could emerge even “amidst the chaos of the slave trade” (Vincent Brown, “Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery,” *American Historical Review*, 2009). Despite obvious reliance on Orlando Patterson’s influential *Slavery and Social Death*, Mustakeem fails to acknowledge this debt—as Trevor Burnard points out in his review of her book (*William and Mary Quarterly*, 2017)—and misses an important opportunity to engage the concept of social death in a more nuanced and critical way along the lines that Brown’s essay opens up.

Slavery at Sea makes for exasperating reading. Imprecision and ambiguity abound. Sentences ramble, their grammatical subjects buried beyond discovery. Quotations from source documents are oddly truncated and awkwardly placed. Words are often misused and infelicitous stock phrases overused. These sorts of failings reflect poorly on both the author’s undergraduate and graduate training and on the editorial process at the University of Illinois Press, plagued no doubt by industry-wide cost cutting measures.

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