Reflections on Captain Swinton's

Journal of a Voyage with Coolie Emigrants

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One of the thorniest problems I face in reading the literatures of slavery lies in understanding the relationship between a narrator's description of a scene, imaginative reconstructions by readers, and the effects a narrative achieves. From this complex causality emerges the political voice of any narrative. In antislavery literature such complexity preoccupies me as I work through a continuing stream of texts, trying to comprehend both the historical voice and contemporary theorizations. Usually the untangling that I manage comes only through years' worth of work and a cumulative appreciation. And yet what I look and hope for are those revealing textual moments, points that penetrate through an ever-cloudy consciousness and cause me to understand with a pang of revelation. Possibly this is a fault, for I know better intellectually. Understandings that arrive instantly bear great risk of representing fleeting, miscalculated, or ephemeral comprehension. The conceit of reader understanding is an especial presumption under circumstances of enslavement, with its deprivation of liberty, forced labor, and psychological and physical threats.

I felt this limitation particularly when recently I read Captain Swinton's *Journal of a Voyage with Coolie Immigrants, from Calcutta to Trinidad*, published in London in 1856. The use of the term 'coolie' here does not refer to Chinese laborers, as was common use in the United States, but is rather a generic term for Asian laborers, in this case Indians. The narrative relates the transport of Indian workers from their homes to Trinidad, a migration organized by a British colonial system that sought to replace now-emancipated African labor in the Caribbean with a new source of labor. When black Trinidadians refused to endure conditions in the sugar fields, the Empire imported more compliant replacements from India, China and elsewhere as bonded laborers. The

conditions these replacement workers suffered, however, were far closer to slavery than free labor. Reading through *Journal of a Voyage*, as a fairly experienced reader of the literatures of slavery I kept noting the narrative parallels and commonalities between the situations of indentured laborers and stories of African enslavement.

A leading commonality was the extraordinary difficulty and high death rates of transport from the Indian sub-continent to the Caribbean. Trinidad-born historian Ron Ramdin refers to this as 'the other Middle Passage' and some historians have adopted the phrase.[2] The story of the *Salsette*, a chartered ship that Swinton captained, exceeded by far the average mortality rates of eighteenth and nineteenth-century transatlantic mortality rates for African slaves. The *Salsette* embarked on March 17, 1858 from Calcutta, faced no especially bad weather or mortality due to an epidemic, and arrived in Port-au-Prince on July 2 of the same year. Of the 324 indentured Indian laborers who embarked, 120 died en route, a rate of one per day. As Marcus Rediker has pointed out, however, while a key issue, exclusive focus on horrific mortality rates represents a limited approach. He writes that death was only one feature of social terror and an element of a broad human drama. "How many people died can be answered through abstract, indeed bloodless, statistics" Rediker writes, but "how a few resisted terror and how the many experienced terror – and how they in turn resisted it – cannot."[3] These are the sorts of questions that I attempt to understand as a reader at this remove of over a century and a half.

The narrative is bare and horrifying. Jane Swinton, who accompanied her husband, copied it out from his diaries after his death the same year. Most of the 16-page

[2] Ramdin, *The Other Middle Passage* (Hertford, UK: Hansib Publishing, 1994); Tobias Döring, *Caribbean-English Passages: Intertextuality in a Postcolonial Tradition* (New York: Routledge, 2001) 7; Verene Sheperd, *Maharani's Misery: Narratives of a Passage from India to the Caribbean* (Kingston, Jamaica: University Press of theWest Indies, 2002) 79.
[3] Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York: Viking, 2007) 354.

tract, published by the Quaker social activist James Carlile, consists of a daily log of deaths. On the second day of the voyage, March 18th, for example, Captain Swinton records "An old woman died of cholera; she was rejected on coming on board, but eighteen men would not come without her." (5) This is the first death of the journey. In the two lines of print relating this death lies an entire array of questions. How did she contract cholera in Calcutta, since clearly she was ill upon coming aboard? If eighteen men refused to depart without her, she appears to have been a matriarchal figure within her extended family. Presumably these male indentured laborers brought their own family members with them. How did this first death prefigure to them their collective family future?

Elsewhere in the narrative, entire families come to an end. "Boy, fifteen, died; this completes the family of father and two sons, rejected at depot for spleen enlargement." (6) If they were rejected as unfit to travel, why were they permitted to board? Families come undone in the face of mass death: "23rd. A child, three years old, died from neglect by the mother." (7) Whatever human social cohesion they brought aboard steadily erodes and disappears. Repeatedly, we encounter the last surviving members of families, as on June 8th where the captain writes "Another man died; this is the last of another family, who said this morning he was much better, and really appeared far from a dying man." (10) Not only individuals die; families find their final solidarity in death.

It is the namelessness that continues to appall as the list of deaths continues, day by day. "A little girl..." "A little orphan girl…" "Two women…" "One infant…" "Another man…" "One twin child…" "A nice little girl, five years old, died…" "Three

Coolies died…" "One woman…" "One man…" It is a list of anonymity, of those whose names will never be known or are almost certainly unrecoverable in history. That reduction of humanity to anonymity strikes me as one of the necessary steps towards destroying public compassion. Captain and Jane Swinton, who in the wake of this tract's publication inexplicably continued to enjoy public respect, are almost the only named characters, excepting two physicians and a government official briefly mentioned when the *Salsette* reaches Port-au-Prince. Not coincidentally, these name-possessors are the only whites mentioned in the narrative, although the ship's crew were likely mostly or entirely white.

There is a racial dispossession from identity that happens here thoughtlessly and without effort. That reduction into a bald list identified by age and sex links this reform tract to the manifests of slave-ships with similar construction. They are cargo, denied either biographies or an opportunity for autobiography. In this scene of daily deaths, names become superfluities. It is precisely this disposal of identities and individual and family histories that enables the scene in the first place. These were the marginal and desperate members of mid-nineteenth-century Indian society, those who were for one reason or another dispossessed and had no hope beyond selling themselves into bonded labor.

As a reader, I am asking these barely-noted lives to perform a service from their sea-graves stretching over two oceans and thousands of miles. I imagine them rising to the ocean's surface in the form of revivified stories, telling the stories of their lives. My academic work takes me over historical terrains where terror and death pervaded, where stories disappeared because lives were demeaned and dismissed by a colonial hierarchy

of racial, gender and class power. Autobiography interests me deeply because of the genre's close, intimate, triangulating relationships with individuality, community, and social power. But how can we read Swinton's narrative as an autobiography of invisible and unknown subjects, especially where these subjects never speak? It is a difficult challenge. We might read the *Journal of a Voyage* as self-exculpation, particularly where Mrs. Swinton concludes the tract with pages of recommendations for improving "coolie ships" and a belated statement that "Had my husband been spared to land in England, it was his intention to lay it all before the Government" (15) Yet the identity-stripping of this narrative betrays such claims and identifies the underlying cultural superiority and malevolence, despite Jane Swinton's professed concern in presenting her now-deceased husband's diary before readers. When working with materials such as *Journal of a Voyage*, texts that frame a horrific scene but provide only limited clues, I find critical writing is the coldest sort of posthumous justice. My heart is with the impoverished, uprooted, exiled, and anonymous dead.

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