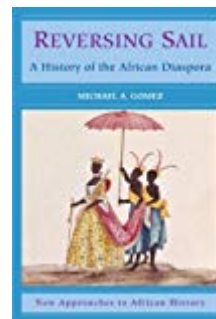


**Michael A. Gomez.** *Reversing Sail: A History of the African Diaspora*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. xii + 219 pp. \$63.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-521-80662-6.



**Reviewed by** Jeffrey A. Fortin

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*Reversing Sail* is Michael Gomez's contribution to the series *New Approaches to African History*, published by Cambridge University Press. As editor Martin Klein of the University of Toronto notes, the "aim of the series is to stimulate debate, to challenge students and general readers" (title page). Gomez fulfills this goal admirably by presenting a concise, well-organized and clearly written account of the development of the African Diaspora from ancient times to the Cold War.

*Reversing Sail* navigates the substantial historiography on the African Diaspora, providing basic definitions of key concepts and capturing the essence of the field. One example is how thoroughly Gomez defines the African Diaspora, "the massive movements and extensive relocations [of persons of African descent], over long periods of time, resulting in the dispersal of Africans and their descendants throughout much of the world" (p. 1). There is nothing new in this definition of the African Diaspora. Yet Gomez manages to boil down a complex concept into a few simple phrases packed with meaning. He introduces undergraduate students to basic concepts in the study of

the African Diaspora, such as identity formation, cultural exchange, the idea of Africa as a land of origin, slave experiences, the importance of race, confrontations with oppression, and the continued symbolic importance of Africa to persons of African descent. The "Suggestions for Further Readings" add to the text's value, making *Reversing Sail* an important resource for graduate students interested in the African Diaspora, or compiling an exam reading list.

Gomez stays true to the target audience by offering a simply structured text composed of two parts. Part 1, "Old World Dimensions," explores various aspects of the African Diaspora prior to European contact with the Americas. Beginning his study in ancient Egypt with the origins of the African Diaspora in 3500-1700 BCE, Gomez examines the dissemination of African ideas and their influence on the Mediterranean world, clearly demonstrating the indebtedness of ancient civilizations such as Greece and Rome to Africa and Africans. The next chapter explores the role of Africans in the Bible and how these roles and experiences have shaped African identities since the

writing of that tome. Of significance is the chapter's explanation of how supporters and critics of slavery used the Bible to defend their divergent claims. This well-known material is refreshingly presented by conceptualising the Bible "to be primarily concerned with 'people of color,' including Africans" (p. 20). Gomez offers fresh readings of Old Testament stories that include a range of interpretations of Noah's curse on his son Ham, also known as the Hamitic curse, which generations of whites used to justify slavery and prove the supposed inferiority of Africans.

Part 1 concludes with a brief examination of "Africans and the Islamic World." In this sizeable chapter, Gomez profiles the experiences of a vast population of both enslaved and free Africans from the Middle East to North Africa to the Iberian Peninsula, circa 650-1500. The "juxtaposition of the similarities and differences between this experience and that of Africans in the Americas" (p. 29) makes chapter 3 key to understanding the second, and larger, section of *Reversing Sail* by tracing the expansion of slavery--and its impact on Africans--in the broader Islamic world. Critics of the text might find this chapter a more suitable beginning for the study of the African Diaspora, rather than the first two chapters devoted to ancient history, but credit must be given to Gomez for his earlier discussion of the connections between Africa and ancient civilizations that will open undergraduates' minds to ideas few high school history courses deal with.

Part 2, "New World Realities," begins with the "Transatlantic Moment." Referring to Europeans as "an energetic group" that "burst upon the world scene," Gomez chronicles the beginning of this new era in world history by examining the interconnectedness of global developments" that "gave rise to the transatlantic slave trade" (p. 59). Religious conflict, international commerce and the expansion of European empires in the Americas laid the foundations, Gomez contends, of the modern world. In the next two chapters, the au-

thor considers the conditions of slavery and blacks' struggle against the institution, revealing the complex meanings of freedom for persons in the diaspora. Finally, the last two chapters capture what Gomez terms the "efflorescence" of Africans in the diaspora: "black folks have always maintained a dynamic and vibrant life of the mind" (p. 183). Desirous to reconnect with Africa, blacks could "return" to their cultural home through various intellectual pursuits, including art, music, and religion. Moreover, Gomez asserts that even in the modern era persons of African descent continue to experience seemingly endless motion, "fighting racism and colonialism globally" in a show of defiance "consistent" with the earliest slave revolts (p. 193). This defiance, Gomez concludes, will not end until Africans and their descendants are fully free.

That the book is a tour de force of decades of scholarship on the African Diaspora necessarily means that synthesis rules at the expense of detail. Although Gomez possesses a unique ability to effectively present six thousand years of history in a neat package, the astute student will have many questions about specifics. This is, however, the intention of the text. Students will need to ask such questions in class, or pursue answers on their own, guided by the extensive "Suggestions for Further Readings" sections located at the end of each chapter. This resource alone makes *Reversing Sail* a must-buy for graduate students and for any scholar whose interests intersect with the history of Africa, especially in the expanding field of Atlantic history. More importantly, given that the intended audience of the text is undergraduate students, Gomez's attention to the field's historiography provides the backbone for deeper explorations of a selected topic, either through in-class discussions or on student's own accord.

Overall, Michael Gomez reaches his goal: an accessible, though current and sophisticated text summarizing the historical concept of the African Diaspora. Critics may perceive his vast chronolog-

ical organization as suspect, or question Gomez's attempt to cover several thousands years in two hundred pages of text (one-tenth of which is devoted to suggestions for further readings), but these critics miss the point. *Reversing Sail* offers a succinct introduction to the study of the African Diaspora, including the historiographical debates that dominate this volatile field, for undergraduates and graduate students, as well as professional historians who need a quick reference or source for that title whose author escapes one's memory. Even as one title of an interrelated series of texts, *Reversing Sail* could stand on its own as the core reading of an introductory class; or, as an assignment integrated into more advanced classes.

*Reversing Sail* does not break new analytical ground, nor should it. The strength of the text is its presentation of key concepts, even some that are highly debated, in the study of the African Diaspora. Gomez connects the African Diaspora with developments in the global community, further emphasizing the importance--indeed, centrality in many cases--of African peoples to world history. With the release of this synthesis, Gomez has provided college-level instructors with an important component to survey courses on the African Diaspora and in world history, and a way for students to conceptualize an important topic. Both the teacher and scholar in me look forward to examining other offerings from Cambridge University Press's New Approaches to African History series.

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