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Michael A. Gomez. *Reversing Sail: A History of the African Diaspora*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. xii + 219 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-00135-9; \$63.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-80662-6.

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Race, Agency, and the African Diaspora

For many, the African Diaspora remains synonymous with the infamous transatlantic slave trade. In *Reversing Sail*, however, Michael Gomez shows that the integration of Africa and Africans into Europe and the Americas resulted in more than the exploitation of African slaves. In his new work, written as an undergraduate textbook, Gomez explores the duration, complexity, and agency of the African Diaspora in a way that lays the foundation for interesting in-class discussions of the issues raised.

Gomez examines the history of the African Diaspora by dividing his work into two sections. Part 1, consisting of three chapters, explores the “Old World Dimensions” while part two, consisting of five chapters, examines “New World Realities.” The work begins by exploring the place of Africans in the early Mediterranean world and Gomez uses this framework to stress two important issues. First, he emphasizes that both Africa (and Africans) possessed a history before Europeans arrived on its shores in the fifteenth century and, consequently, that the transatlantic slave trade that caused the Diaspora “was but an aberration” (p. 7). Gomez then addresses biblical Africa(ns) in chapter 2 to explain the place of Africans in scripture, interpreting figures such as the Queen of Sheba while also setting up the role of Christianity in the African Diaspora. In chapter 3 Gomez considers the other monotheism that influenced Africa and, like Christianity, played a role in the enslavement and movement of Africans: Islam. The overarching point that Gomez makes in these early chapters is that Africans were not passive peoples without a history, but rather

played a dynamic role within each of the contexts he examines.

From Africa, Gomez moves, in chapter 4, to the western Atlantic basin and the realities of the Europeans’ New World. As Europe expanded into the Atlantic, the focus of West Africa shifted from the north, and the trans-Saharan trades, to new coastal Atlantic trades, which, in turn, laid the foundations for the transatlantic slave trade. Here Gomez argues that several factors—religious competition and conflict, the development of transoceanic trade, the movement of sugar production westward across the Atlantic, and New World conquest/settlement—caused Africans to become the “principle source of servile labor, laying the foundations of the modern world” (p. 59). In the remainder of this chapter, Gomez creates a general history of the transatlantic slave trade that has a short section on the various coastal regions followed by a longer section on the Middle Passage. Changing scene but not focus, chapter 5 explores what happened to the Africans after they arrived, as slaves, in the Americas. Dominant themes within this chapter involve the regional variations of slavery coupled with the rise of race—a construct with important repercussions for the African Diaspora.

After recounting Africans’ experiences of enslavement, Gomez guides the reader through the development of the abolitionist movement, with the ingenious agency of slaves in challenging the peculiar institution providing an apt counterpoint in chapter 6. As in the previous

chapters, Gomez relies upon the existing historiography to create a general but insightful history of the struggle for freedom. Themes include the multiple meanings of freedom, the role of the family and religion in slave resistance, the return to Africa movement, and how, with emancipation, ex-slaves received little as many continued to live within a system of servile dependency. Chapter 7 builds upon the theme of freedom by exploring how, in post-emancipation societies, the peoples of the African Diaspora attempted to reconnect to Africa in an attempt to better define themselves. This reconnection, often centered on the Caribbean, involved migration, labor organization, religious development, and the growth of specific political, ideological, and intellectual traditions. The section on religion, in which Gomez looks at the Africanization of Christianity, the continuity of African traditions in the Americas, and the creation of new religions such as the Rastafarian movement, is especially interesting. The book ends with an examination of the achievements of the Diaspora community from the 1940s until 1970.

While a short work, Gomez provides the reader with not only an introduction to the many issues of the African Diaspora, but also with insight into the people who participated in, and are still affected by, the Diaspora. While at times the work appears broad, through his selective sections within each chapter Gomez still manages to elaborate upon some of the debates surrounding the Diaspora. Although an obvious strength, these disquisitions are at the same time one of the work's problem areas in that Gomez raises numerous questions that he never fully answers. While this approach serves the purpose of the "New Approaches to African History Series" of which *Reversing Sail* is a part, too often it also lends the work an unfinished quality. A typical example of this tendency involves how Gomez treats the issue of cul-

pability for the transatlantic slave trade. Work on West Africa during the transatlantic slave trade has shown that the coastal African middlemen and states involved in the slave trade dictated the nature of the trade and that European slavers needed to react to these coastal demands. From this develops an obvious question: who is to blame? Yet this is such a complex question, with such a multiplicity of answers, that students will need more than just a very general introduction to the issue to formulate their own answers. A second issue concerns Gomez's specific choices in terms of content. It would be easy to argue for or against what Gomez decided to include in his work, including the length and detail of various sections. Yet here, in my view, we must deal with the work that Gomez created and it is obvious that all of his inclusions were well thought out and clearly contribute to the larger goals of his work. In sum, while the above observations should be kept in mind by those teaching this text, the work's utility as an undergraduate text is unquestionable.

One of the text's greatest strengths is that it shows that the people affected by the African Diaspora were not passive participants. Rather they actively responded to their changing situation and worked hard to protect themselves, their families, and their friends in the new circumstances in which they found themselves. This becomes even more evident as Gomez explores the development of race within the second section of the work and how race redefined the place of Africans within the developing Atlantic world. As an undergraduate text, the work serves an important role in that it provides a general history while raising questions that a class could explore and debate. For those familiar with the history and historiography of the African Diaspora the text adds little, but that is not its purpose.

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