



Pablo F. Gómez. *The Experiential Caribbean: Creating Knowledge and Healing in the Early Modern Atlantic.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017. 314 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4696-3087-8.

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From its intriguing title, *The Experiential Caribbean: Creating Knowledge and Healing in the Early Modern Atlantic* promises exciting “sensory scholarship.” Moreover, the subheading, “creating knowledge and healing in the Atlantic world,” hints at the fact that the Caribbean is positioned not as a place of emptiness, loss, a place of noxious effluvia, nor as the proverbial “white man’s grave.” Instead, the author, Pablo F. Gómez, defines the Caribbean of what he terms the “long seventeenth century” (p. 2) as a space of creation, a vibrant incubator of knowledge production.

In an effort to portray the Caribbean and its Afro-descended citizens as legitimate sources of knowledge production, and to emphasize that this knowledge drew its inspiration from a wellspring located in the senses and “non-canonical” sources, Gómez teases his readers with chapter headings that both conceal and reveal. The seven chapters include titles like “Arrivals,” “Landscapes,” “Movement,” “Sensual Knowledge,” and “Social Pharmacoepias.” Each chapter advances Gómez’ argument about the significance of “black ways of knowing,” while also introducing us to more than one hundred *Mohanes* (a term defined by Gómez as “practitioners of knowledge creation,” p. 11) like Antonio Congo, Paula de Eguiluz, Bernardo Macayo, Francisco Arará, Juana la Campechana,

Mateo Arará, and Isabel Hernández. These *Mohanes* of African-descent harnessed the material and immaterial worlds and created their own worldviews.

The author’s recuperative telos is also evident when he states that *The Experiential Caribbean* “affords the ideas espoused by people of African descent the same treatment historians have previously given to contemporaneous sources created by Inquisitors, missionaries, learned physicians, natural historians, and natural philosophers” (p. 11). To this end, in his own words Gómez “made a conscious choice not to refer to historical actors in the book as *brujas*, sorcerers, witches, witch doctors, warlocks, or shamans.” Pejorative terms like *brujas* serve as linguistic markers that reflect the ways in which “black ways of knowing the world” were relegated “to sites isolated from ‘rational’ and ‘enlightened’ projects of knowledge production.” To fix these linguistic and epistemological biases, Gómez instead uses the affirming Amerindian term “Mohán.” In this sense, therefore, Mohán powerfully marks black ways of knowing as respectful and important.

That Gómez set out to do something revolutionary in this text is hinted at in his critique of historians of the “early modern Caribbean and the black Atlantic” who, he claims, “have largely

privileged economic, political, religious, and canonical readings of embodied practices resulting from the modernist Western frames of processes that ensued in subsequent centuries” (p. 8). By contrast, Gómez takes us, his readers, on a sensory journey where we learn about individuals of African descent (and Amerindians) who could subdue hurricanes; communicate with nature; smell evil; use cures consisting of chickens, leaves, and *barquisi* (red powders); use mats that could open and close when asked a question (an *esterita* or *escobita*); and cure snakebites, *inter alia*. This pharmacopeia was far from “canonical,” and it is thus unsurprising that African and Afro-descended ritual practitioners who harnessed these technologies of healing did so with the Inquisition and charges of being witches or sorcerers ominously hanging over them.

In arguing for blacks to be recognized as healers and knowledge creators, the author meticulously shows that they created their “sensory worldviews” in multiple spaces. Blacks healed in “canonical healing places like hospitals” (p. 65), in slave traders’ infirmaries, in convents, in their homes, or even in the homes of their patients. As a case in point, Lázaro, a black healer from Cartagena de Indias (in Colombia), along with working in the Hospital de San Sebastian, also “healed autonomously” (p. 65), while Paula de Eguluz visited the bishop Don Fray Cristóbal Pérez de Lazarraga “on an almost daily basis,” even “sometimes staying at the bishop’s palace for up to twenty days in a row” (p. 166).

Throughout this text, Gómez continuously argues for black ritual practitioners to be given prominence in discourses of healing. He makes this clear, for example, when he notes that Africans and those of African descent healed “in a world in which the wondrous and experiential dominated, migration was constant, and the need for physical alleviation was unrelenting” (p. 8). It was in this world that “black ritual specialists

most freely and thoroughly pushed the boundaries of knowledge creation.”

As they pushed “the boundaries of knowledge creation,” black *Mohanes* achieved notoriety and immortality. In addition, they reworked understandings of healing as they borrowed from West African, Amerindian, and European technologies of curing. Francisco Mandinga of the northern New Kingdom of Granada, for example, finds immortality between the pages of *The Experiential Caribbean* because of his power to heal using his sense of smell. By smelling herbs, Mandinga was able to know their “virtue,” thus enabling him to cure his patients (p. 106). Along with smelling herbs, Mandinga’s healing skill set included being able to suck wounds, cook water (which would be given to the sick), and detect evil within individuals. Mandinga was apparently an effective “sensorium” as he was summoned to the town of Tolú in 1655 “to treat several cases locals suspected were the work of indios yerbateros” (Amerindian herbalists) (p. 106).

Perhaps even more remarkable than Mandinga was Antonio Congo, a *Mohán* from West Central Africa who lived in Cartagena in the seventeenth century who was able to overpower a hurricane. Even though he was afflicted with leprosy at the time that the hurricane in question arrived in Cartagena, Congo was able to subdue it by doing nothing more than whistling three times. Although Congo’s diseased body provides an interesting contrast to the power and might of the hurricane, the breadth of his healing oeuvre suggests that his power to command nature came from “outside” of his body. Documents from evidence given during the Inquisition show that Congo was able to control nature (and the supernatural) in its various forms. As a case in point, he was able to use words to frighten birds and other animals and to communicate with spirits—even making these spirits dance to rhythms that he created on his *tamborico*, a small drum.

Gómez's source material is as rich, vibrant, and eclectic as the characters that dance across the pages of his text. He conducted research in archives in Colombia, the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal, and Italy. He consulted internet resources including the Ecclesiastical and Secular Sources for Slave Societies (ESSSS) and the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade database.[1] Along with these internet databases, his book includes historical data from primary sources like the Dutch explorer and colonial governor Willem Janszoon Blaeu's 1630 "Terra Firma et novum regnum Granatense et Popayan," volume 1 of the 1677 publication *Missione Evangelica al Regno del Congo* that was written by the Italian missionary Giovanni Cavazzi, and Pieter Goos's 1675 work *De Zee-atlas, ofte water-wereld*. Secondary sources consulted by Gómez include María del Carmen Borrego Pla, *Palenques de negros en Cartagena de Indias a fines del siglo XVII* (1973); George Brooks, *Landlords and Strangers* (1992); and Daniela Buono Calainho, *Metrópole das Mandingas: Religiosidade negra e Inquisição Portuguesa no antigo regime* (2000). To say that this is an impressive bibliography is an understatement. It is not just the fact that Gómez is able to move effortlessly among scholarly works written in different languages that makes the catalogue of works that he consulted breathtaking. In navigating these sources, Gómez also subverts the compartmentalization that characterizes the Caribbean because of its cultural and linguistic diversity.

My one quibble with this work occurs close to the beginning. In spite of his recognition of the power of language to marginalize and invisibilize, in his introduction Gómez refers to the men and women who populate his book as "immigrants." Even though he notes that they varied in status ("some were first-generation, others "second-, third-, or even fourth-generation immigrants," p. 10), the use of the term immigrants to label this diverse group unwittingly elides the violence that led to the presence of blacks in the Americas. If Mateo Arará, who was thought to have been cap-

tured and sold into slavery, was an "immigrant," then how do we label Juan Nicolás, a "Greek residing in Cartagena" (p. 26), or Don Alonso Coronado Maldonado, "a Spaniard living in the city of Panama around 1610" (p. 97)? By lumping these disparate groups of black slaves, slave owners, military captains, licensed surgeons, tillers, and woodcutters into the category "immigrants," there is the potential to paper over the complexity of the lived experiences of blacks—something that is the cornerstone of Gómez's work.

Perhaps this is a debate for a seminar of graduate students—the demographic to whom this book is best suited. As a teaching text, there is much that is valuable about Gómez's work. The depth and breadth of his research suggests that *The Experiential Caribbean* would work well in a course on history methods. This text is a classic blueprint on how to use primary documents and, in particular, documents crafted by *colonial officials*, to tell "histories from below." Individuals who are usually silenced in historical scholarship become the protagonists in Gómez's work. This can only happen through the meticulous searching, close reading, and chasing loose ends—meandering through swathes of documents that are more memorable for their journey than the findings they yield—that historians are often forced to do. Through Gómez's text, graduate students can see the full extent of work that goes into recreating historical narratives—particularly when those whose lives are being recreated are not part of the canon.

The richness of Gómez's work also means it is better suited for graduate students than it is for undergraduates. The prose in the book might be daunting or off-putting to undergraduates, particularly those taking a history class as a general education requirement. For instance, it would take a dedicated undergraduate to spend the time unearthing the multiple meanings hidden in the assertion that black ritual practitioners "show the power of black Caribbean communities in creat-

ing sophisticated and highly adaptable knowledge-producing practices based on the experiential that incorporated and processed a multiplicity of intellectual procedures of all Atlantic origins to produce effective classificatory and operative practices about nature” (p. 8).

So, what are scholars to make of individuals who could claim dominion over humans and animals, spirits and the weather? How do discourses of healing by smelling the virtue of herbs or detecting the evil that causes sickness, for instance, fit into canonical medical discourses about Galen and Hippocrates of Kos? Gómez’s *The Experiential Caribbean* has provided a blueprint on how to reconstruct narratives of healing from places and spaces that have been misread and invisibilized. He warns: “If we reject the material existence of Francisco Arará’s and Francisco Mandinga’s worlds, we risk reducing the creators of Atlantic bodily realities to peddlers of exotic or magic cultural artifacts who do not belong in rightful histories of knowledge-making” (p. 117). Instead, he invites us to see how “by creating scenarios in which references to invisible and inaudible energies could be perceived, black Caribbean ritual practitioners’ success occurred around innovation and the skillful shaping of new sensible realities.”

In the final analysis, the Caribbean that Gómez recreates between the pages of *The Experiential Caribbean* upends narratives that paint the Caribbean as an inert space where bad things are done to it (or happen to it and its people), typically by rapacious European men. Gómez’s work is a welcome addition to Caribbean historiography. Moreover, it complements important “sensory” scholarship like Elaine Scarry’s well-known 1987 *The Body in Pain* and Margaret Abruzzo’s 2011 *Polemical Pain*. Indeed, Gómez does something revolutionary in this text, as he shows that even in employing the standard methodological tools of historians he can do something fresh and innovative.

Note

[1]. This is now known as the Slave Societies Digital Archive (<https://www.slavesocieties.org/>).

[1]

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-teach>

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