

REVERSING SAIL

A History of the African Diaspora

MICHAEL A. GOMEZ



New Approaches to African History

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Michael A. Gomez

New York University



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Reversing Sail

This book examines the global unfolding of the African Diaspora, the migrations and dispersals of people of Africa, from antiquity to the modern period. Their exploits, challenges, and struggles over a wide expanse of time are discussed in ways that link as well as differentiate past and present circumstances. The experiences of Africans in the Old World, in the Mediterranean and Islamic worlds, is followed by their movement into the New, where their plight in lands claimed by Portuguese, Spanish, Dutch, French, and English colonial powers is analyzed from enslavement through the Cold War. While appropriate mention is made of persons of renown, particular attention is paid to the everyday lives of working class people and their cultural efflorescence. The book also attempts to explain contemporary plights and struggles through the lens of history.

Michael A. Gomez is Professor of History at New York University. He is the author of *Pragmatism in the Age of Jihad: The Precolonial State of Bundu* (Cambridge, 1992) and *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (1998). He currently serves as Director of the Association for the Study of the Worldwide African Diaspora (ASWAD).

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*In memory of the love of my mother,
Mary Williams Gomez, 1936–1999,
the first to make me see
the beauty and suffering of the African Diaspora.*

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Introduction

The dawn of the twenty-first century finds persons of varying ethnic and racial and religious backgrounds living together in societies all over the globe. The United Kingdom and France in Europe, together with the United States and Brazil in the Americas, are perhaps only the better known of many such societies, a principal dynamic of which concerns how groups maintain their identities while forming new and viable communities with those who do not share their backgrounds or beliefs. To achieve the latter requires a willingness on the part of all to learn about the histories and cultures of everyone in the society.

This book is about people of African descent who found (and find) themselves living either outside of the African continent or in parts of Africa that were territorially quite distant from their lands of birth. It is a history of their experiences, contributions, victories, and struggles, and it is primarily concerned with massive movements and extensive relocations, over long periods of time, resulting in the dispersal of Africans and their descendants throughout much of the world. This phenomenon is referred to as the African Diaspora. Redistributions of European and Asian populations have also marked history, but the African Diaspora is unique in its formation. It is a story, or a collection of stories, like no other.

As an undergraduate text, this book is written at a time of considerable perplexity, ambiguity, and seeming contradiction. People of African descent, or black people, can be found in all walks of life. In ancient and medieval times their achievements were in instances unparalleled; their economic contributions to the modern world have

been extensive and foundational, introducing agricultural forms and mining techniques while providing the necessary labor. They have contributed to the sciences and the arts in spectacular ways, but it is their cultural influence, involving literature, theater, painting, sculpture, dance, music, athletics, and religion, that has received greater recognition, with individual artists or athletes achieving extraordinary heights. Jazz, blues, reggae, and hip hop, for example, are global phenomena. Even so, the contemporary contrast between the individual of distinction and the popular perception of blacks as a whole could not be more striking. Blacks as a group are disproportionately associated with crime, poverty, disease, and educational underachievement. This perception is paralleled by the view of Africa itself, a continent brimming with potential but waylaid by war, poverty, disease, and insufficient investment in human capital.

The study of the African Diaspora can be distinguished from the study of African Americans in the United States, or from other groups of African-descended persons in a particular nation-state, in that the African Diaspora is concerned with at least one of two issues (and frequently both): (1) the ways in which preceding African cultural, social, or political forms influence African-descended persons in their new environment, and how such forms change through interaction with non-African cultures (European, Native American, Asian, etc.); and (2) comparisons and relationships between communities of African-descended people who are geographically separated or culturally distinct.

The observation that the African Diaspora is a complex pattern of communities and cultures with differing local and regional histories raises an important question: Why continue to speak of the African Diaspora as a unified experience? There is no easy answer or scholarly consensus, but there are a number of factors that together suggest a related condition. These are (1) Africa as the land of origin; (2) an experience of enslavement; (3) the struggle of adapting to a new environment while preserving as much of the African cultural background as possible; (4) the reification of color and race; (5) a continuing struggle against discrimination; and (6) the ongoing significance of Africa to African-descended population. With these factors in mind, one can state that the African Diaspora consists of the connections of people of African descent around the world, who are linked as much by their common experiences as their genetic makeup, if not more so.

This book is divided into two parts, “Old” World Dimensions and “New” World Realities, with chapters that proceed in more or less chronological fashion. Chapter One, Antiquity, begins with a consideration of ancient Egypt, Nubia, and Greece and Rome. Chapter Two, Africans and the Bible, recognizes the critical role Judeo-Christian traditions have played in the formation of African Diasporic identities and seeks to examine the historical bases for this process. Chapter Three, Africans and the Islamic World, centers on the roles of Africans, sub-Saharan and otherwise, in the formation and expansion of Islam as a global force. The fourth chapter, Transatlantic Moment, shifts the inquiry away from the Old World to the New and discusses the various dimensions of the transatlantic slave trade. Chapter Five, Enslavement, focuses on the similar and dissimilar experiences of slavery in the Americas. The response of Africans and their descendants to the disorientation of displacement and enslavement, their various strategies of resistance and reconstitution, and the ambiguities of economic, political, and juridical conditions in the postslavery period are the subjects of Asserting the Right to Be, Chapter Six. Chapter Seven, Reconnecting, concerns the first half of the twentieth century and the rise of global capitalism, and it considers migrations of those of African descent, especially involving the Caribbean and the American South. Such developments increased contact between diverse populations, contributing to the rise of Pan-Africanism, the Harlem Renaissance, and *négritude*. Chapter Eight, Movement People, covers the period from World War II through the 1960s, highlighting the interconnections between decolonization, civil rights, black power, music, sports, and writing.

As an interpretive history, this book is far from an exhaustive treatment of such a vast topic (or set of related topics). As part of a strategy to sufficiently treat the various components of the African Diaspora at some point in time, geographic emphases shift from chapter to chapter. Originally envisioned as part a series of short books introducing African history, the book’s scope is necessarily influenced by spatial constraints, and, in keeping with the format for the series, there are no endnotes. But in addition to African history, *Reversing Sail* can also be used for courses examining the African Diaspora as well as African American history. While not intended to serve as a comprehensive reference section, suggested readings following each chapter identify materials of most immediate assistance in the undergraduate search for greater depth.

I

“Old” World Dimensions
