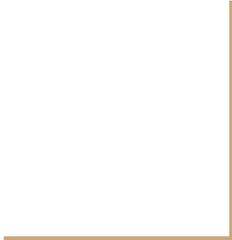


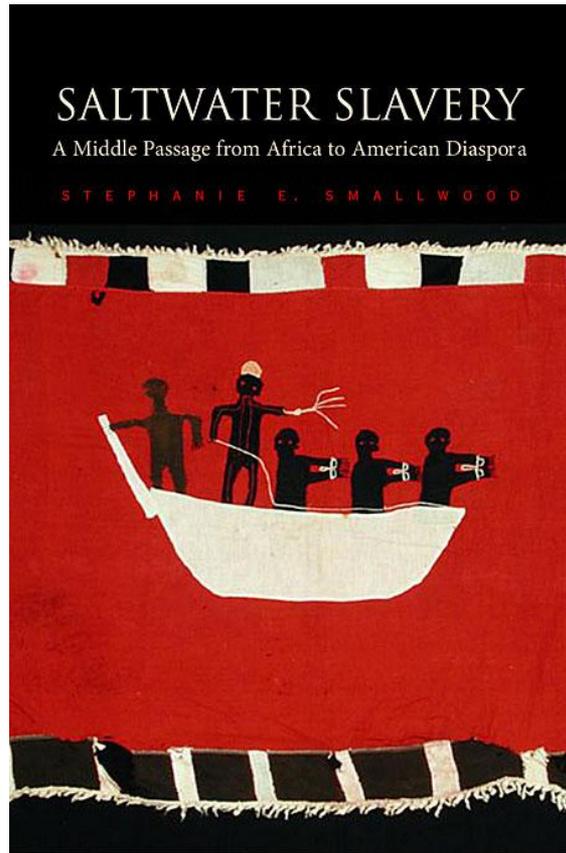


"Exchanging Our Country Marks"

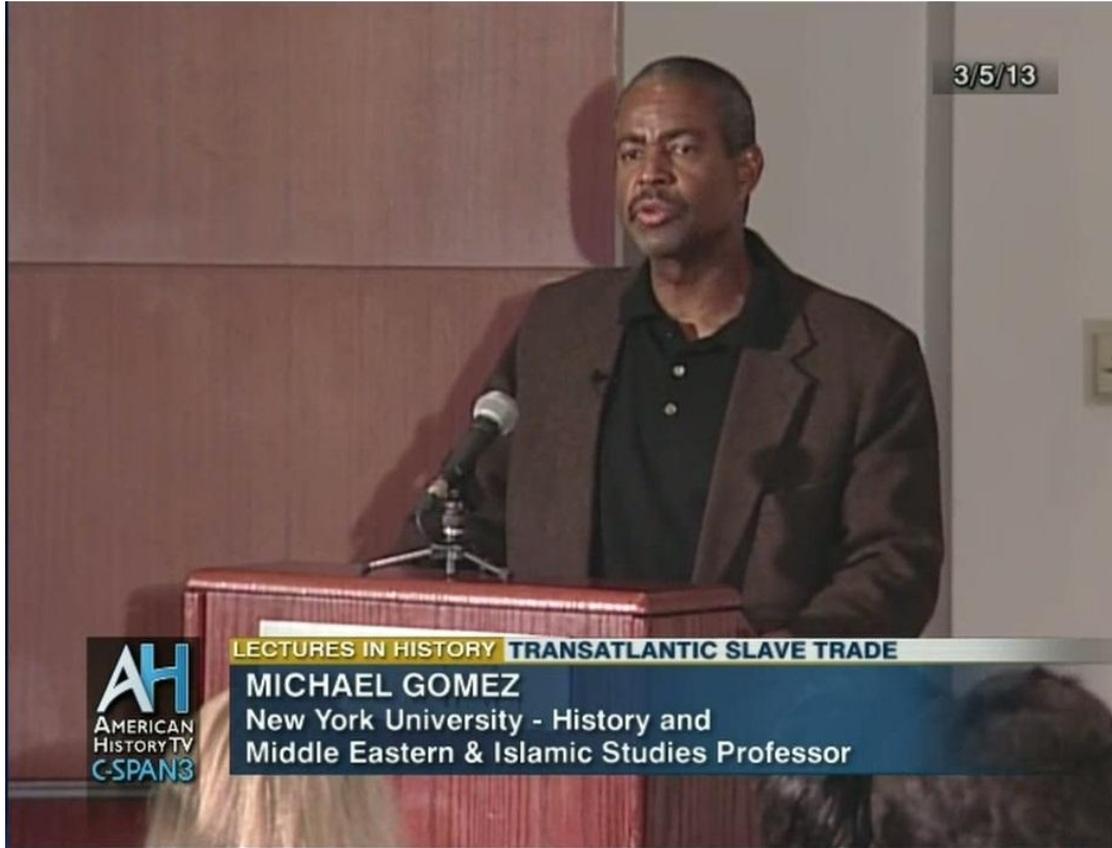
Week Six Lectures



Stephanie Smallwood



Michael Gomez



Michael Gomez is Professor of History at New York University (NYU) and is the founder of the Association for the Study of the Worldwide African Diaspora (ASWAD).

He researches African History, American History, and Islamic History.

He is particularly interested in ways in which the African Diaspora remains linked with the African Continent.

Smallwood's "Life and Death in the Diaspora"

- Slaves in the Americas "came to terms with the saltwater journey's haunting imprint on their communities, regularly reinforced by the slave ships' return to deposit still more saltwater slaves on these unfamiliar shores" (183).
- Some slaves sought to escape from plantations to find their way back to their countries by land or by sea. This was virtually never successful.
 - Others took their own lives: "Dying by their own hand at a carefully chosen spot near the water might bring about their migration to the realm of the ancestors" (186).
- Furthermore, up to 50% of slaves on sugar plantations would die within three years. Most slave owners had given up trying to keep their workers alive and healthy; if they work them to death, they just use the profits to buy new slaves.

Smallwood's "Life and Death in the Diaspora"

- Smallwood's key argument: "Survivors of the slave ship thus drew future migrants into saltwater slavery by the engine of their labor. Once converted into sugar (or tobacco or rice or any of the other staple commodities), the labor of those already in saltwater slavery cycled back to African shores to pull still more captives into circulation, thus 'buying' more bodies to sustain the chain of captive migrants that bound Africa to the Americas" (194).

How is one to cope with this??

- Smallwood argues that kinship networks were rebuilt based on shared experiences: "shipmates" treated one another like brothers, even if they came from different ethnic backgrounds. This is called "fictive kinship".

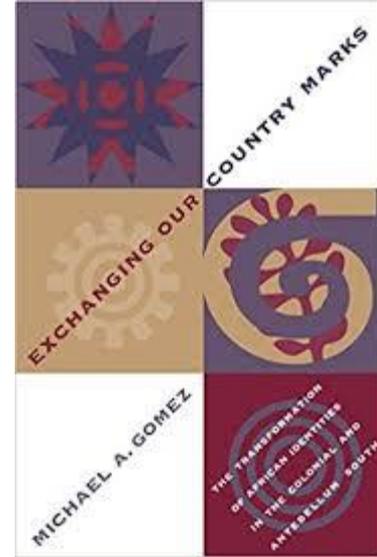
Smallwood's "Life and Death in the Diaspora"

- Smallwood notes that the "relentless stream of newcomers", what she terms "saltwater slaves", left this African immigrant community in a constant state of formation. And in time, "saltwater slaves" were looked down upon.
- "The stigma of being a saltwater slave was not Africanness per se, but rather the ignorance and inexperience that African birth symbolized in a world increasingly dominated by American-born, or 'creole,' slaves - a word rooted more firmly in the African diaspora in America than in Africa itself" (202).
- In short, Stephanie Smallwood portrays new slave migrants in the Americas as suffering a decisive *break* from who they once were. The Middle Passage and the experience in the plantation complex destroyed (or at least severely modified) their African identities. Forcing them to immediately form new ones.

MICHAEL GOMEZ VIEWS THE BIRTH OF THE AFRICAN DIASPORA VERY DIFFERENTLY

Gomez's *Exchanging Our Country Marks*

- "This book seeks to examine the means by which Africans and their descendants attempted to fashion a collective identity in the colonial and antebellum American South. It is a study of their efforts to move from ethnicity to race as the basis for such an identity, a movement best understood when the impact of both internal and external forces upon social relations within this community are examined. The analysis yields the following conclusion: prior to 1830, the movement toward race and away from ethnicity met with varying degrees of success relative to place and period, and in any case was significantly influenced by ethnic antecedents. . . . But whether related to ethnicity or not, classism emerged as the principal obstacle to race-based collective concept" (4).



IN SHORT, GOMEZ SEEKS TO SHOW THAT PRIOR TO 1830, BLACK PEOPLE IN THE UNITED STATES IDENTIFIED FIRST AND FOREMOST BY (AFRICAN) ETHNIC IDENTITIES, NOT RACE.

African American Identities

- It has often been argued, and Smallwood repeats this argument, that Africans in the Americas automatically shed their earlier identities and cultures and 'became' African American (or Black Caribbean), identifying based on race.
Gomez completely disagrees with this!
- According to Gomez: "The creation of the African American collective involved a movement in emphasis away from ethnicity and toward race as the primary criterion of inclusion. That is to say, an identity based upon ethnicity was often a practice both very African and very ancient; race, a social construction intimately informed by the political context, was relatively new and without significant meaning in much of Africa at the dawn of the transatlantic slave trade" (11).

African American Identities

- Contrary to what Smallwood says, "Africans and their descendent did not simply forget (or elect to not remember) the African background. Rather, that background played a crucial role in determining the African American identity. Put another way, given the importance of African ethnicity, it is inescapable that ethnicity had a direct impact on African Americans' self-perception. *The African American represents an amalgam of the ethnic matrix; that is, the African American identity is in fact a composite of identities*" (13).

Understanding this necessitates engaging in a historical analysis of how Africans in the Americas identified and thought about their condition. Doing so helps us trace the process by which *race* was chosen as a way of including many people into one community.

Chapter Two: "Time and Space"

- Gomez notes that approximately 481,000 slaves were brought to North America, only 5% of the total amount brought to the New World
- Most of these slaves were targeted at a few key port areas: Charleston (South Carolina), Chesapeake (Virginia), and New Orleans (Louisiana).
 - With regards to South Carolina, most of the plantation owners also owned plantations in the Caribbean, particularly Barbados, so SC was very linked to the Caribbean economy.
- Especially in SC, but also elsewhere, the black population was very concentrated near the port areas. While American planters might have owned fewer slaves per farm than their Caribbean counterparts, there was a lot of interaction and interexchange between plantations. This led to a fair amount of interaction between individuals of African descent, whether they are on the same plantation or not.

Chapter Three: "Warriors, Charms, and Loas"

- We must remember that slave owners and slave traders knew a decent amount about the people they were enslaving. Certain African communities had reputations that would be looked upon favorably or unfavorably by slave owners.
- Many planters from SC and Georgia sought to bring in slaves from the Senegambia region (modern day Senegal and The Gambia).
 - They identified these slaves as stronger, taller, and more knowledgeable of Rice cultivation, a major crop in the Carolinas.
 - Many men from Senegambia were identified by their "Country Marks", scars identifying them with a specific tribe or people. Gomez traces through the archival records references to these "marks".
- Similarly, planters in Louisiana preferred slaves from the Bambara ethnic group in Southern Mali; they were identified by possessing talismans, and this is referenced in the archival sources.
 - However, the Bambara had a reputation for being rebellious, so some planters avoided them.
- GOMEZ IS SHOWING US THAT THERE WERE TRENDS OF WHICH AFRICANS WENT TO WHICH PLACE. SOME SLAVE COMMUNITIES STARTED OFF FAIRLY HOMOGENOUS.

Chapter Four: "Islam in Early America"

- From the 1400s, Senegambia and other parts of West Africa became made up primarily of Muslim believers, and it was these people who introduced the religion to North America. While African Americans are now primarily Christian, this was not always the case.

Regarding Muslim slaves in America, Gomez writes: "First, their numbers were significant, probably reaching into the thousands. Second, Muslims made genuine and persistent efforts to observe their religion and even though the continuation of their faith took place primarily within their own families, in some cases they may have converted slaves who were not relatives. Third, cultural phenomena found in segments of the African American community, such as ostensibly Christian worship practices and certain artistic expressions, probably reflect the influence of these early Muslims" (60).

Chapter Four: "Islam in Early America"

Percentages of African Imported into North America from Regions Containing Muslim Populations
(Gomez, 66)

Senegambia	14.5%
Sierra Leone	15.8%
Gold Coast	13.1%
Bight of Benin	4.3%
Bight of Biafra	24.4%
TOTAL	72.1%

Chapter Four: "Islam in Early America"

- There were a number of slaves brought to the United States who possessed literacy. They were literate in Arabic, which they learned because they were Muslims. This was particularly the case with an Arabic Scholar "Omar ben Said" (1770-1864), who was enslaved in the American South, and eventually wrote an autobiography of his life as a slave in the Arabic Language.
- Gomez also looked through the archival records to learn the Names of slaves in Early America, and a lot of them had Muslim names, sometimes just spelled differently.
 - "Names such as Bullaly (Bilali) Mustapha, Sambo, Bocarrey (Bukhari, or possibly Bubacar from Abu Bakr), and Mamado (Mamadu) are regularly observed in the advertisements for runaway slaves" (68).
- Many enslaved Muslims in the USA observed Islamic prayer and dietary requirements.

Chapter Four: "Islam in Early America"

- It is important to remember that many of these Muslim slaves actually came from prominent Islamic families in West Africa. Many viewed their adherence to Islam as evidence of their superiority over Christian or non-believing slaves.
 - Some of these Muslim men might have been slave owners in their own regions.
- In time, however, Islam began to slowly fade within the Southern United States.
 - The slaves from regions with Muslim populations that were brought to the USA tended to be male, meaning the religion would inevitably change or disappear in time.

GOMEZ WANTS US TO RECOGNIZE THAT CULTURAL PRACTICES LIKE RELIGION (ISLAM) WHICH THESE SLAVES ACQUIRED IN AFRICA LIVED ON (SOMETIMES IN MODIFIED FORM) IN THE NEW WORLD.

CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS TRANSFORMATION TAKES A LOT OF TIME.

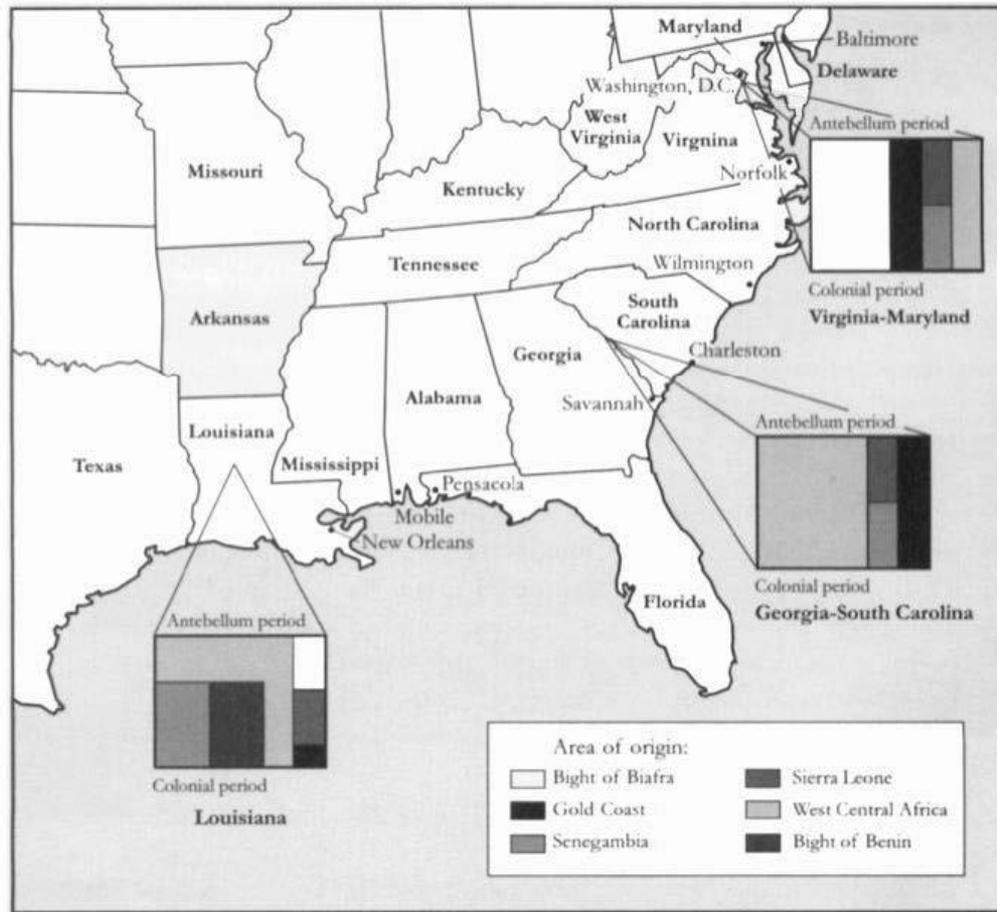
Chapter Six: "The Igbo and West Central Africa"

- About twenty-five percent of the slaves brought to North America came from the Bight of Biafra (modern day Nigeria), the home of the Igbo.
- Strangely, though, there were many states in the USA that did not want slaves from Igboland. Virginia was totally cool with the Igbo, which South Carolina did not want slaves from this area at all. Why is this?
 - Well, in South Carolina, the Igbo were considered "suicidal" (116)
 - Interviews with former slaves conducted during the 1940s confirm that many thought the Igbo could 'fly'

"Some hab magic powuh wut come tu um from way back in Africa. Muh mothuh use tuh tell me bout slabes jis bring obuh from Africa wut hab duh supreme magic powuh. Deah wuz a magic pass qud dat dey would pass tuh uddus. Ef dey belieb in dis magic, dey could scape an fly back tuh Africa" (117).

Chapter Six: "The Igbo and West Central Africa"

- According to Gomez, "The ability to fly was associated exclusively with native-born Africans, who were believed to possess supernatural power capable of such a feat. American-born or country-born blacks are never depicted [in the records] of having this ability or experience" (118).
- There even was a plantation in South Carolina called "Ebo Landing", which was a site that slaves claim the Igbo would leave and fly back to Africa from.
- Some testimonies recorded about the "flying Igbo" view it differently (and perhaps more accurately) as abscondment or a form of collective suicide.
 - South Carolina abandoned bringing in Igbo slaves because, in Gomez's words, "a self-terminating labour force was certainly out of the question" (120).
- While suicide in Igbo culture was severely looked down upon "many may have found [slavery] worse than death." "Flying back was a risk worth taking" (134).



MAP 6.1 Africans in the American South by Area of Origin

Chapter Seven: "Talkin' Half African"

- While it is quite clear that certain regions of the USA were seeking specific ethnicities for their slaves, barracoons and slave ships were still multi-ethnic entities.
- In line with Smallwood, Gomez does admit that "shipmates" was a form of kinship, and that their very survival of the middle passage was a potential site of future community building (165).
- According to Gomez, "The question of language is absolutely critical to understanding the transformation of the African into the African American" (170).
- African Americans began to speak English, but it became a hybrid of African languages and English: merging syntax, grammar and vocabulary.
 - Furthermore, Africans did not simply choose to "forget" their African languages, they were morphed, replaced, and incorporated into new languages.
- Some Africans in the USA also simply refused to speak English; this was quite possible in plantations where nearly all the slaves came from the same region.

Chapter Seven: "Talkin' Half African"

- Nevertheless, Africans in America began to speak English, not necessarily as a way to communicate with their owners, but with other Africans from different regions.

According to Gomez, "The restructuring of the African identity, principally involving a move away from ethnicity toward race, would have been greatly facilitated by the creation of a lingua franca emblematic of the African's altered condition in the New World. Cooperation between individuals of different ethnicities would have met with varying degrees of success or failure depending upon their ability to effectively communicate. One of the most important corporate ventures that Africans could have undertaken was to abscond. That Africans regularly crossed ethnic boundaries and literally took steps in the direction of redefining themselves is amply documented in the runaway slave advertisements" (180).

- Many Africans ran away, to form Maroon communities throughout the south, recreating their African communities. They had left Africa, but Africa had not left them.

Chapter Eight: "Ethnicity and Class in African America"

- It would take time for Africans in North America to "become" African American. And not all Africans in America wanted to "assimilate" and become African American.
- This was eventually a class rift between what were (in those days) called "Negroes" (Assimilated Blacks) and "Saltwater Slaves" (African born and identifying blacks).
- This concurs (to a small degree) with Smallwood's belief that Saltwater Slaves were looked at with contempt.
- Gomez notes, however, that the argument positioned by Smallwood is incomplete. While many did look on African born people with contempt or fear, many also held them in high regard.
 - When you think about demographics, this is clearly the case. First Generation African Americans are unlikely to hold their parents' generation in contempt.
 - Only in by the 1830s did the number of African-born slaves drop below double-digit percentages.

Chapter Eight: "Ethnicity and Class in African America"

- "To the extent that divisions between Africans and African Americans were grounded in class, it is probably that such divisions were more a preoccupation for the few who had achieved a higher status, as opposed to the masses of blacks whose concrete, levelling experience in agricultural slavery converged with elements of cultural continuity to reinforce the bonds between the African and her American-born counterpart" (195).
 - Gomez seeks to explore how this class division developed
 - With that being said, many African and American born slaves absconded together, lending insight to respect and cooperation between the groups.
- Gomez reads deep into WPA interviews to understand something of the relationship between Africans and African Americans.
 - Central to the story is how "capture" or "enslavement" as an action is remembered.

Chapter Eight: "Ethnicity and Class in African America"

- It should be noted that the way in which capture was remembered by African Americans of the 1930s *does not* historically reflect what actually happened. Rather, it is representative of how African Americans are invoking *inherited memory and identity*.
- Capture seems to always invoke the notion of *deception*, as though Europeans deceived Africans into getting onto the boats. Only then did the future slaves see that this was a slave ship. African Americans might state that they were lured with red textiles.
- It is as though Africans has no time to react; the deception is remembered as quick.
- Now, we know from our compulsory readings that this was not how it actually went. Rather, this is how the story was *standardized* among the communities.
- In fact, it is quite likely that African Americans, especially in the earlier years, knew that African communities themselves participated and profited from the trade. Nevertheless, *choosing* to remember the history in this way reflects a particular transformation from ethnicity towards race; Europeans are viewed as the deceivers, Africans were merely tricked.

Chapter Eight: "Ethnicity and Class in African America"

- "African Americans were essentially saying that they saw white people, whether from America or Europe, whether French or Spanish or English speaking, as one and the same. African Americans were saying that although there were differences in the details, the experiences of Africans of all backgrounds and regions were sufficiently similar to cast them as a common ordeal" (209).
- Furthermore, as the King Buzzard Tale (pg. 211) states, African Americans had dealt with the notion of the slave trade by separating the African from the European side of complicity. Europeans are viewed to have duped and tricked Africans. King Buzzard is remembered for betraying Africans
 - "Africans could not have felt betrayed so long as they held to the construct of an ethnically based identity. That they reached this point is undeniable evidence of movement along a continuum from ethnicity to race as the primary criterion of identification" (212).

Chapter Eight: "Ethnicity and Class in African America"

- Gradually, however, class divisions formed based on who was able to work in more skilled professions. These positions often were reserved for "acculturated" American born slaves, rather than African born (who often were given field labour work).
- As long as African-born were the majority, slave owners used ethnicity to distinguish preferences for certain slaves. Once American-born became the majority, this changed.
 - This often took the shape of linguistic capability, or even lightness of skin.
- This is the root of the oversimplified "house slave" versus "field slave" dichotomy.
 - It's oversimplified because they often worked together (absconding)
 - But there is a small amount of truth to it, because Christianity often spread first amongst house slaves, and mixed-race slaves were often given preferential treatment and easier work.

Chapter Nine: "Christianity & the African-Based Community"

- "The religion of the slave and the identity of the slave developed over time and in a relationship of mutual reciprocity. That is, the shift from an ethnically based to a race-premised collective personality was greatly influenced by the religious views of the African-based Community" (245).
 - Gomez challenges the scholars of slavery who claim that African slaves in America were immediately drawn to Christianity. There is an image in some portrayals of slavery that Christianity and conversion was forced upon slaves, and they immediately accepted it. Gomez shows that this is not true.
- In fact, according to Gomez, "If whites were not indifferent to the conversion of their slaves, they were positively resistant to it. Fears that slave conversion would ultimately undermine and weaken the slaveocracy fueled slaveholder opposition" (248).
- Gomez shows that, at least until 1750, the vast majority of African slaves were "unfamiliar with the new covenant" (248).

Chapter Nine: "Christianity & the African-Based Community"

- With that being said, during the "Great Awakening" (a Protestant religious revival during 1760-1790), a branch of more progressive white pastors began to preach to African slaves, treating them better than whites previously had. Some of the more radical white preachers even advocated for the abolition of slavery.
- Importantly, the non-conformist nature of some of these evangelical revivalist churches during this period allowed Africans to approach the gospel and the church on their own terms.
 - Christian teachings merged with indigenous African religious traditions to form a hybrid faith.
- Gradually, up to the year 1790, some Africans in America became members of churches (some of which, during this time, were even made up of multi-racial congregations). With this being said, only 4% of slaves at this time were 'official' church members (254).

Chapter Nine: "Christianity & the African-Based Community"

- By the end of the 1700s, many of these radical white ministers were replaced with conservative, pro-slavery preachers. They were, therefore, unable to recruit too many new black members to their churches on their own.
 - They had gradually trained some black ministers, who were loyal to the slave system, however.
- As the previous chapter noted, a class division gradually formed within the black community, and it is quite visible in this study of churches.
- Black churches split in two directions:
 - The first was clandestine, maintaining connections to African spiritual traditions and Christian teachings in a hybrid format, away from the prying eyes of whites.
 - The second was integrationist, emulating "white" models of church organization and preaching.
- Quite a lot of this growth of black churches were in urban areas, where most of the "free blacks" lived.

Chapter Nine: "Christianity & the African-Based Community"

- The fact that many of these urban churches, especially the clandestine kind, were anti-slavery and run by free-blacks made whites feel threatened.
 - Some slave insurrections, such as that of Denmark Vesey (1822) and the prophet Nat Turner (1831) claimed God's inspiration to rise up against slavery.
- "That the Christian faith and the Bible could be used as tools of revolt was totally unacceptable to the slaveocracy; swift and decisive measures had to be taken to decouple Christianity from the just war. The South's answer was to seize control of black religious life. Blacks, whether enslaved or free, could no longer lawfully assemble without the supervision of whites" (257).
 - In a lot of ways, it was too late. Black Christians were beginning to identify with stories from the Old Testament of escapes from slavery in Egypt and other appropriate parables. They completely rejected the slaveholder version of Christianity, which was all about obeying one's master, not one's maker.

Chapter Nine: "Christianity & the African-Based Community"

- With that being said, it is estimated that only 22% of slaves were Christians when the US Civil War began (1861). That is actually a small amount of people, but it was a very influential group of people.
- We must remember, though, that the fact that 78% of people weren't Christians does not mean that they were practicing African religions. Some were simply non-religious.
- Gomez's summary: "Africans and their descendants, then, were not immediately immersed in the tenets of Christianity upon arriving on North American shores. There were few whites qualified for or interested in such a mission. Rather, blacks throughout the eighteenth century arrived at an understanding of the religion via circuitous means and in small numbers, usually in contravention of the expressed wishes of slaveholders in general. In stark contrast to the model of coercion, those blacks who converted to the religion did so of their own volition. They did so, however, after the religion had itself undergone a conversion, by which it became useful to the slave's physical and psychological struggle to be fully human" (263).

Chapter Nine: "Christianity & the African-Based Community"

- This conversion led to a class division, and it was often along the lines of continuity of African religious symbolism.
- The Ring Shout was gradually introduced as a central part of Christianity. The methods and symbolism remained the same, but the direction of prayer changed from African gods to Jesus Christ, and from Africa to heaven (267).
 - Some of the members of black churches overseen by whites were disgusted by the ring shout. "For the elite, the ritual was a vivid and unmistakable reminder of their African heritage, an origin they earnestly sought to forget. Black clergymen in urban areas, whose congregations were substantially made up of free persons of color, were particularly sensitive to anything associated with heathenism" (269).
- Because of the Ring Shout's ubiquity throughout many West African cultures, it was instrumental not just in bringing Africans into Christianity, but also to a move away from ethnic towards racial identification. The same applied to river baptism, as well as the notion of a high god and preachers (griots).