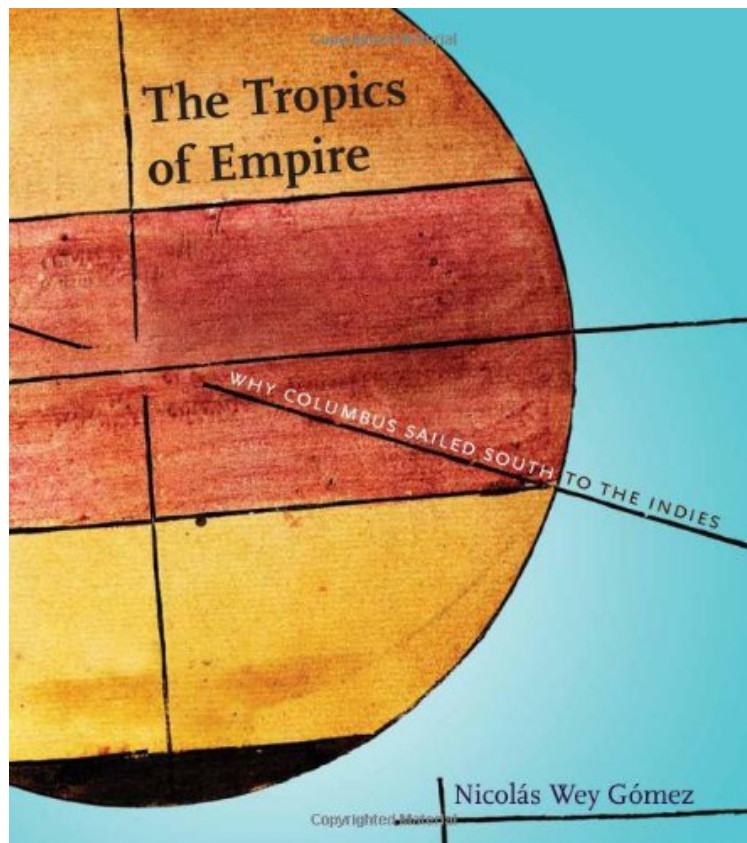


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## The Tropics of Empire: Why Columbus Sailed South to the Indies (Transformations: Studies in the History of Science and Technology)

*Nicols Wey Gmez*

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**Nicols Wey Gmez : The Tropics of Empire: Why Columbus Sailed South to the Indies (Transformations: Studies in the History of Science and Technology)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Tropics of Empire: Why Columbus Sailed South to the Indies (Transformations: Studies in the History of Science and Technology):

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. A gorgeous and crucial bookBy Diana WilsonAll the scholarship on Columbus that preceded Tropics of Empire came to seem limited after publication of this book, a gigantic study that explores concepts of latitude as well as attitudewhat drove the explorer to sail south. Columbus carried with him ideas and practices of an emerging nation state, Fernando and Isabels Spain, that would come to be regarded as colonialist. Columbus assumptions about the nature of placeshabitable or inhabitable---were forged both in the late 15th-century climate and in his reading of Aristotle, Ptolemy, and Pierre dAilly. This is a magnificent book by a superb scholar that belongs in the library of anyone interested in the discovery of America.0 of 8 people found the following review helpful. Long Way to Surf for a Discovery ChannelBy DENNIS ROHATYNTThe author writes: " . . . for obvious

reasons . . . Columbus preferred to attribute to the lands he had discovered a temperatenessthat in every way alluded to the general perfection of Eden" (224). In other words, he got lost, lucked out, then made the best of it.Likewise, " . . . even as the explorer Columbus saw himself southing through marvelous suburbs of a miraculous Eden, the colonizerColumbus would continue to see, and to treat, its peoples as the childish or monstrous inhabitants at the mouth of Hell" (434). Thus,as Montaigne said a century later, "they don't wear britches": they're naked and unashamed, so they must all be devils, Satan's tools. Every sentence in this brick of a book is like that: clumsy, verbose, stuffed with pedantry, and flatulent. The simplest points get statedin the most complicated, roundabout way, Trivialities are conflated with profundity. And everything Columbus did is part of a plan, or stems from a world-view which is oppressive yet in its own way consistent, or at least consistent with European aims (settlement, enslavement, conquest) and vile racist mythology. The denunciation may be accurate, but the plan was botched,if there ever was one. By making the whole thing seem foreordained, Gomez converts Catholicism into Calvinism, as if foreseeingthe Reformation. By imposing a telos where there was only greed, or avarice and ambition, Gomez gives Columbus too much creditfor being the devil himself, and pays little or no attention to the vagaries of nature, as opposed to a priori rules, principles, systems.For all of his erudition, Gomez would benefit from reading Machiavelli on fortune, Thucydides on the relation between chance andfate, or Nick Herbert's reliable intro. to quantum mechanics. Instead, he gives himself entirely too much "latitude" and ends up onthe beach, alongside his own white (multi-cultural) whale. Next time, pick a destination, but avoid PC, plotting and predestination.Get rid of Aristotle, Albertus Magnus, and even the great Las Casas (an anachnism, in this casas). Write about what happened,not what you misinterpreted. And do get rid of all that excess verbal baggage: as Mies van der Rohe wrote so well, less is more.

A radical revision of the geographical history of the discovery of the Americas that links Columbus's southbound route with colonialism, slavery, and today's divide between the industrialized North and the developing South.Everyone knows that in 1492 Christopher Columbus sailed west across the Atlantic, seeking a new route to the East. Few note, however, that Columbus's intention was also to sail south, to the tropics. In *The Tropics of Empire*, Nicols Wey Gmez rewrites the geographical history of the discovery of the Americas, casting it as part of Europe's reawakening to the natural and human resources of the South. Wey Gmez shows that Columbus shared in a scientific and technical tradition that linked terrestrial latitude to the nature of places, and that he drew a highly consequential distinction between the higher, cooler latitudes of Mediterranean Europe and the globe's lower, hotter latitudes. The legacy of Columbus's assumptions, Wey Gmez contends, ranges from colonialism and slavery in the early Caribbean to the present divide between the industrialized North and the developing South. This distinction between North and South allowed Columbus to believe not only that he was heading toward the largest and richest lands on the globe but also that the people he would encounter there were bound to possess a nature (whether "childish" or "monstrous") that seemed to justify rendering them Europe's subjects or slaves. The political lessons Columbus drew from this distinction provided legitimacy to a process of territorial expansion that was increasingly being construed as the discovery of the vast and unexpectedly productive "torrid zone." *The Tropics of Empire* investigates the complicated nexus between place and colonialism in Columbus's invention of the American tropics. It tells the story of a culture intent on remaining the moral center of an expanding geography that was slowly relegating Europe to the northern fringe of the globe. Wey Gmez draws on sources that include official debates over Columbus's proposal to the Spanish crown, Columbus's own writings and annotations, and accounts by early biographers. *The Tropics of Empire* is illustrated by color reproductions of period maps that make vivid the geographical conceptions of Columbus and his contemporaries.Nicols Wey Gmez is Assistant Professor of Hispanic Studies at Brown University.

In this challenging book, Nicols Wey Gmez proves something everyone thought was impossible: there are useful new things to say about Columbus. (Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, Department of History, Tufts University)The *Tropics of Empire* is an extraordinary work of history, learned, imaginative, and immensely revealing. Nicols Wey Gmez recreates the complex and now forgotten world of cosmological and geographical learning within which Columbus planned his voyage to Asia. Through close reading of a vast range of sources he shows us exactly why Columbus thought he could sail south, as well as west, to Asia, and how he envisioned the material and human world that he would find there. Wey Gmez makes clear that Columbus's wide reading and speculative thinking had dramatic consequences in the real world, not only for him but for the inhabitants of the Americas. (Anthony T. Grafton, Henry Putnam University Professor of History, Princeton University)This work is a significant milestone in the study of Christopher Columbus, his psyche, and the academic pursuit of history in general. (Clinton R. Long, Fordham University *The European Legacy*)[A] hefty and impressive study executed with erudition, skill and considerable insight... Those who believed, following the Columbus quincentennial, that there was little left to say about a Genoese sailor's extraordinary adventures overseas will now be convinced otherwise. (Neil Safier *American Scientist*) *The Tropics of Empire* deserves to become a landmark in the study of the inaugural stirrings of European overseas expansion. (Gabriel Paquette *The Times Literary Supplement*)Mr. [Wey] Gmez's volume... offer[s] tremendous insight into the prevailing medieval understanding of the shape of the world Columbus encountered and absorbed. (Alfred W.

Crosby The New York Sun)About the AuthorNicols Wey Gmez is Professor of History at the California Institute of Technology.