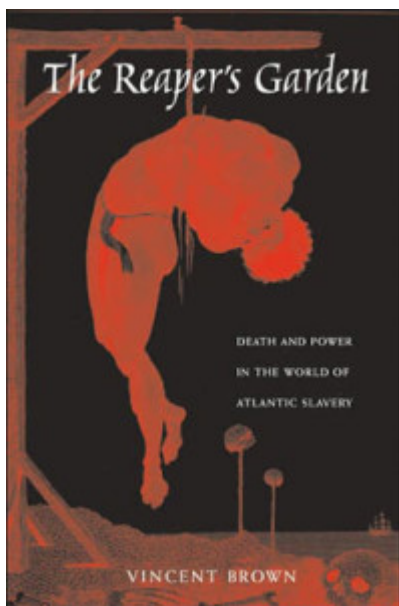
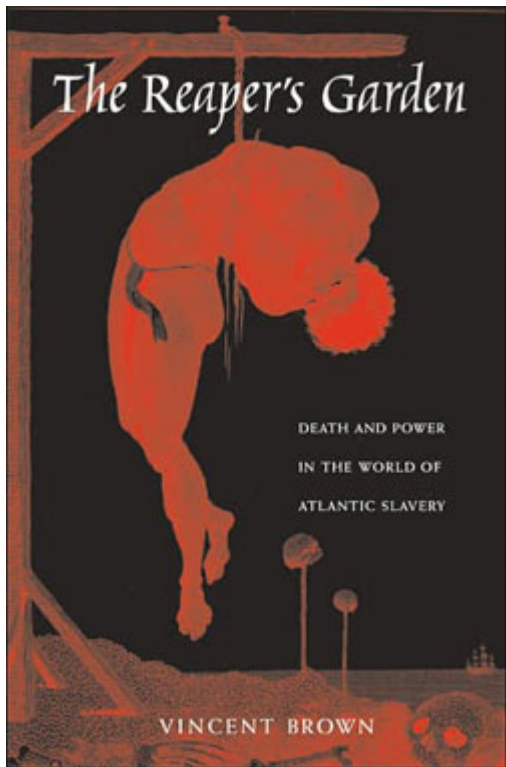


Reaping the Bounty of Death



Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2008. 340 pp., hardcover, \$35.00.

In this fascinating and provocative study about mortuary politics and culture in the eighteenth-century British Atlantic world, Vincent Brown illuminates the powerful ways death shaped the everyday life of white and black Jamaicans. In *The Reaper's Garden*, Brown presents more than a history of Jamaican slavery. He describes a world where mortality penetrated nearly every aspect of Jamaican

society and arguably everywhere the Atlantic slave trade reached its lethal tentacles, structuring political, economic, and social relationships in the process. Significantly, Brown demonstrates how attitudes about death produced Afro-Jamaican cultural practices and rituals that in turn created “new worlds of meaning” (58). In other words, eighteenth-century Jamaican mortuary culture reveals the creative cultural adaptation and blending among Afro-Caribbean slaves that became the foundation of a hybridized culture unique to the Atlantic world.

Vincent Brown begins his narrative with four black Jamaican women who encounter a British ship bringing European travelers to the island colony. As the women leave the European ship, they sing, “New-come buckra, He get sick, He tak fever, He be die; He be die [sic]” (1). This provocative encounter and astonishing verse reflects multiple aspects of colonial Jamaican culture and society, as well as death’s pervasive and extensive reach. As Brown reminds us, the Caribbean (and arguably other parts of British North America at different moments in time) “was the grave of the Europeans” (2). Yet the dreams of riches from plantation slavery, particularly sugar production, attracted entrepreneurial Europeans to the Caribbean. Where common sense might deter one from risking his life, Englishmen (and they were primarily men) came to Jamaica, dreaming of potential wealth and social mobility. In this regard, eighteenth-century Jamaica had much in common with other Anglo-American colonies such as seventeenth-century Virginia and South Carolina. Where the mortality rate eventually declined in those North American British colonies by the early eighteenth century, it remained high for English and African Jamaicans, perpetuating social instability and fueling the Atlantic slave trade. Here, Brown’s study connects with recent historical scholarship such as Ian Baucom’s *Specters of the Atlantic*, which describes the interconnected relationship between the Atlantic slave trade and the rise of modern finance capitalism. In this context, the profitability of British Caribbean plantation slavery enabled these colonies to maintain outsized influence in British imperial politics, helping us to understand the near delirious pursuit of wealth among the English who came to the Caribbean. In this regard, Brown illustrates a significant point about the ways in which white and black Jamaicans tried to make sense of the pervasiveness of death. For whites, death was perpetually connected to property and commercial exchange—yet another feature of a worldview centered upon economic transactions. For blacks, death became a way to create a culture that actually celebrated life by recognizing the interrelationship between the living and the dead. The latter could comfort the former by reminding them of their humanity in a world that considered them property and without human value.

As Brown moves beyond his study of mortality and the political economy of slavery in the initial chapters, he interrogates the mortuary politics and culture of eighteenth-century Jamaica. Drawing upon anthropological studies of Caribbean slave culture and society, particularly Sidney Mintz and Richard Price’s *The Birth of African-American Culture*, Brown points out the ways diverse Africans drew upon common cultural traditions to make sense of their

New World environment, adapting and creating a slave culture shaped by the ever-present reality of death. Death informed kinship structures and socio-political relationships in the Caribbean, as mortality generated and regenerated families, marriages, and entire slave communities. In this context, Jamaican slaves could negotiate political and economic relationships among themselves (and sometimes with whites in powerful positions) to stabilize their communities and kin-networks whenever their lives were disrupted by death. Whites, for their part, also produced and reproduced a colonial culture, one that was also powerfully shaped by mortality. As with most other things in Anglo-American life, funeral rites and mortuary culture were influenced by the omniscient values of property and commercial exchange. For white Jamaicans, death was also a relationship between the living and the dead, but one that valued the worth of one's kin relations in financial terms, most notably in the economic transaction we know as inheritance. Reading Brown's study of white Jamaican colonial culture, however, one would wonder if the English ever viewed their children and family relations beyond economic terms.

Yet, it is questionable whether Anglo-American values of economic exchange, property, and mortuary culture were any less spiritually and culturally significant for white Jamaicans than the dynamic colonial culture shaped by Afro-Jamaicans. If we think about other anthropological studies that have examined the culture of gift giving and if we frame Anglo-Jamaican attitudes about death and inheritance in terms of gift exchange, perhaps we can see the rich emotive qualities that signify the importance of bequeathing property and money to one's descendents. Moreover, when we further interrogate the spiritual value of land and property in terms of the ways early modern English people imparted profound meaning to the productive capacities of their labor, we can better understand the importance they attached to land as a significant means to provide prosperity and bounty for their kin and community. The "gift" of an inheritance may have materialized as a kind of emotionally detached financial transaction, but perhaps this could not have been further from the truth for white Jamaicans given the centrality of property in Anglo-American religious cosmology. As numerous studies of Puritan New England have reminded us, property had profound cultural and spiritual value that sustained powerful relationships across generations and between the living and the dead. We only have to consider the cultural significance of financial donations toward college and university endowments in our recent history to understand the power of inheritable or "legacy" gifts. The memory and honor of these magnanimous donors continue to "live" in college buildings, fellowships, endowed chairs, and other kinds of "gifts" that remind us of their valuable past contributions. These forms of inheritable gifts have cultivated and perpetuated human relationships between the living and the dead for generations in this academic universe.

Undoubtedly, the brutality and terror of plantation slavery produced a destructive world that dehumanized master and slave alike, and mortuary culture was one venue to rescue their collective humanity. However, we should remember that Anglo-Jamaican culture was as dynamic and full of spiritual meaning

(however misplaced and disturbing we believe their values and cultural priorities to be) as that created by Afro-Jamaicans. This certainly was not a world in which white and black Jamaicans produced a cross-cultural, multicultural society in the ways scholars such as Mechal Sobel describe in accounts of biracial cultural development in eighteenth-century colonial Virginia. However, it must have been a colonial society where white Jamaicans brought a rich spiritual tradition about land, death, and the afterlife that was as significant to them as the colonial mortuary culture was to black Jamaicans.

Vincent Brown asks readers not to imagine the grim reaper as a harvester using his scythe to cut down the flourishing wheat of humanity at the zenith of life. Rather, he wants us to imagine this icon of death as a gardener cultivating the life of the living with the bounty of the dead, especially in eighteenth-century Jamaica. As he states, "In Jamaican slave society and its transatlantic hinterlands, at least death tended and nurtured the activities of the living, cultivating their understanding of the world and their struggle to shape it. In the reaper's garden, death helped to constitute life, and the dead were an undeniable presence" (255). Brown's *The Reaper's Garden* is a penetrating and thought-provoking book that is a valuable contribution to the study of early America and the British Atlantic world. As mortality was a central fact throughout colonial American life, for blacks and whites, historians will find that after reading Brown's book, they may never look at the world of colonial British America the same way again.

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