



Vincent Brown. *The Reaper's Garden.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008.
340 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-02422-9.

Reviewed by Brian W. Refford (Indiana University of Pennsylvania)

Published on H-Albion (April, 2009)

Commissioned by David S. Karr (Columbia College)

Worlds of Death and Power

In an important account of death and power in the world of Atlantic slavery, Vincent Brown demonstrates the integrated worlds of the living and the dead in Jamaica, the wealthiest colony in the first British Empire. In *The Reaper's Garden*, Brown focuses on the cultural and political implications of demographic disaster, exposing the cultural significance of death in the politics of the living. In perhaps his most profound observation, Brown suggests that "death was as generative as it was destructive" (p. 4).

At the conceptual heart of *The Reaper's Garden*, Brown explores the relationship between death and power in plantation Jamaica, arguing that the "dead are active participants in the living world" (pp. 4-5). Brown supports his highly original cultural analysis with carefully chosen examples. In his prologue, Brown depicts the arrival of British traveler Robert Renny in Jamaica around 1800, where he was greeted by the jeering song of black slave women. "One, two, three, All de same," the women sang, "Black, white, brown, All de same, All de same" (p. 3). Ridiculing white authority, the women pointedly reminded the newcomer that his white skin was no protection, and that he was equally vulnerable to disease and death. This derision, Brown argues, was a violation of the "spirit of colonial order and discipline"; such songs expressed "a rejection of the symbolic order" that maintained white dominance (p. 4). In Jamaica, Brown argues, "death structured society and shaped its most consequential struggles" (p. 4).

These struggles were manifested in what Brown calls "mortuary politics," a complex relationship between slaveholder and enslaved in which patterns of property holding, family and social networks, and cultural meaning were influenced by "high mortality and the lingering presence of the dead" (p. 4). The political meaning of death can be fashioned into what Brown describes as a "materialist history of the supernatural imagination" (p. 5). This suggests that marshalling supernatural beliefs and practices associated with death in pursuit of political, cultural, and social goals is not a recent development. This symbolic association of death and power, Brown contends, provided the context for social and political mobilization, and was "therefore vital to historical transformation" (p. 6).

Jamaica was a killing ground for Britons, a place where death shaped social life. By the 1750s, endemic yellow fever and malaria prevented most white immigrants from surviving more than a few years. Status and wealth provided no protection for ambitious Britons, as most arrived in Kingston oblivious to the "demographic disaster that awaited them" (p. 20). The massive numbers of slaves imported to work the cane fields created other dangers for whites. Deeply insecure about their ability to keep slaves in a state of subjugation, Brown argues that Britons made "whiteness ... a coherent and inviolable social category" that justified the concerted use of terror to maintain white control over a numerically superior population of slaves (pp. 22-23). However, this is

not an original observation. What Brown fails to make explicit is that the interrelatedness of whiteness and the use of terror was a common means of social control not only in Jamaica but in all West Indian plantation societies as well.)

Another major theme of *The Reaper's Garden* is that the experience of enslavement forced captive Africans, regardless of their regional origins, to reconstitute their social worlds wherever they landed (p. 10). Social and cultural reconstruction was at the heart of the slave experience in Jamaica, a new reality that engendered a reformulation in the worldview of the enslaved in this contested land. Brown argues that beginning in the holds of slave ships, dislocated Africans created new social bonds that originated in common assumptions, idioms, and beliefs (pp. 32, 49). These shared beliefs allowed slaves to rearticulate a view of death that accepted the dead as active participants in the affairs of the living.

Building on his discussion of evolving views of death in Jamaica, a major strength of *The Reaper's Garden* is Brown's reimagining of the funerary practices of slaves. Founded on idioms of power and protest, Brown argues that funerals helped slaves restructure conceptions of social order, enact renewed social hierarchies, and draw strength from the afterlife (pp. 59-61). Funerals not only offered opportunities for expressions of grief but also provided a communal setting for expressions of spiritual resistance to white moral tropes, in which the living made partisan use of the dead (p. 63). This mu-

tuality, Brown suggests, did not end with death: shared perceptions of relations with the dead made it possible for slave families to survive the horrors of slavery. In the public funeral, enslaved blacks enacted a moral universe of symbolic resistance, remembrance, and communal affirmation. Brown concludes that the funeral provided a theater of social solidarity that rendered communal values sacred by associating them with their dead.

In *The Reaper's Garden*, conflict was written on the land, and death was a productive force that stimulated a continual cycle of destruction and renewal. For Brown, the evolving politics of death, power, and remembrance was part of the larger process of creolization arising from the conflicted relationship between master and slave, and the resultant development of local institutions, customs, and worldviews. Struggle marked the birth pangs of a uniquely Jamaican society, a process of renewal that destroyed individuals while generating a society (p. 252).

In *The Reaper's Garden*, Brown concludes that the case of Jamaica demonstrates that it is not uncommon for people to reorganize disrupted lives to preserve some continuity between traditional views of life and death and new social and cultural realities. In Jamaica, death held deeper meanings for slaves; invocations of the dead represented a reassertion of traditional conceptions of authority, as well as recognition of the continuing presence of the dead among the living. Jamaica was a land, Brown laments, in which death was—and remains—a vital presence.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-albion>

Citation: Brian W. Refford. Review of Brown, Vincent, *The Reaper's Garden*. H-Albion, H-Net Reviews. April, 2009.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24638>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.