



Vincent Brown. *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010. x + 340 pp. \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-674-05712-8.



Reviewed by Ann-Marie Adams (Post Doctoral Associate, Rutgers University)

Published on H-Atlantic (June, 2012)

Commissioned by W. Douglas Catterall (Cameron University of Oklahoma)

Channeling the Voices of the Dead in the Atlantic World

Jamaica was an economic powerhouse in the British Empire during the eighteenth century, the peak period for Atlantic slavery. The brutal and volatile slave society gained a reputation in the Americas as a crucible for rebellious slaves and a graveyard for avaricious Europeans (p. 3). Additionally, Jamaican slave society had a remarkably high mortality rate among both enslaved Africans and Europeans. Yet few historians have explored the macabre social and political aspects of slavery, or the simultaneity of death and power in this colonial hub.

Vincent Brown's interest in the dynamics of mortality on this important plantation society led to his first book, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery*, which Harvard University Press has recently issued in paperback. With pristine prose, he deftly articulates the mechanics of what he calls "mortuary politics," meaning burial rituals with a particular political goal (p. 7). With this expanded notion of politics, he illustrates how the dead, both black and white, refused to be silent among the living. Moreover, the in-

domitable and rebellious spirit of the enslaved survived the middle passage, endured the brutal life on sugar plantations, and lingered long after the horrors of the Atlantic slave trade. The dead, Brown also asserts, were victors because of their pervasive presence among the living. By artfully weaving classic studies of plantation culture and varied documents from archives in Africa, England, and Jamaica, Brown allows the dead to speak. And by doing so, he offers readers deep analyses of the relationships between death, power, and wealth in an empire spawned by the Black Atlantic.

Drawn from diaries, letters, newspaper advertisements, folklore, and oral traditions, the very title of the book immediately clues the reader in to the author's basic argument. In the 340-page book divided into seven chapters, Brown effectively buttresses that argument. But first, he uses the prologue to give readers a window into a world that awaited both forced and voluntary arrivals to the island. To illustrate the interlocking dynamics of death and power that dominated daily routines and rituals for both master and slave, he opens

with a haunting scene that details a first encounter between new European arrivals from Britain and enslaved African women selling oranges and other fresh fruits in the port of Kingston. This vivid portrait recreates a recurring motif in the Black Atlantic: scenes of Europeans on ships docking into Atlantic harbors. An eighteenth-century British traveler, Robert Renny, later describes one such encounter in his diary. The women, he wrote, sang: "New-come buckra/He get sick/He tak fever/ he be die" (p. 1). It is a scene Brown uses effectively to foreshadow the fate of these visitors and to establish the main thrust of his narrative: *buckras*, or slave masters, usually die soon after arrival. That cryptic scene also unveils the author's central argument that both master and slave in this colonial hub shared the same fate: death. Moreover, the power differentials of the master and slave dissipated in death. And because both master and slave became equals, or "all de same" in death, death represented power to the enslaved (p. 3). Indeed, Brown contends that "death was as generative as it was destructive" (p. 4). After all, frequent rebellions organized by Jamaica's enslaved Africans were aimed at dismantling the psychological and physical shackles of slavery. And once the enslaved died, they continued their rebellion in the afterworld as "transatlantic spirits" (p. 152). So the end was the beginning for many of the enslaved—a triumph over *buckra* and his tentacles of social control in this brutal slave society at its peak in the second half of the eighteenth century and leading up to the end of the transatlantic slave trade.

After expounding on the meaning of death and dying in the prologue, Brown uses chapter 1 in *The Reaper's Garden* to give a portrait of eighteenth-century plantocracy Jamaica, the largest island with the most enslaved Africans in the British Empire. He details the rapid rise in the colony's population and the equally dramatic increase in wealth generated for many Europeans on and off the island. In an effort to locate "death at the center of social experience ... on the island," Brown provides statistics and anecdotes of afflictions to illustrate the growth of the enslaved African and European populations (p. 12). Simultaneously, he details how this growth corresponded with increased wealth during Jamaica's sugar revolution. Between 1740 and 1776, Brown notes, Jamaica's spectacular economic growth correlated with an equally high mortality rate among enslaved Africans and Europeans. In fact, the European death rate in Jamaica was more than 10 percent per year, whereas Africans actually died at a somewhat lower rate. Thus, while both Africans and Europeans found their way to

this international hub in different ways, collectively they created "a magnificent factory out of mortal crisis" that linked them (p. 13). And as more people arrived on the island, death became the fulcrum of their social lives.

In chapter 2, Brown eschews simplistic interpretations of both Africans' and Europeans' burial rituals, providing instead a deep probe of the process of death and dying and its ties to life, articulating the particularities of this universal experience. To do this, he illustrates what he describes as the "insistent presence of the dead," using cultural artifacts such as the fictionalization of European experiences in Jamaica created by the British army officer Abraham James. It is entitled *Johnny New-come in the Island of Jamaica*, and is a satire of funeral customs. James's sketch conveys the critical and final stage in the process of "healing the disruptions caused by death" (p. 61). Brown further asserts that the burial ceremonies were a cathartic experience for the aggrieved. But not everyone had the luxury of an elaborate process of saying good-bye. The burial ritual also revealed—and reaffirmed—status. For instance, expensive funerals with large crowds showed social standing and a strong network in the community. Enslaved Africans without such a network received a simple and rapid burial. In addition, Brown uses conflicting and contradictory statements in diaries to reinterpret the rituals and rites of enslaved Africans' burial ceremonies. In doing so, he challenges old and frequently rehearsed interpretations found in the diaries of English slave-owners. The often-quoted Edward Long, for example, wrote that enslaved Africans' funerals were "the very reverse of our English ceremony" (p. 75). But Brown concludes that Long inaccurately described African rituals surrounding death, a key component of African religions "as an uncontrolled manifestation of inherent savagery" and thereby "placed black cultural practice firmly at the bottom of the hierarchy of religion and culture" (p. 75). To support his conclusion, Brown quotes Long's English contemporary, a plantation overseer named Thomas Thistlewood. Although of questionable character himself and the author of now well-known racist and imperialistic interpretations of Jamaican slave culture, Brown uses Thistlewood's diary to refute Long's impressionistic and often inaccurate commentaries.

In chapters 3 and 4, Brown details the expectations of the dead and living in these rites of passage found in African and European cultures. The blending of different customs and cosmologies constituted new coping mechanisms that Africans and Europeans used to survive their new world. Moreover, this syncretism en-

abled the enslaved to derive power from death in their new home. And although the changing and merging of religious philosophies in the Atlantic eventually transformed Africans, as John Thornton asserts, enslaved Africans held on to many familiar rites, rituals, shamans, and martyrs.[1] In doing so, they were able to nurture their belief that in death everyone was equal or "all de same" (p. 3). This transference of African and European cultures to the Jamaican context was significant, Browns suggests, to the survival of the enslaved in the Atlantic world's plantation economies. That is because by necessity captured and enslaved Africans clung to their past to survive the horrors of the Atlantic. And because of the continual forced migration of Africans to colonial Jamaica, the African population swelled with "Salt-Water Negroes" and was able to sustain the African forms of worship that white missionaries had hoped to dislodge.[2]

In chapter 5, Brown shows how the treatment of slaves as well as high slave mortality provoked outrage in the metropole that spurred a massive colonial reform movement. The mortality rate, which was at first seen as an economic concern, morphed into "a moral problem of vital importance to the "soul" of the British nation" (p. 157). Antislavery advocates offered evidence of atrocities at parliamentary hearings in London. These reports also emphasized the suffering and the death of whites who visited Jamaica. Consequently, the antislavery campaign resulted in half a million Britons signing petitions to abolish the transatlantic slave trade.

But before slavery was abolished, English missionaries set out to redeem the souls of these African "heathens." Chapters 6 and 7 synthesize the effect of death and dying and what was done to ensure a better after-life for these so-called savages. Additionally, Brown delineates the rituals of death and salvation, the horrors of slavery, the afterlife, and the changes and continuities of life among the living. He suggests that continuity is evidenced by monuments to the dead and by those who endured slavery on the island. Burial grounds, too, served as a reminder of the dead. With graveyard headstones, atop elaborate and decorative caskets or simple pine boxes, the living created "gardens of remembrance" (p. 231). Furthering his argument, Brown posits that these commemorative practices were an attempt to find "some continuity in the midst of flux, rupture, and loss," constituting "a strategy for both black and white Jamaicans: [whereby] immortality might be achievable through symbols, in the enduring form of the physical landmark" (p. 231). But far from leaving us only with

reminders of the past, Brown offers a litany of paradoxes among the living, especially the paradox of "eternal remembrance" (p. 232). This kind of remembrance, he claims, was "sustained in temporal conflicts," because burial grounds with monuments and tombs are markers of collective struggles of the past. Consequently, all these aspects of syncretic rituals constituted the mechanics of death. And most readers will agree with Brown's use of an epilogue to elucidate the continued politics of life that was laced with the haunting presence of the dead amid the horrors of Atlantic slavery.

Brown's narrative of death and power would be complete were it not for its glaring omission of a notable site on the island that would have been ideal to examine the interplay between death and power. Brown begins his story with Kingston harbor during the mid eighteenth century. But he could have interrogated Port Royal, which is across from Kingston harbor, as shown in Figure P.1 Port Royal was an important naval station on the island before its decline in the early eighteenth century, and it garnered a reputation for being "the wickedest city in the world" because it was a haven for buccaneers and pirates like Sir Henry Morgan. According to local folklore, it was so evil that on June 7, 1692 an earthquake swallowed part of the ostentatiously wealthy city.[3] The earthquake swallowed thousands and buried them in the section of Port Royal that sank below sea level. So a part of Jamaica was literally a site transformed into a graveyard of black and white bodies before the peak of Atlantic slavery. An exploration into this site of death and destruction would have given even more credence to Jamaica being cast as "the graveyard of Europeans. Although it is a piracy narrative, an anecdote of Port Royal's haunting past would have also served as a fitting prelude to the long history of what Brown calls "mortuary politics" on the island. After all, piracy and plantation narratives of death is not mutually exclusive. Death in both contexts is "all de same."

All in all, this clear and compelling look at death and power in the Atlantic should be of interest to upper-level undergraduate and graduate students engaged in research that departs from discourses centered on, or dominated by, the climatic, demographic, and economic theses about the Atlantic world of sugar and slaves. It is, therefore, a welcome addition to the historiography on the experiences of Africans in the Americas and indicates a bold new direction for the study of the intercultural and transnational formation of the Black Atlantic.[4]

Notes

[1]. John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making*

of the Atlantic World, 1400-1680 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

[2]. Stephanie E. Smallwood, *Saltwater Slavery: A Middle Passage from Africa to American Diaspora* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

[3]. Rebecca Tortello, "Pieces of the Past: Port Royal," *Jamaica Gleaner*, November 26, 2001.

[4]. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

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

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

Citation: Ann-Marie Adams. Review of Brown, Vincent, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery*. H-Atlantic, H-Net Reviews. June, 2012.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=33774>



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