

# History Attends to the Dead

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Having published a book about death, I could not help but notice how a finished manuscript is a compendium of impulses that have died. It is, after all, a specter of what might have been. Much of what I had imagined for *The Reaper's Garden* had departed the text by the time inspiration yielded to thought, which was channeled into grammar and word choice, and prose became print.<sup>1</sup> There are few surviving explicit statements of my general outlook on the conceptual, methodological, and rhetorical problems I encountered. Consequently, what lives on in this regard must be determined by the book's readers, as they fashion the legacy of the author's efforts. So I am grateful for these early eulogies by Colin Dayan, Trevor Burnard, and Verene Shepherd, three readers I admire a great deal. They have presented me with an opportunity to learn from my own work and to recall some of the inspirations that motivated my research, the assumptions that framed my analysis, and the purposes I hoped my storytelling would serve.

Not long ago, the anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot explained how everyday understandings of *history* encapsulate both the process of change over time and its representation. "Both the facts of the matter and a narrative about those facts, both 'what happened' and 'that which is said to have happened.' The first meaning places the emphasis on the sociohistorical process, the second on our knowledge of that process."<sup>2</sup> Trouillot was concerned to show how historical knowledge is produced over time as an artifact of power and how "silences"

1 Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); hereafter cited in text.

2 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon, 1995), 2.

in historical understanding result from the creation of sources, the making of archives, the retrieval of events as moments of importance, and the interpretation of retrospective significance. I had only recently read *Silencing the Past* when I began to make my way through statistical studies of the demography of Atlantic slavery, especially the indispensable work of B. W. Higman and Trevor Burnard.<sup>3</sup> Confronted with the imposing volume of data on the shaping force of high mortality rates, I also encountered a piercing silence, best represented by a passage in Stuart Schwartz's magnificent social history of Bahian sugar plantations:

What the skeleton of lists at Fazenda Saubara cannot convey is the kind of world and perception of it that such high mortality rates must have created. Here we are dealing with pure speculation, but undoubtedly slaves perceived the transitory nature of their existence and the danger of death in which they lived. Those few who survived the whole decade [1750–60] at Saubara would have seen almost half their friends, acquaintances, and companions die in that short time. Was their reaction despair, resignation, or resentment? We cannot know.<sup>4</sup>

This was a provocation. Having identified statistically one of the most salient aspects of plantation slavery, Schwartz largely declined to pursue his questions further. Like many social historians of his generation, Schwartz revealed in his approach the importance of fundamental questions to which his method could yield few answers. He was right, of course; most of the sources created by planters noted deaths as business expenses, things to be counted. Even in territories within the ambit of the Catholic Church—which maintained a bureaucratic interest in supernatural affairs—commonly recognized sources, archives, events, and interpretations had not combined to facilitate a readily accessible history of slavery's world of high mortality.<sup>5</sup>

My frustration with this impasse paralleled the dissatisfaction that had led so many social historians to cultural history a generation before me.<sup>6</sup> For them the study of culture provided a way to examine the life worlds of populations only barely discernable in the archives of states, churches, and commercial enterprises. But I thought that rather than distilling cultures of death from a long and turbulent history, I might see the beliefs and behaviors associated

- 3 B. W. Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807–1834* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984); B. W. Higman, *Slave Population and Economy in Jamaica, 1807–1834* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); Trevor Burnard, "European Migration to Jamaica, 1655–1780," *William and Mary Quarterly* 53, no. 4 (October 1996): 769–94; and Trevor Burnard, "A Failed Settler Society: Marriage and Demographic Failure in Early Jamaica," *Journal of Social History* 28, no. 1 (Fall 1994): 63–82. Out of the voluminous literature on the demography of slavery, see especially Philip D. Curtin, "Epidemiology and the Slave Trade," *Political Science Quarterly* 83, no. 2 (1968): 190–216; Richard Sheridan, *Doctors and Slaves: A Medical and Demographic History of Slavery in the British West Indies, 1680–1834* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Kenneth Kiple, ed., *The African Exchange: Toward a Biological History of Black People* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987); Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (New York: Norton, 1989); and Michael Tadman, "The Demographic Cost of Sugar: Debates on Slave Society and Natural Increase in the Americas," *American Historical Review* 105, no. 5 (December 2000): 1534–75.
- 4 Stuart B. Schwartz, *Sugar Plantations in the Formation of Brazilian Society: Bahia, 1550–1835* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 378.
- 5 However, for an excellent study of death and politics in Brazilian slave society, which appeared first in Portuguese in 1991, see João José Reis, *Death Is a Festival: Funeral Rites and Rebellion in Nineteenth-Century Brazil*, trans. H. Sabrina Gledhill (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003). For a later period in Brazil, see Nancy Scheper-Hughes, *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).
- 6 For an illuminating discussion of the trajectory followed by many social historians, see William H. Sewell Jr., "Crooked Lines," *American Historical Review* 113, no. 2 (April 2008): 393–405.

with death as the driving force of a sociohistorical process. Acknowledging the importance of death, I came to ask how people dealt with the dead and how their interest in supernatural forces came to be a real determinant of their actions. This was part of a larger set of questions about how and why the past inspires, and about how people make use of history. Informed by my readings in the ethnography of mortuary ritual and religious histories of early modern Europe, I came to understand that the dead serve to make an ineffable abstraction like death more immediate, personal, and knowable.<sup>7</sup> I learned how the dead have served as a focal point for both the actions that make significant things happen and for the representation of the past itself. In this way, examining relations between the living and the dead became a way not only to glimpse what kind of a world death created but also to show how what Colin Dayan called the “rituals of history” have been part of the political struggles that shape the process of change over time.<sup>8</sup> Or, to put it more directly, to see what people *made* of death and the dead.

Given the nature of my sources, I was necessarily vague in my treatment of just what I meant by *the dead*. In fact, I joined several potentially distinct meanings, which (hopefully) served to illustrate the way relations between the living and the dead allowed people to stitch themselves into a social fabric that was by turns textured and abstract, immediate and eternal. The dead were corpses, ancestors, the spirit world, those who came before, and those who would die in the future—the representatives of people’s place in time.<sup>9</sup> Generally, the dead embody the human experience of time: they hem the present, define the past, and guide struggles to shape the future. Jamaican slave society, in which death was omnipresent, seemed to show this in stark relief.

This idea about the temporalities of the dead was implicit in the tripartite organization of *The Reaper’s Garden*. The first part of the book is a largely synchronic study of the enduring political-economic forces and cultural practices that made a slave society from a human catastrophe. After exploring the way that the colonial economy focused attention on death and the way that rites of passing and inheritance gave recognizable patterns to social life, the book proceeds to a diachronic discussion of the way that invocations of the dead in a range of conflicts—from efforts to stage and suppress revolt to arguments over the morality of the British empire and the souls of its subjects—facilitated significant changes in the local and transatlantic history of slavery and abolition. Finally, the story looks backward to explore

7 See especially Katherine Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Robert Hertz, “The Collective Representation of Death,” *Death and the Right Hand*, trans. Rodney and Claudia Needham (1907; London: Cohen and West, 1960); Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington, *Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981); Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver (1981; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991); David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Bruce Gordon and Peter Marshall, “Placing the Dead in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe,” introduction to Bruce Gordon and Peter Marshall, eds., *The Place of the Dead: Death and Remembrance in Late Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

8 See Joan [Colin] Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

9 I am grateful to the graduate students in Marcus Rediker’s and Patrick Manning’s Atlantic seminar at the University of Pittsburgh, who pressed me on this point during a visit on 26 March 2008.

the commemorations of the dead that helped to set the terms for debates over emancipation and its aftermath. By using static, progressive, and retrospective modes of analysis I hoped to convey a sense of the way that a politics of death and the dead not only is concerned with remembrance but also is pertinent to the present, future, and past all at once.

The dead have certainly loomed large in human endeavors. In everything from the exchange of property to the authorizing of rhetorical expression, people look to the dead as the personification of legitimate precedent. The ubiquitous importance of relations between the living and dead has been analyzed in scholarship most often through the lens of culture and religion. Yet cultural history has traditionally been principally concerned with discerning and explaining unique logics of meaning and behavior corresponding to particular groups—defined by geography, nation, class, race, ethnicity, and so on. Often assuming an isomorphic relationship between cultural practice, population, and bounded territory, studies in the genre tended to ignore or underplay the kinds of movement, change, and entanglement that define the history of the African diaspora and the Atlantic world. In studies of religion, especially in those classified under the rubric of the African diaspora, the dead and ancestors feature as a focus of ritual attention, but it has been rare to find a study willing to take seriously the idea that all this interest in supernatural affairs has a notable historical impact beyond the religious sphere. Consequently, scholars know a lot about cultures of death but less about how the dead catalyze historical process, this knowledge having been left to religious adepts with different standards of evidence and interpretation. Indeed, secular history writing from the time of Thucydides seems to have required that supernatural forces be cordoned off in the realm of myth, and their role in motivating human action neatly separated from “real” forces.<sup>10</sup> At the same, as Saidiya Hartman has recognized, “history is how the secular world attends to the dead.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, worldly narratives about the past compete with spiritual discourses even while taking up the same subject. Why not then intertwine them in order to consider how these representations of death and the dead *drive* as well as derive from larger sociohistorical processes?

In approaching this question, I was not primarily interested in arguing for a kind of demographic determinism. The demographic environment was what Alfred Hitchcock liked to call “the MacGuffin,” the essential background for the strivings of slaves, colonists, missionaries, and other concerned imperial subjects, whose efforts held me in suspense.<sup>12</sup> What did it mean to survive under those conditions? While Jamaica’s (and Atlantic slavery’s) catastrophic demography begged the question of how people experienced it and what they made of their predicament, I followed recent cultural studies–inflected scholarship in presuming the

10 Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1998), is often credited as the first “modern” history for focusing on human agency rather than that of the gods. Among the great recent exceptions are the many works by anthropologist Michael Taussig; see especially his *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

11 Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007), 18.

12 Alfred Hitchcock, “Master of Suspense, Being a Self-Analysis by Alfred Hitchcock” and “Lecture at Columbia University,” in *Hitchcock on Hitchcock*, ed. Sidney Gottlieb (London: Faber and Faber, 1995), 124, 270.

semi-autonomy of cultural and material life.<sup>13</sup> Scholars such as Paul Gilroy and Stuart Hall, to name only two, had helped to shift discussions of transatlantic black cultural history from questions of heritage to questions of vernacular political culture, showing how particular practices and discursive idioms mediate material and ideological struggles.<sup>14</sup> Building on their insights, I hoped to develop a dynamic understanding of how the idioms that related the living to the dead mediated the way people in Jamaican slave society strove to achieve particular ends.

My aim was to begin where most demographic histories of slavery had left off, to explore how social, cultural, and political life articulated with the brutal facts of morbidity and mortality. So while Trevor Burnard may be right to suggest that the pervasiveness of death in Jamaica is even more profound than I acknowledge, at the time I wrote *The Reaper's Garden* I was eager to avoid drawing simple correlations between mortality rates and transformations in social life. Indeed, the first chapter, which considers statistical data in most detail, is lengthy but impatient, in a hurry to establish the demographic context as a problem in the *experience* of Atlantic slavery and to discover the implications of death as a way of life. Never simply a reflection of material conditions, experience is mediated by cultural practices and beliefs and inflected by political struggle. What I was after, then, was some way of writing the social, cultural, and political history of slavery in relation to the generative properties of death. A rehearsal of slavery's horror was not the point of the argument but the point of departure for a discussion of what people made of such circumstances.<sup>15</sup> I was guided by my desire to see how the politics of everyday life played out under sustained crisis. If in my text "death overwhelms life" and readers see Jamaican slave society as being "devoid of any lasting meaning for its residents," as Burnard claims, then I have failed to sufficiently stress the ways in which the Grim Reaper cultivated social life. For, I began with the assumption that death and life are not only opposites but also mutually constitutive states of being made meaningful by the practices that define them. Death was not only an end; it spurred regeneration, thereby helping to constitute life. I tried to imagine the social and cultural activity surrounding death less as a pathological distortion of recognizably healthy life than as a natural state of affairs under conditions of "creative destruction."<sup>16</sup>

13 See especially Stuart Hall, "The Problem of Ideology—Marxism without Guarantees," in Betty Matthews, ed., *Marx: A Hundred Years On* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1983), 57–85; and Stuart Hall, "Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance," in Houston A. Baker, Manthia Diawara, and Ruth H. Lindeborg, eds., *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 16–60.

14 See especially David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, eds., *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 1996); and Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

15 At an early stage of the project a friend asked, "What is your thesis, anyway? That slavery was bad?" His unmistakable implication: don't we know that already? I explained that within traumatic histories there is much yet to be explained about how people's actions contribute to the unfolding of dynamic processes.

16 This term, describing capitalism's essential properties, was first popularized by the economist Joseph Schumpeter, who thought *creative destruction* a good thing. See Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* (1942; New York: Harper, 1975).

I hoped to steer a course between that old and enduring opposition—structure and agency, where structure equates with power and agency is construed as its opposite—that had helped to produce a silence around the history of relations between the living and the dead in slavery. Either the system of bondage was so overwhelming that it completely defined the behavior of the enslaved, or the enslaved were implacable rebels who maintained some deep self, unaffected by the prerogatives of power. Either Africans were stripped of their cultural heritage by dislocation, alienation, and subjugation, or they recreated vital communities by retaining core aspects of their ancestral cultures. David Scott recently highlighted an important problem with the debates arising from these positions. For many scholars, he notes, the power of slaveholders and the damage wrought by slavery have been “pictured principally as a negative or limiting force” that “restricted, blocked, paralyzed, or deformed the transformative agency of the slave.” Viewing “slave plantation colonial power” in this way “obliges one to look for the agency that transgresses it, survives it, overcomes it, and to look in turn for the sources (cultural or otherwise) that enabled or fed that transgression, survival, or overcoming.” Often neglected is the fact that the violent domination of slavery generated political action, it was not antithetical to it. Scholars who have emphasized slavery’s corrosive power and those who stress resistance and resilience share the same assumption, which prevents them from pursuing questions about “how colonial power reshaped or reorganized the conceptual and institutional conditions of possibility of social action and its understanding.”<sup>17</sup> The terms of this debate have also understated the predicament of the powerful and obscured the ways that the activity of the enslaved was a constituent aspect of colonial power in operation.<sup>18</sup>

Freed of the need to keep agency and power locked in opposition, one can emphasize the ways that the practice of political life generated systemic transformations in social relationships. Following William Sewell Jr.’s useful definition of *structures* as “mutually sustaining cultural schemas and sets of resources that empower and constrain social action” and *agents* as those empowered “both by the knowledge of cultural schemas that enables them to mobilize resources and by the access to resources that enables them to enact schemas,” it is less difficult to envision a more elemental political history of slavery that includes the role of supernatural “schemas” in material life.<sup>19</sup> For those contending with the conditions of Atlantic slavery, enacting assumptions about the role of the dead in the fortunes of the living required daily struggle over the means of existence and the exercise of will, even as such efforts reshaped the conditions in which people conceived their relations with the dead. In this sense, while *The Reaper’s Garden* may appear at first glance to exemplify a trend away

17 David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 111–12, 119.

18 As Laurent Dubois has recognized, “Through their labor but also through their resistance—both in actions and in speech—enslaved peoples in the Atlantic world both generated problems of governance and began to propose new solutions by insisting on their own dignity and denying the justifications issued for their enslavement.” Laurent Dubois, “An Enslaved Enlightenment: Rethinking the Intellectual History of the French Atlantic,” *Social History* 31, no. 1 (February 2006): 14.

19 William H. Sewell Jr., *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 151.

from scholarship that emphasizes resistance and cultural dynamism, I have viewed my work as a natural development upon what has often been glossed as the “agency, culture, and community” school of slavery studies.<sup>20</sup> I had hoped to transcend the debate about whether the enslaved could create vibrant communities under severe constraints by highlighting the unmistakable political creativity shown by those facing the most absolute of limitations—slavery and death.<sup>21</sup>

If Burnard is convinced that I do not seem to argue forcefully for the agency and resistance of the enslaved, or at least that my “heart is not in these arguments,” this may be because I assumed agency and resistance rather than arguing for their existence. For me, the question was never, are the slaves agents? but rather, *what is the focus of their agency?*<sup>22</sup> So while I spent a great deal of effort describing the conditions that shaped the subjectivity of the enslaved (and their masters), I was generally more interested in what people made of their predicament. I also wanted to avoid understating the limitations on the powerful by maintaining a sense of the desires, aspirations, and outright fears that drove slaveholders’ choices and motivated their unspeakable acts of violence, or in some cases, self-serving benevolence. This was something understood acutely by the enslaved, who needed a keen awareness of where their masters are vulnerable. How else could they learn to play them off each other, make claims in shared idioms, or provoke self-defeating behavior that might lead to precious opportunities for revolt? Yes, slave societies were the products of violence, coercion, and dislocation, but these things were also the raw materials of an everyday struggle without end, a struggle that often revolved around relations between the living and the dead.

These efforts had consequences for the evolution of Atlantic slavery. As highlighted by Dayan, the rites of legal practice governing slavery were deeply entangled with spiritual beliefs. And in law one can often see sediments of the politics of everyday life. Moreover, when people made collective appeals to the dead or on behalf of the dead they fashioned the ligatures of social order, much as law reaches back in time for legitimating precedents. I had learned much from Dayan’s work, and came to the project convinced that, as Dayan says here, “the raw materials of colonial legal authority became the stuff of spiritual life” in the Caribbean. Certain of this, I sought to illustrate the reverse, that the worldly routines of spiritual life fed a political process that could transform lawmaking from the local parish to the metropolitan parliament.

Mortuary politics and the laws that reflected it also implied the limitations of the concept of *social death*. Scholars have often followed Orlando Patterson’s monumental *Slavery and Social Death* in positing a metaphorical annihilation as the basic condition of slavery. Indeed, social death—“the permanent, violent domination of natively alienated and generally dishonored

20 The seminal text in this scholarly tradition is John W. Blasingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972).

21 See Richard Price, “Dialogical Encounters in a Space of Death,” in John M. Smolenski and Thomas J. Humphrey, eds., *New World Orders: Violence, Sanction, and Authority in the Colonial Americas* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 47–65. “We are beginning,” Price recognizes, “to unravel the tightly woven threads that bind destruction and invention, death and creation, in the wake of the Columbian moment” (48).

22 See Walter Johnson, “On Agency,” *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 1 (Fall 2003): 113–24.



persons”<sup>23</sup>—has become a handy general definition of slavery for many historians and non-historians alike. However, it is often forgotten that the concept of social death is a distillation from Patterson’s survey of slavery from ancient to modern times—a theoretical abstraction that meant not to describe the lived experiences of the enslaved so much as to reduce them to a least common denominator that could reveal the essence of slavery in an ideal-type slave, shorn of meaningful heritage. As a concept, it has provided a neat cultural logic but ultimately does little to illuminate the social and political experience of enslavement and the struggles that produce historic transformations. Slaves’ responses to actual death suggest that if studies of slavery would account for the outlooks and maneuvers of the enslaved as an important part of that history, scholars would do better to keep the struggle against alienation in closer view than alienation itself.<sup>24</sup>

The struggle to remake fractured connections—to extend individual and collective perspectives in time—is at the core of relations between the living and the dead. It may have been especially urgent for those threatened by social death, but the politics of the personified past are, of course, a general feature of human existence. This is, in essence, a politics of time, expressed most clearly in the hard-fought battles over the commemoration of the dead. Verene Shepherd might be seen in this way as an active participant in the history I recount. One can see efforts at commemoration like those she describes in present day Jamaica not only as retrospectives on slavery but also as extensions of the efforts of its legatees. For me, the story told in *The Reaper’s Garden* is less a reminder that ancestors must be commemorated than that we are continuing their commemorative work. Remembrance was a vital part of the politics of slavery, then no less than now.

At least since C. L. R. James’s *The Black Jacobins* and Eric Williams’s *Capitalism and Slavery*, writers of Caribbean history have been keenly aware of its location within a global political economy expanding over several hundred years.<sup>25</sup> While I was disciplined enough not to allow my narrative to slip into allegory, I could not help but locate Jamaican slave society within a turbulent history that continues to unfold—a sweep of accelerating changes, intensifying contacts, and aggravated inequalities presaged by colonialism in the Caribbean. I tried to signal what I take to be important elements of my own context as a writer in the acknowledgments and epilogue: I have been motivated by my understanding of worldwide black freedom struggles, the incarceration industry, pervasive warfare—drug war, cold war, terror war—and the HIV-AIDS pandemic. It must be said that these inspirations are quite distinct from those that stimulated writers such as Richard Dunn and Edmund Morgan.<sup>26</sup> They were shocked by

23 Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 13.

24 I have discussed the limitations of the concept of “social death” at length in a review essay, “Social Death and Political Life in the Study of Slavery,” *American Historical Review* 114, no. 5 (December 2009): 1231–49.

25 C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*, 2nd ed. (1938; New York: Vintage, 1989); Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (1944; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

26 Richard S. Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves: The Rise of the Planter Class in the English West Indies, 1624–1713* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1972); Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975).



slavery and racism at the betrayal of America's promise; I yearned to see the world stir from a continuing nightmare. For this reason, I spent less time than most historians highlighting the achievements of the planter class, which depended on the subjugation of so many men, women, and children. Whatever the merits of the *herrenvolk* egalitarianism that eddied in a flood of racial tyranny and terror, congratulating the beneficiaries of conquest and empire would seem to distract too much attention from the historic struggles of those who, in Dayan's words, "live in the shadow of merciless brutality"—the overwhelming majority of the world's population. In any case, the degree to which Jamaican slaveholders share our modernity should provoke searching self-criticism.

Have I written a jeremiad, as Burnard claims, "about how the settlement and exploitation of the Americas exemplified the darkness that is present in men's souls"? Possibly. Though as Burnard suspects, for such a genealogy of the book's rhetorical forms to be convincing, it would probably have to draw the connection between Puritan declension narratives and the reggae music of the 1970s and 1980s. For I learned my first and most fundamental lessons about slavery as an adolescent *not* from a national curriculum concerned with slavery as the "original sin" against democracy but from the songs of Robert Nesta Marley, David Hinds, and Winston Rodney. Their teachings on slavery imparted an ominous wisdom, to be sure: "Babylon is falling, it was foolish to build it on the sand." Yet I was repeatedly reminded that in the darkness "there must come out to light."<sup>27</sup>

So my emphasis on historical catastrophe is not despairing as it might appear; it clings to the prospect of renewal. In this respect, *The Reaper's Garden* shares a sentimental kinship with Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road*, about a father and son who scavenge for hope amid the detritus of a ruined world and find faith instead.<sup>28</sup> Reaching into the darkness to grasp the hands of the dead is how human beings have spoken to silence, spinning hope from fear and community from chaos. As I wrote in *The Reaper's Garden*,

It is common for people to organize their social lives to preserve some continuity between life and death; to claim authority by associating with and invoking the dead; to allow perceptions of the afterworld to shape their actions; and to stake out territories with commemorative landmarks. Though the way people do these things may vary, the same kinds of questions can be asked about other times and places: How have people made sense of death culturally and use of the dead politically? What has been the consequence of mortuary politics? (257–58)

Reading the commentaries by professors Dayan, Burnard, and Shepherd, I am flattered that my work has advanced serious discussion of these questions. If, as Dayan says, "nothing ever dies" in *The Reaper's Garden*, then perhaps too none of its failings is complete. If death is generative, surely the book's shortcomings can be productive. One might even say that this engagement has given it new life.

27 Steel Pulse, "Handsworth Revolution," *Handsworth Revolution* (London: Island UK, 1978); Bob Marley and the Wailers, "Could You Be Loved," *Uprising* (New York: Island USA, 1980). See also Burning Spear, *Marcus Garvey* (New York: Mango Records, 1975). This is not to say that *The Reaper's Garden* shares much in common with the tenets of Rastafarianism, only that its rhetorical tropes as expressed in music were an early inspiration to my historical thinking.

28 Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Knopf, 2006).