

# Jamaica as America, America as Jamaica: Hauntings from the Past in Vincent Brown's *The Reaper's Garden*

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Edward Long's brilliant history of Jamaica is a sustained defense of the white men and women of eighteenth-century Jamaica and the society they had created. He is concerned to defend the white planters of Jamaica from the inexplicable condescension of metropolitan Britons.<sup>1</sup> Yet his work, strongly influenced by prevailing climatic and humoral theories that attributed virtue to temperate zones and vice to regions that were either very cold or abnormally warm, was a product of wishful thinking.<sup>2</sup> Jamaica was full, in his imagining, of prosperous long-lived white inhabitants and their happy and well-treated slaves. He so much wanted this proposition to be true that he forced the evidence that he had carefully accumulated into patterns that belied the facts. In particular, he tried to deny what was a salient fact about Jamaica: it was dominated by death.

1 Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica, or, General Survey of the Antient and Modern State of that Island*, 3 vols. (1774; repr., London: Frank Cass, 1970).

2 For humoral theories and their effect on race and ethnicity, see Mary Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

Whether death may have been “as generative as it was destructive” in Jamaica is debatable.<sup>3</sup> What is not debatable is its omnipresence. I have documented the empirical evidence about Jamaica as a charnel house in several articles.<sup>4</sup> Vincent Brown has drawn on these works and extended their small insights into a powerful analysis of early colonial Jamaica. As he uses the multiple social and cultural meanings of death as a window into Jamaica’s eighteenth-century soul, he advances two important propositions. First, he asserts that it was the constant presence of death that most defined the character of Jamaican slave society. Second, he argues that Jamaica—which he places within the wide ambit of early American, Atlantic, and British imperial history rather than within the narrow context of British West Indian history—is “representative of early America, rather than anomalous” (258). I agree with both propositions. What I suggest here is that the bleak moral vision that underlies these propositions offers to us a version of early America that is profoundly at odds with established, or at least popular, narratives of American historical development. It is also at odds with customary narratives of Caribbean history. These narratives deal as much with creativity as with destruction. They also see the merging of white and black in the crucible of slavery as producing not just death but also a viable Caribbean culture. Consequently, Brown’s work is both a challenge to Caribbean orthodoxy and a reiteration of long-standing jeremiads about how the settlement and exploitation of the Americas exemplified the darkness that is present in men’s souls. Brown’s vision of a Jamaica that looked like heaven but that was instead a hell on earth is compelling. I do wonder, however, whether in this hell there may have been some patches of sunlight that would allow us to create a usable Jamaican past in which even planters might have some place.

Let’s get the praise out of the way first. *The Reaper’s Garden* is a major achievement, fit to be talked about among such classics in the field as Richard S. Dunn’s *Sugar and Slavery* and Edward Braithwaite’s *The Development of Creole Society*, and with few contemporary peers in English save for the two extraordinary works of Laurent Dubois on the French Caribbean published in 2004.<sup>5</sup> Seeing Jamaica through the prism of death is brilliant and insightful. In addition, Brown’s is one of the most beautifully written books on Atlantic history—elegant and elegiac—that I have had the pleasure to read. It is unsurprising that I like *The Reaper’s Garden* so much. Brown engages deeply with my own work on early Jamaica, especially in his first chapter on wealth and death. Yet, although in referring to Jamaica as a “failed settler

3 Vincent Brown, *The Reaper’s Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 4; hereafter cited in text.

4 See, among others, Trevor Burnard, “‘The Countrie Continues Sicklie’: White Mortality in Jamaica, 1655–1780,” *Social History of Medicine* 12, no. 1 (1999): 45–72.

5 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); Edward Braithwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770–1820* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971); Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787–1804* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

society” he is deliberately echoing the title of an article I published fifteen years ago,<sup>6</sup> Brown is clear that he sees Jamaica as being “much more” (59). But he does agree with my feeling that men like overseer Thomas Thistlewood (1721–86), an Enlightenment intellectual who was also a brute (and of whom I am biographer)<sup>7</sup>, and the wealthy planter Simon Taylor (1740–1813), with whom Brown deals at length, need to be incorporated into the lexicon of representative early American figures.

The pervasiveness of death in Jamaica, however, is even more profound than Brown suggests. White and black mortality peaked in the years between 1692 (the start of the transformation of Jamaica into a mature plantation society with the modal plantation containing hundreds rather than tens of slaves) and 1760 (the year of the trauma of Tacky’s revolt). What white settlers in Jamaica wanted during this period is clear: to increase the level of white settlement while providing white settlers with abundant African laborers. The Jamaican Assembly devoted enormous attention and money to white settlement schemes. They also devised laws that made planters employ whites within the plantation system or pay large fines. Yet despite appreciable migration of whites to the island, all such schemes were to no avail because of high mortality, mostly from disease. Furthermore, in the white population marriages were brief and increasingly infrequent and produced negligible numbers of children, few of whom survived to adulthood. In the black population, as far as we have any evidence, mortality was also very high. Blacks died not from disease, however, but from mistreatment: it was in these years that the conditions of black life were at their absolute nadir. The greatest irony, of course, about these dreadful demographic conditions is that high white mortality arose from the successful transformation to the mature plantation system: the diseases from which Jamaican whites died were largely imported from Africa. Thus, the precariousness of white life in Jamaica can be seen in part as the African slaves’ inadvertent revenge on their brutal owners.<sup>8</sup>

The implications of the failure of Jamaica to turn itself into a settler society in the first half of the eighteenth century were profound. It meant that the experience of Jamaica diverged from the experience of structurally similar societies such as Barbados and Virginia and South Carolina. It meant also that the potential strength of the slaveholding class in British America was diluted. While the colonial planter class was immensely powerful, it would have been more powerful still if Jamaica had enjoyed white demographic growth rather than catastrophic decline.<sup>9</sup>

It is interesting to speculate about what would have happened if the white population of Jamaica had increased at, say, half the rate of the North American colonies and if the black

6 See Trevor Burnard, “A Failed Settler Society: Marriage and Demographic Failure in Early Jamaica,” *Journal of Social History* 28, no. 1 (Fall 1994): 63–82.

7 See Trevor Burnard, *Mastery, Tyranny and Desire: Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

8 See John McNeill, “Yellow Jack and Geopolitics: Environment, Epidemics, and the Struggles for Empire in the American Tropics, 1650–1825,” *OAH Magazine of History* 18, no. 3 (2004): 9–13. Of course, given the inadequacies of medical understanding of the biological origins of disease, no one understood how diseases brought from Africa could so devastate European populations.

9 See Burnard, “A Failed Settler Society.”

population had begun to sustain itself naturally. That would have meant a white population of around forty thousand by 1750 and seventy thousand by 1776. Perhaps Jamaica would have followed Virginia in reducing its reliance on the Atlantic slave trade. A more likely scenario, however, is that a larger white population would have clamored for more Africans. As an anonymous author (possibly Governor Edward Trelawney) wrote in a 1746 tract, Jamaicans' "rage for pushing on their estates" made them addicted to buying slaves.<sup>10</sup> Brown cites Daniel Defoe, who made the case plain as early as 1713, when he declared, "No African trade, no negroes; no negroes, no sugars . . . ; no sugars etc no islands" (24). Buying slaves was the means through which whites enhanced their fortunes and established their social bona fides. A larger white population would have probably increased slave trade volumes. Certainly, the amount of uncultivated land suitable for plantation agriculture could sustain a larger population than in fact existed. If the quadrupling of the white population had led to a doubling of African slave imports, then Jamaica would have imported three hundred thousand slaves per decade by the last quarter of the eighteenth century.

It is not difficult to envision a population of seventy thousand whites and five hundred thousand to seven hundred thousand blacks in Jamaica by the outbreak of the American Revolution. Perhaps such increases would have led to a Malthusian crisis in the island. Planters did not like diverting resources from the production of staples to the production of food for domestic consumption. The subsistence crisis of the early 1780s, when perhaps fifteen thousand enslaved people died from dearth, would thus have been much worse. A larger slave population might also have led Jamaica into a cataclysm such as that which transformed Saint-Domingue into Haiti.

It is just as likely, however, that a larger and more powerful slaveholding class would have encouraged the British to expand even more strongly its reach into the American tropics. It would have had an unspecified effect on the working out of the constitutional crisis of the 1770s that artificially separated the slave societies of British North America from those of the British West Indies. If mortality rates had been lower, the nature of slavery in Jamaica also might have been different. More children, more old people, and a greater proportion of native-born slaves to slaves born in Africa would have made Jamaican slavery more similar to that of North America. Sugar would still have been a demographically destructive work regime, but a more variegated slave experience might have made Jamaica like nineteenth-century Louisiana or Cuba.<sup>11</sup> It also would have had long-term consequences for the present day, as high mortality among eighteenth-century Caribbean slaves and relatively low slave mortality

10 Anonymous, *An Essay Concerning Slavery and the Danger Jamaica Is Expos'd to from Too Great Number of Slaves* (London: C. Corbett, 1746).

11 For the dreadful demography of sugar, see 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. For Louisiana and Cuba, see Richard Follett, *The Sugarmasters: Planters and Slaves in Louisiana's Cane World, 1820–1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2007); and Laird Bergad, *Cuban Rural Society in the Nineteenth Century: The Social and Economic History of Monoculture in Matanzas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990).

in North America has meant more African Americans and fewer Afro–West Indians than their relative shares of the Atlantic slave trade warranted.

We should not wallow in counterfactuals. It is hard work to figure out what might have happened if the tape of history had run differently. Constant death made Jamaica what it was. What I find interesting is how Brown's choice of death as "the landscape of culture itself, the ground that produced Atlantic slavery's most meaningful idioms" (59) rather than seeing Jamaican culture as the product of intense racial negotiations, as is more usual, tells us something important about Brown's moral vision. His view of eighteenth-century Jamaica is relentlessly bleak, as bleak in its implications as the view of Jamaica that I presented in my biography of Thomas Thistlewood. Jamaica, Brown bluntly declares, was a "catastrophe" (12). It was a place of "dislocation, alienation, and death" (29). Yet, he occasionally finds something to celebrate in Jamaican life in the period of the Atlantic slave trade, such as the occasional resistance that enslaved people made against their masters, the vitality of slave spiritual life, and the efforts of missionaries. He is broad-minded enough to acknowledge the intelligence, the entrepreneurial ingenuity, and the personal qualities of Jamaica's wealthiest planter, Simon Taylor, and to appreciate the effectiveness of how planters exploited their black charges. But underlying his narrative is moral outrage at the wastage of lives under enslavement. He is horrified at how the actions of Africans and Britons implicated in the enslavement of Africans led enslaved Jamaicans "to associate the accumulation of wealth with the most malevolent forces in the universe" (29). Animating *The Reaper's Garden* is a commendable desire to restore to the unrecorded slave casualties of a monstrous system a dignity in death not afforded in life. Occasionally his anger boils over, as when he notes that the planter millionaire Simon Taylor has left no legacy in Jamaica except a memory of a man who "elevated property above humanity" (253). He notes the irony of Taylor's Kingston home now being the home of the Jamaican prime minister—at the time of the book's publication, a black woman.

Such sentiments are reminiscent of V. S. Naipaul's memorable statement that the West Indies was a place only of destruction, its culture mere derivative mimic inventiveness.<sup>12</sup> There is much in Brown's book to justify Naipaul's nihilism. But Brown's moral vision is not nihilistic. It is more a tragic vision, similar to that of the few Puritan divines who traveled to the Caribbean, who saw in planter excesses and in the cruel treatment of slaves what can happen when a people do not respect what Puritans saw as the moral creeds handed down in the Bible. I do not want to say that Brown is a Puritan or that his work is influenced by early Puritanism, but it is remarkable how closely his vision of America fits with the vision of America put forward in classic works on early American slavery written by scholars heavily influenced by Puritan conceptions of the proper social order.

Compared to the three authors previously celebrated above—Dunn, Braithwaite, and Dubois—Brown's view most resembles that of Richard Dunn. Brown does not follow

12 See V. S. Naipaul, *The Middle Passage* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1962), 29.

Braithwaite in celebrating how Jamaicans created a vital creole Caribbean culture out of disparate European and African heritages. He is less enthusiastic than Dubois in suggesting that blacks had their own Enlightenment and that they made major contributions to the formulation of European concepts of liberty. He tries to celebrate slave agency and he recognizes the heroism implicit in slave resistance, but his heart is not in these arguments; no one is heroic in Brown's story. The slaves who resist are killed gruesomely in spectacles of state-sponsored terror. They lose spectacularly in their contestation of white authority. They have retrospective power only as martyrs. For the most part, enslaved people in Brown's reading live miserably as traumatized, psychologically damaged people.

It is a view of Jamaican slavery that harks back to Orlando Patterson's *Sociology of Slavery*.<sup>13</sup> It accords also with Dunn's powerful statement in *Sugar and Slaves* that Caribbean slavery was one of the most dreadful systems of labor ever invented. Indeed, Dunn's vision of West Indian history as being about the evils that the English sons of Adam visited on paradisaical islands is a vision that also underlays Brown's book. Dunn came to his subject as a student of Puritanism and as an American dismayed by the manifold injustices of American society during the tumults of the late 1960s and early 1970s. His work and the work of Yale historian Edmund Morgan, also a famous scholar of Puritanism—his *American Slavery, American Freedom* was a powerful indictment of the history of Virginia and its ruling class<sup>14</sup>—were products of a specific time in American history: the trauma of Vietnam and Nixon. Both Dunn's and Morgan's books exercised, and continue to exercise, a powerful hold over a generation of scholars, in part because of their mixture of erudition, elegance, and impeccable scholarship but also in part because both scholars skewered successfully the pretensions of the most powerful members of America's historical ruling classes. That these condemnations of America's founders came from exemplary WASP academics writing from citadels of intellectual privilege played no little part in their enduring influence.

Brown writes at a different time in history than did Dunn and Morgan, and his work owes as much to a tradition of scholarship that emphasizes the reality of slave resistance and the vitality of slave culture as it does to histories that tried to show that America was born as much in Jamaica and Virginia as in New England. Brown does not come to this subject after studying Puritans. One of his aims seems to be to find a past where enslaved people had both agency and historical significance. I sympathize with this aim, as I suspect most readers will do also, even if the balance of evidence that Brown presents about life in early Jamaica suggests that most slaves lived at best lives of quiet desperation and at worst real-life examples of Hobbes's dicta about life in the state of nature being short and brutish. One cannot avoid coming to the conclusion that life for enslaved people in Jamaica was hellish, especially in the African period of slavery during the first half of the eighteenth century, when Christianity had little

13 Orlando Patterson, *The Sociology of Slavery: An Analysis of the Origins, Development, and Structure of Negro Slave Society in Jamaica* (London: Macgibbon and Kee, 1967).

14 Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975).

purchase among either whites or blacks and when early death was the experience that most linked together white masters and their mistreated enslaved people. Brown does something similar to what Dunn and Morgan did in their works written in the early 1970s—he shows that what he is writing about is not just important for scholars interested in the workings of a long vanished society but has relevance for people trying to understand different periods and times in American and Caribbean histories. Brown explicitly links his work to modern times, arguing that Jamaica tells us as much about the real soul of America as do more conventional and more uplifting narratives of slaves overcoming oppression. It is for this reason, I believe, that *The Reaper's Garden* will resonate well outside narrow circles of scholarship on whites and blacks in eighteenth-century Jamaica.

Brown, like Dunn and Morgan, is far too good a historian not to treat the past on its own terms—his book is not a history of the second Bush administration. But Brown believes, I think rightly, that the story he tells is a “dark vision” (260) of an America established in sin and maintained through brutality. He wants to restore Jamaica to its rightful place as an American colony, one whose history, though “inconvenient” (259) to Americans who see America as a “beacon on a hill,” exemplifies colonial history as much of that of Massachusetts, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. America, in this view, is the home of slavery, cruelty, and the relentless pursuit of Mammon as much as the home of liberty and freedom. I agree entirely, although I doubt that his call either to see Jamaica as integral to the story of early America or to see “the frenetic tempo and mirage-like quality of West Indian life”<sup>15</sup> as emblematic of a certain kind of colonial American life will have much purchase. Most historians cannot contemplate a British America that is not congruent with the United States. Jamaica will stay outside the mainstream of colonial American historiography, no matter how often some of us argue for its inclusion in the master narrative of American history. Moreover, the Adamic principle of the continual rebirth of a “new” America, cleansed of its original sins, is such a powerful impulse in American public life to render redundant jeremiads about America’s original sin. One need only listen to Barack Obama’s stirring election-night speech, with its evocations of America as a “beacon” to the world, its implicit assumption of American exceptionalism, and its belief in the possibilities of American spiritual regeneration, to realize that Brown’s dark vision is tilling “haunted” but barren land (59). Americans like happy endings. They like their Puritan ancestors but not those ancestors’ messages about man’s propensity to do evil.

Furthermore, seeing death as “the principal arena of social life” (*ibid.*) rather than one of several arenas of cultural creation overstates the dark side of early Jamaican life. Dunn’s and Morgan’s books were so important because the authors were aware of the ambiguities and ironies in American life. Dunn’s Barbadian planters and Morgan’s Virginian patriarchs may have initiated America’s original sin of slavery, but they also established British America as a viable colonial place. They were tyrants with a vicious streak, but they also had attractive qualities,

15 Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves*, 334.

such as compulsive hospitality, fierce egalitarianism, devotion to liberty, and successful entrepreneurialism. Their enslaved people were treated worse than any other migrant group to British America, but the slaves could fashion lives with meaning for themselves despite their travail. Brown concentrates so intensely on death as key to Jamaican cultural evolution that he highlights almost obsessively the dysfunctional, monstrous, and catastrophic aspects of Jamaican life. Brown, of course, recognizes the problems inherent in his approach. He tries to show that enslaved people could find value in their lives, brutal and truncated as those lives were. But there is an intrinsic problem with seeing Jamaica as a land haunted by death: death overwhelms life. It is easy for the ordinary reader to see this tropical land as being devoid of any lasting meaning for its residents, at least devoid of meaning for slaves before the advent of Christianity, before the beginnings of abolition, and before a slightly gentler, if still coercive, form of slavery in the early nineteenth century allowed enslaved people a form of hope that their condition may one day be improved.

How else might we see Jamaica in the eighteenth century? We can see it, for example, as an extremely racially polarized society. During the period of Brown's analysis, white Jamaicans invented new and pernicious forms of racial categorization. By the American Revolution, Jamaicans had transformed their society into what was effectively a caste society, where blackness meant inferiority and whiteness superiority. It is going too far to say that Jamaica invented the biological racism of the nineteenth century, but it was a way station along the road on which racism was pioneered. It was also a way station in the development of white male democracy; in a society where high mortality made white men few in number, to be a white man was to be someone special. Jamaica was, by the standards of Europe, and even North America, remarkably free of class distinctions. Of course, such an observation only makes sense for whites. Moreover, assertions that all white men were in a sense politically and socially equal obscures the structural inequalities of wealth in a society marked by extreme differences in wealth, even in the white population. But egalitarianism was marked. The historian Bryan Edwards celebrated white Jamaicans for having "an independent spirit and a display of conscious equality" where "the poorest white person . . . approaches his employer with an extended hand" unlike Europe where "men in the lower orders of life" seldom considered themselves to be "nearly on a level with the richest."<sup>16</sup> White Jamaicans were not only socially egalitarian; they were also determinedly committed to principles of liberty for themselves that were notably at odds with the values of the ancien regime of Britain and which foreshadowed democratic impulses in the nineteenth century. Jamaica may have stayed with Britain in the American Revolution, but wealthy planters were as committed to republican ideology as any of the Southern founding fathers.<sup>17</sup>

16 Bryan Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies*, 2nd ed., 3 vols. (London: J. Stockdale, 1793), 3:7.

17 For North America, see Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967). For Jamaica, see Jack P. Greene, "Liberty, Slavery, and the Transformation of British Identity in the Eighteenth-Century West Indies," *Slavery and Abolition* 21, no. 1 (2000): 1–28.



In their political attitudes, white Jamaicans were precociously modern, both in their racism and in their egalitarianism. They were also modern in other ways. White Jamaicans resembled twenty-first-century people more closely than we might think. They were in many respects attractive people, with values close to our own in respect to religion, sexuality, and in business. They were relentlessly secular, for example, tolerating freethinkers and scoffers of organized religion to an extent that would have been scandalous in eighteenth-century Britain. Brown notes as much in his sensitive portrayal of Kingston's leading slave trader, the secularly minded Thomas Hibbert (239–41). Jamaicans' sexual practices were also remarkably contemporary. The frequency of death meant chaotic family structures that resemble those of modern life—death playing for Jamaicans the role of divorce for us—but it also opened up possibilities, especially in the realm of sexuality. What shocked many observers of mid-eighteenth-century Jamaica was not that everyone tended to die but that Jamaicans treated sex so casually. White men seldom troubled themselves with marriage, moving from partner to partner as they pleased and living openly with black mistresses. White women, too, took advantage of the lax social mores of Jamaica to fashion lives of surprising independence. We can see this in the extraordinary life of the beautiful courtesan Teresia Constantia Phillips, nicknamed “The Black Widow” for her ability to make money from the estates of multiple deceased husbands. After coming to Jamaica in the mid-1750s, Phillips cut a swathe through Jamaican society, picking up and discarding lovers as if she were a white man and establishing herself as a woman of consequence as mistress of the revels in Jamaica's small-theater world, despite her propensity to waste the estates of her lovers in conspicuous consumption. What was immoral in Europe was no barrier to social advancement in Jamaica. Mrs. Phillips showed herself to be a thoroughly modern woman: independent, sexually free, and able to repeatedly reshape her identity through manipulations of her consumer choices.<sup>18</sup>

The modernity of Jamaica troubled observers, unused to what Joseph Schumpeter termed the creative destruction of capitalism. The ruthless efficiency of Jamaican plantation life, where large profits were made through exacting the most possible labor from slaves, resembled modern business practices. For J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, the most acute observer of America before Tocqueville, Jamaica was deeply disturbing precisely because it was so acutely modern. It inspired the complicated “Sketches on Jamaica,” a text that, perhaps unsurprisingly, given its implications for his project elsewhere of welcoming America and Americans as new men in a forward-thinking country, remained unpublished. Jamaica was an exemplar of what Crèvecoeur thought were characteristics of modernity—restless wandering, corruption, and pervasive dishonesty. He noted that Jamaica was a model of some sort, a place where there was “a great Glare of Richesses.” But his narrator was “shocked at that perpetual Collision & Combination of Crimes & Profligacy which [he] observed there,” the “severity Exercised agt ye Negroes” and the sexual excitement of illicit sexuality that raised

18 Kathleen Wilson, *The Island Race: Englishness, Empire and Gender in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 2003), 129–68.

some black females to “Pomp” from “which the rest were reduced” derived from “a perversion of appetites.” In a place with no religion “save few Temples,” everything was sacrificed to business and sensuality — “a perpetual pursuit of Gain & Pleasures seem’d to be the idol of the Island.” Jamaica was bewildering, “a Chaos of Men Negroes & things which made [his] Young American head Giddy.” Fighting his way “through this obnoxious Crowd,” he reflected that “the Island itself looked like a Great Gulph, perpetually absorbing Men by the power of Elementary Heat, of Intemperance by the force of every Excess,” so that “Life resembled a Delirium Inspired by the warmth of the sun urging every Passion & desire to some premature Extreme.”<sup>19</sup> He left Jamaica, resolving not to think about it again. The reason is clear. Thoughts of what passed in Jamaica cast doubt upon the Enlightenment project of cosmopolitan adventuring.

Like Brown, Crèvecoeur noted that the constant turnover of lives in a “Great Gulph” gave a transitory, miragelike feel to West Indian life. But, unlike Brown, Crèvecoeur links human turnover to the constant flux, instability, and moral ambivalences inherent in modern life and to the emerging capitalist system that sustained it and distorted its moral values. The only way to ensure that his vision of the United States was not violated by the realities thrown up by Jamaica’s pursuit of “business and sensuality” through the exploitation of slaves as dispensable commodities was to remove Jamaica from what constitutes American history.

Brown’s work is first a contribution to early American history and secondarily a contribution to Atlantic history. Is it also a contribution to Caribbean history? It provides a vivid interpretation of society and culture in the wealthiest eighteenth-century British West Indian colony. But it is noticeable that Brown’s epilogue is focused on the modern United States rather than on the West Indies. What does the contemporary West Indian have to learn from Brown’s work? I am not West Indian, nor a descendant either of planters or of slaves, so I would not presume to talk for “those who know that tomorrow is not promised, yesterday is not past” (261), as stated in Brown’s compelling final sentence. I suspect, however, that scholars wedded to discourses of creolization will find the bleakness of Brown’s account of Jamaica’s economic heyday and moral low point unconvincing, or at least unappealing. But a story of how materialism and high mortality in a population dominated by young adults shaped Jamaican values in retrograde ways may be seen as extremely relevant in a society that routinely sees its young men living in slums filled with despair, killing each other in escalating cycles of violence. And in a society shamed by crime and even more shamed by state-condoned intolerance to homosexuals, there may be some lessons in Brown’s description of the moral delinquencies of an earlier generation of Jamaicans that modern Jamaicans—residents, of course, of highly religiously charged environments—might find useful.<sup>20</sup>

19 J. Hector St. John [M. G. St. J. de Crèvecoeur], “Sketches of Jamaica and Bermudas and Other Subjects,” in Dennis D. Moore, ed., *More Letters from the American Farmer: An Edition of the Essays in English Left Unpublished by Crèvecoeur* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 106–13.

20 Of course, Jamaicans are as partial to jeremiads as any other people. I have placed Brown within the currents of American academic discourse, but one might as easily say that his response fits neatly within Rastafarian criticisms of modern materialism. And for denunciations of the moral decay of contemporary Jamaica, one need only read the letters column in

I deliberately opened with Edward Long because he was an English and Jamaican patriot, a man similar to forgotten creole Jamaican planters such as Sir Charles Price, speaker of the house, cultivated patron of the humanities and paternalistic slaveholder, and to Simon Taylor, the millionaire planter and proud Jamaican. Long wanted to show that Jamaica was not a social disaster. He saw great merit in humane and hospitable planters. He fashioned a robust defense of slavery and the subjugation of Negroes that makes him a pivotal figure in the development of racial theory (though Long himself was wedded to humoralism and climatic understandings of human behavior). In his neglected *English Humanity No Paradox*, he tried to defend the English from sneering charges, made by French polemicists in the aftermath of the Seven Years' War, that they were savages.<sup>21</sup> In his more substantial *History of Jamaica*, he took aim against British American colonists from northern colonies who urged Britain to make distinctions between the sturdy and indubitably white inhabitants of British America's northern provinces. Long insisted that Jamaica and its rulers were proud Britons, as loyal as any Philadelphian merchant or Boston divine and more consequential to the empire than any other American imperial subjects. He was, in short, the first advocate of creolization and a Caribbean nationalist, if not of a stripe that any modern Caribbean nationalist would want to consider.

Brown's jeremiad, his vivid evocation of Jamaica as a social catastrophe that even after two centuries still needs to be condemned, is another voice from the North, one imbued with the same puritanical distaste for Jamaican excess that marked the harsh words of American revolutionary James Otis in 1764, although Brown's jeremiad, obviously enough, dispenses with Otis's derogatory racial views. Otis fulminated that northern colonists were "free born British white subjects," as truly British as Britons themselves, unlike settlers in the Caribbean, who were a "compound mongrel mixture of English, Indian and Negro."<sup>22</sup> Otis was among the earliest Americans to try and distinguish Americans from morally suspect white West Indians. Metropolitan Britons tried the same tactic during abolition. One could explain away what white Jamaicans did to black Jamaicans by imagining that the hot tropical climate had addled their brains and that the abundance of power that slave owners had over slaves turned normal Englishmen into savage tyrants, and by considering white Jamaicans as "infected" by Africanness through their avid pursuit of sexual opportunity among supposedly sexually insatiable black women. White Jamaicans such as Simon Taylor might argue that they, like Otis, were "free born Britons," but Britons increasingly denied such claims. Jamaica was a place where race and heat transformed Englishmen into deracinated monsters. That Jamaica was a place where death was constant helped fuel understandings of black and white Jamaicans

Kingston's *Daily Gleaner*, or, as I prefer to call it, the forum for people who believe that things were so much better back in the days of the (British) governor.

21 Edward Long, *English Humanity No Paradox* (London: T. Lowndes, 1778). For the wider context, see David A. Bell, *The Cult of the Nation in France: Inventing Nationalism, 1680–1800* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

22 James Otis, *The Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved* [Boston, 1764], in Bernard Bailyn, ed., *Pamphlets of the American Revolution, 1750–1776*, volume 1, 1750–1765 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 435–36.

as irrevocably different. But Otis and the British abolitionists who succeeded in painting West Indians as backward, regressive sociopaths with little claims to Britishness were wrong. In their freethinking, in their devotion to egalitarianism (even if that egalitarianism was racially circumscribed), in their sexual libertinism, and in their ruthless materialism, white Jamaicans were indubitably modern Britons. The Caribbean might have been a place where the specter of death was omnipresent, but it was also, as Philip Morgan notes, a pioneer of modernity, an area of vital fusions between peoples brought, often unwillingly, from all over the world. It was “a generative front, a cultural frontier, a gathering place of broken pieces.”<sup>23</sup> Lawrence Stone once declared in a book review on the French Terror that he could not imagine eighteenth-century Britons acting toward others with the fury that was evident in the ferocity of French violence toward “traitors.” Stone was wrong, too. Jamaica showed what Britons were capable of doing. What they did in Jamaica not only left lasting scars on the beautiful land they corrupted but gives us a chastening glimpse into what is good and what is bad about early modern imperialism. The lesson of Jamaica is not that it was a disastrous social failure, as Dunn insists, or a catastrophic example of what Colin Dayan has memorably called “the monstrous institutionalized magic” of the gothic Americas.<sup>24</sup> It was not aberrant but typical of how colonization worked. And its history shows that the old catechism that seventeenth-century Puritans used for teaching their children how to read, as well as to teach them about the underlying truths of human existence, still has resonance for us looking at the history of early America: in Adam’s fall sinned we all.

23 Philip D. Morgan, “The Caribbean Islands in Atlantic Context, circa 1500–1800,” in Felicity A. Nussbaum, ed., *The Global Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), 64; see 52–64.

24 Dunn, *Sugar and Slaves*, 340; Joan [Colin] Dayan, *Haiti, History and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 264.