

**The Reaper's Garden:  
Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery**

Vincent Brown

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Sir Hans Sloane, the author of *A Voyage to the Islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers and Jamaica* (London: printed by B.M. for the author, 1707), describes the elaborately staged and mournful funeral rites at Africans' burials. West Africans, he wrote, "believed that their ancestors would protect them from the other world; hence it was essential to honor the dead in the best way possible" (Sloane 1707, 250–51). Now in *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* Vincent Brown presents a dynamic portrait of how Blacks in Jamaica used death, the fear of death, and the rituals of death to their advantage. He shows that slaves' responses to death were themselves a form of resistance.

In *The Reaper's Garden*, Brown combines his knowledge of the history and the anthropology of slavery, the slave trade, African and European religions, the cultures of the Africans and the English, and their respective mortality rates to show that the fear of death was one of life's constants for both the oppressor and the oppressed. He documents the effects of the slave trade on African peoples and the suffering and death that it brought in the horrific "middle passage." Surveying various funeral processions of Africans from powerful states such as Asante to the Kingdom of Dahomey, he shows how some of the rituals had been passed down to the enslaved in Jamaica.

The slave-trading barons came to realize that many African religions required the body to be whole in order for the transmigration of the soul to take place. They knew that for many Africans the only thing worse than slavery and death was a mutilated corpse unfit for a place in the African burial grounds or in heaven. Sloane wrote that "the *Negroes* from some countries think they return to their own country when they die in *Jamaica* and therefore regard death but little, imagining they shall change their condition, by that means, from servile to free, and so for this reason often cut their own Throats. Whether they do thus, or naturally, their country people make great lamentations, mourning and howlings about them expiring." "[A]t their Funeral," he added, they "throw Rum and Victuals into their Graves, to serve them in the other World. Sometimes they bury it in the ground, at other times spill it on the Graves" (1707, lvi). Even men as far away from Jamaica as Philadelphia, such as the Quaker abolitionist Anthony Benezet, noted these events. In his *Short Account of That Part of Africa*, first published in Philadelphia in 1762, Benezet quoted Captain Thomas Phillips, who wrote that "the *Negroes* are [so] loath to leave their own country, that they have often leaped out of the Canoe, Boat and ship, into the sea, and kept in the water until they were drowned, to avoid being taken up and saved by the boats that pursue them" (Benezet 1762, 47). These Africans believed that their actions would bring them freedom, if not in this world then in the next.

Brown describes the kidnapping of Africans, their confinement in the death trap of the ships' cargo hold, and, if they survived, their long seasoning process in Jamaica, which was designed to make them fit for a profitable sale without destroying their physical ability to work. Using the works of enslaved Africans such as Olaudah Equiano, white slave traders such as William Bosman, and the reformed slave-trading sea captain John New-

ton, Brown shows that both blacks and whites feared that the other lacked humanity and engaged in cannibalism.

At the center of Brown's work is his contention that "Africans integrated these views with supernatural conceptions of Atlantic geography and economy. The death of the enslaved was more than disappearances, absences, or extinctions; the deaths generated new stories and understandings to account for the enormity of the social disturbance" (41). Death was everywhere, but the slaves also used death and all that was associated with it in their struggles for freedom.

Brown describes the many forms of slave resistance and rebellion—from the first Maroon Wars of the 1730s, to Tacky's Revolt of 1760, to the activities of the Charles Town Maroons in the war of 1795—emphasizing their impact on whites' fears. Brown convincingly shows the lengths planters went to prevent their slaves from practicing African or other religions. As Brown writes, Edward Long, the author of *History of Jamaica* (London, 1774), had once dismissed the spread of Christianity among French slaves; however, after the Haitian Revolution he came to fear its influence on Jamaican slaves.

Brown quotes Simon Taylor, an attorney and one of the wealthiest plantation owners in the British Empire, who wrote to his cousin in 1807 that "some improper communication" exists among the slaves, adding that "all new Negroes know of the insurrection of 40 years ago" and asking him "if something were not going on, for what reason would they tell these New Negroes [*sic*] who have not been four months in the island of what happened before any of the negroes sent there were born" (155). Brown gives in-depth descriptions of Africans' funerals and rituals, both celebratory and mournful, and shows how whites in late-seventeenth and eighteenth-century Jamaica feared these and other assemblies of blacks in large numbers. Slaveholders especially feared the influence of black preachers, "whose sermons could be a source of insurrectionary moral authority" (Brown, 229). Long said as much, writing that the funeral had "always been their rendezvous for hatching plots" (Brown, 212).

According to Brown, fear of a short life and of death (and burial in the far-off West Indies) also consumed whites, which explains how in "early eighteenth-century Europe stories about death and pain among ordinary people proliferated, narratives that linked the concerns of reader to the experiences of others" (167). Brown quotes Adam Smith, the author of *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (London, 1759), who wrote, "We even sympathize with the dead" (Brown, 167).

In the end, for many Africans the transition to death was life's true climax. In 1711 French monk Godfrey Loyer described "The doctrine of the Transformation of the Souls" in *A Jacobite, Abstract of a Voyage to Iffini on the Gold Coast in 1701*. "The Negroes," he wrote, "believe the World to be eternal, and the Soul immortal; that after their death their Soul will go to the other World, which they place in the Centre of the Earth; that there it will animate a new Body in the Womb of a Woman; and that the Souls from thence, would do the same. So that according to this doctrine, there is a constant Intercourse or Exchange of inhabitants between these two worlds" (quoted in Thomas Astley, ed., *New General Collection of Voyages and Travels*, 4 vols. [London: Thomas Asley, 1745–47], 2:441–42). This belief kept the African alive in this world and hopeful for the next. Brown makes the connection between these two worlds, showing how from the Maroon Wars to Tacky's Revolt, Africans combined the knowledge of past rebellions, African and Christian religions, and the knowledge of death rituals to survive in life. At a time when the word *Atlantic* is attached to

even the most provincial work, Brown has produced a fully documented and readable book that connects the many links in the chains of Atlantic slavery and slave resistance.

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**Red Chicago:  
American Communism at Its Grassroots, 1928–35**

Randi Storch

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With this engaging book, Randi Storch has made a significant contribution to the continuing debate about the American Communist Party (CP). Drawing on research in Moscow's Comintern archive, Storch finds no evidence of the espionage that others have claimed is the key value of the archive's evidentiary trail. Instead, she finds it a vital source of information about a radical party that was the product of transnational, national, and local actors' political, ideological, and sectarian battles. *Red Chicago: American Communism at Its Grassroots, 1928–35* challenges the revived charge that the American CP was nothing more than a tool of Moscow. Although Storch traces Moscow's instrumental role in prescribing the policies of the party in Chicago, she argues that the meaning of the party's edicts were also shaped, ignored, or rejected at the local level. Working-class Chicagoans continued to bring their own experiences and traditions to the party. She balances the records from Moscow with local archival sources and oral histories that put a human face on activists often characterized as party-line robots. Labor historians will find much of interest in the story. Despite the problems of Stalinism, Storch shows the party politicized working-class men and women in a major industrial city, providing a bridge to participation in the labor struggles that challenged power structures in the United States.

Storch focuses her exploration of Chicago's CP on the so-called Third Period, the years considered the most sectarian in the party's history. It was then that the Comintern suggested its affiliates prepare to lead pending revolutionary struggles by exposing "misleaders" in other socialist and radical groups. For labor historians, this period is often considered a weak prelude to the dramatic mass organizing drives of the 1930s. But Storch joins other historians who have argued that this was a critical period of transition and ambiguity, when party activists and their associates learned how to engage in direct action, negotiate repression, organize in neighborhoods and workplaces, and integrate race and gender issues into their organizing strategies. Core activists hoped for a revolution and looked to the Soviet example for inspiration, but they lived in the reality of organizing in Chicago. CP members formed friendships and marriages with other radicals in the city and sometimes gained liberals' respect. She shows what is usually considered Popular Front–style (1935–39) political and social behavior in this earlier period, including party members working with liberals and churches. They were often ineffective, but even those failures prepared them to engage meaningfully in the city's gritty working-class culture. In order to build the party and be more effective working-class advocates, they learned, CP members sometimes had