

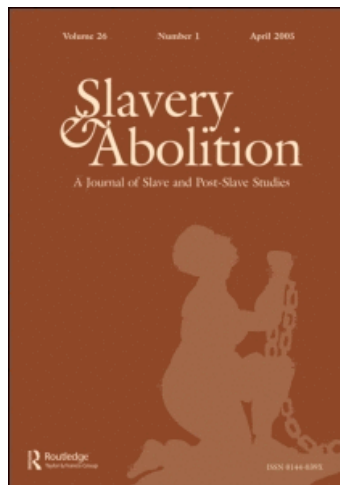
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### The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery

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## Book Review

**The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery**, by Vincent Brown, Cambridge, MA and London, Harvard University Press, 2008, xviii, 340 pp. \$35.00. ISBN 13: 978-0-674-02422-9, ISBN 10: 0-674-02422-2

*The Reaper's Garden* is an innovative and engrossing study that sheds new light on the world of Atlantic slavery by looking at the politics of death. Vincent Brown focuses on Jamaica, the most lucrative and strategically prized colony in Britain's first empire. In its eighteenth-century heyday, the island exemplified the virtues of accumulation and consumption that characterised the British Atlantic world. The colony was an economic success, feeding consumer demand for tropical staples while facilitating the ambitions of an acquisitive planter class that aimed to become 'masters of the colonial world' (20). In human terms, though, and as Brown skilfully demonstrates, the place was 'a catastrophe' (12).

Brown's main theme is death and its meaning in Jamaica before emancipation. The violence and cruelty intrinsic to New World slavery are familiar themes to historians. So too are the demographic horrors of the system. In Jamaica, high mortality rates ensured that the island earned the soubriquet 'grave of Europeans' and meant that slaveholders relied on the transatlantic slave trade to replenish the slave population. Brown expands on these themes by discussing more than just death itself. He explores the meanings that people attached to it, analysing Jamaican 'mortuary politics': the ways in which ideas and practices associated with death were put to work in pursuit of people's struggles and ambitions in the land of the living. Tropical diseases meant that whites died in Jamaica at a higher rate than blacks, and death became a central concern for colonists who gambled their lives for a share of colonial wealth. For Africans sold as slaves in Jamaica, the experience was one of alienation, and the arduous work on the plantations helped to ensure that the island 'routinely destroyed' those enslaved there (49).

In Jamaica, the ubiquity of death was a fact of life that formed 'the landscape of culture itself' (59), and Brown explores how the powerful and the oppressed made sense of this. He uses an eclectic range of sources, including monumental inscriptions, plantation papers, letters, diaries, newspapers, travel narratives, paintings, governmental documents and material culture. Almost all of these sources were written or produced by those with power and, as Brown admits, they are consequentially limiting and ambiguous, especially when it comes to analysing the practices and motivations of enslaved people. In spite of these difficulties, Brown provides a compelling analysis of death and its meaning that includes ample insights into the poorly documented political world of enslaved people. These explorations are a necessarily interdisciplinary

endeavour, drawing on approaches and insights from history, ethnography, archaeology and literary analysis.

Brown's topics are as richly varied as his sources and methods. He discusses Christian and non-Christian funeral services and burial rites as well as inquests into deaths and coroners' reports. These mortuary rituals helped to control social borders: slaveholders poured scorn on black funerary practices, marked white graves with elaborate shrines and treated the deaths of enslaved people as non-events. Death and migration meant that Jamaican society was always transitory and shifting, and Brown illustrates how bequests and wills helped to enslave and free people to cement bonds of kinship and to express their visions of the future in this uncertain world. Masters were able to use wills to keep property and power in white hands, but slaves occasionally also benefited from the wills of slaveholders, and patterns of bequests within slave communities demonstrate that they were able to create and sustain ongoing communities in the most difficult of circumstances. In Jamaican slave society, disciplinary practices often focused on the bodies of the enslaved, and executions were usually the most grisly punishments. Mutilation, gibbeting and displays of severed heads of enslaved convicts served as terrible warnings to others, but in the imaginations of enslaved people, dead rebels and their remains could also become symbols of heroism. Humanitarians across the Atlantic in the United Kingdom also sympathised with the plight of enslaved 'martyrs' killed in the aftermath of uprisings.

The rise of the British Abolitionist movement marked an important turning point in the history of slavery in Jamaica. As Brown demonstrates, the debate over the institution was also a discussion about death. The waste of human life on the Middle Passage and disastrous demographic regimes of the West Indies were mobilised by campaigners to stand for the moral and social failure of slavery. The conflict over slavery also became a struggle for the 'soul of the British Empire', as abolitionists and missionaries associated slavery with disease, sin and death and emancipation with spiritual and social rejuvenation. In the era of abolition, slaveholders tried to project themselves as loyal and useful members of the empire, often through media such as monumental inscriptions on graves and shrines. As the master class mourned their lost status in the empire and the passing of the slave system, Christianity provided many enslaved people with a new political language of opposition. Brown notes that at the point of emancipation, several black congregations held services that marked the end of slavery by burying symbols of oppression: placing whips and shackles in coffins decorated with the names of proslavery newspapers. Of course, such rituals represented the death of slavery but they did not see the passing of its many legacies, which have had a long and pernicious afterlife.

*The Reaper's Garden* sheds new light on social and cultural life in one of the most important of Atlantic slave societies. It certainly broadens our understanding of Jamaica, but it also helps us to reconsider some of the broader foundations of modern societies in the Atlantic, because, as Brown remarks, reading 'Jamaican slavery as representative of early America, rather than as anomalous, is unsettling, but also illuminating' (259). This book is a stark reminder of the human cost of European empire-building in the Americas and of the 'roots of contemporary forms of

inequality, domination, and terror' (260). Its focus on the dead, their memorialisation and political meaning also helps to open up an inspiring, and strangely lively, new vista for interdisciplinary studies of slavery and abolition in the Atlantic world.

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**Fighting for Honor. The History of African Martial Art Traditions in the Atlantic World**, by T.J. Desch Obi, Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 2008, xvi+350 pp., \$49.95, ISBN 978-1-57003-718-4

The book is a greatly revised version of the author's doctoral dissertation at the University of California (2000). In this new version, Desch Obi has incorporated a vast array of new sources and dropped some of his most extravagant former claims (for instance that during the nineteenth century capoeira was called *engolo* in Brazil). The result is a very readable account of pugilistic traditions in two African regions and three American plantation societies where these practices, according to him, were further developed. All the chapters rely on extensive research combining, in varying proportions, secondary literature, primary sources and interviews with contemporary practitioners. As very little specialised literature exists on African martial arts in the Atlantic except on capoeira, this is a welcome contribution to a rapidly developing field of scholarship. A *capoeirista* himself as well as proficient in other martial arts, Desch Obi relies on his wide expertise to make a number of pertinent observations on bodily techniques.

Desch Obi aims to show that enslaved Africans continued to maintain their pugilistic traditions in the Americas, and that, in contrast to the development of Creole languages 'there was no equivalent need to create hybrid forms' (6). For this reason, he attempts to unearth the martial traditions that existed at the time of the slave trade in southern Angola. Although his discussion of the societies that existed in the Kunene region has incorporated much new material, it still suffers from the same basic methodological flaw: Desch Obi uses late twentieth-century evidence (from the painter Neves e Sousa and his own fieldwork in the 1990s) to draw conclusions about practices two hundred years earlier. Merging evidence from pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial periods, Desch Obi describes a timeless 'Kunene society' as if martial arts and their meaning would not have been affected by historical change. He passes over the fact that there is not a single description, and not even a mention, of either *engolo* (usually spelled *n'golo*) or *kandeka* (slap boxing) prior to the 1950s. Moreover, he conveniently glosses over the problem that the most important twentieth-century ethnographer of the region, Estermann, also does not mention *engolo* even once. So his story of Kunene warriors coming to the Americas with *engolo* and *kandeka* fighting skills might please present-day *capoeiristas* but is not borne out by historical records. The formal similarities between capoeira and twentieth-century