



Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History

Volume 9, Number 2, Fall 2008

E-ISSN: 1532-5768

DOI: 10.1353/cch.0.0009

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The Reaper’s Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery. By Vincent Brown. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008

Historians have long known that the grim reaper stalked New World plantations, scything down Africans and Europeans at a horrifying rate. But in Vincent Brown’s powerful retelling of the history of Atlantic slavery, the reaper was not merely a harvester, but also a gardener (255). That is, death was generative, producing the language and politics of everyday life. “It is thus less revealing to see the extravagant death rate ... as an impediment to the formation of culture than it is to view it as the landscape of culture itself” (59). As the living buried their dead, mourned their loved ones, and tried to escape the reaper’s scythe, they created a new culture at the nexus between the here and the hereafter.

Brown’s signal contribution is his concept of “mortuary politics” (5). Most historians who have investigated African deathways in the New World have concerned themselves with unearthing the African roots of New World practices. This reflects the field’s broader interest in the process of creolization: the creation of new cultures out of Old World influences and New World circumstances. Brown, however, sidesteps the creolization paradigm. “Rather than ask of a cultural practice or idea, „How African is it?’ it might therefore be more useful to ask, “What was it used for? What were its consequences?’” (8) This is the central component of mortuary politics: what people tried to accomplish by invoking the dead or by mobilizing death practices. Deathways do not simply reflect broader historical realities, in Brown’s formulation, but help create change. And it should be emphasized that although this is a history of slavery, Brown’s subjects are not only the enslaved. Brown is also interested in how people of European descent used

mortuary politics. The result, in prose that admirably avoids breathless overstatement, is a work that manages to say something fresh about the intensively studied subject of slavery.

The story is set in Jamaica. Although some of Brown’s findings are specific to this island, most of the dynamics he describes are applicable to plantation societies throughout the Americas. Brown begins by describing the demographic disaster that was eighteenth-century Jamaica. Jamaican whites died at a faster rate than blacks; in the first half of the eighteenth century, some 50,000 European migrants streamed into the island yet the white population grew by only 5,000 (17). But at least these European fortune-seekers went to Jamaica (mostly) of their own volition. The same cannot be said, of course, for the roughly 600,000 Africans who arrived in Jamaica between 1740 and 1807 (25–26). Their death rate was slightly lower than that of whites, apparently as a result of their previous experiences with tropical diseases such as yellow fever and malaria, yet still they died at an extraordinary rate due to miserable working conditions and poor nutrition.

This is depressingly familiar to historians, but where Brown goes beyond existing works is to describe how all this dying was central to the creation of culture in Jamaica. Burial practices helped define boundaries between Europeans and Africans, clarifying what it meant to be “white” and what it meant to be “Negro” (75). But deathways also helped each group sustain itself in the face of potentially crippling death rates. For people of African descent this was especially important. “Funeral ceremonies, which had been perhaps the most important occasions for communal association in Africa, became still more significant in the context of demographic calamity in Jamaica” (74). Mortuary politics was likewise evident in what Brown calls “necromancy,” the “conjunction and manipulation of the dead for the purpose of shaping actions and events” (130). Whites and blacks practiced necromancy with equal fervor. Slaveowners relied on postmortem humiliation of black corpses—placing severed heads on poles, nailing ears to trees—to send the message that they had control over life and death. Blacks responded with obeah and myal, religious practices that connected the dead with the living through the harnessing of supernatural powers.

Because Brown’s subject is mortuary politics and not the narrower mortuary practices, he is able to expand his discussion beyond what one might expect. In particular, Brown creatively connects the British abolition movement that emerged in the 1780s with attitudes toward death. Starting in the middle of the eighteenth century, he argues, evangelicalism and graveyard literature “focused British attention on the relation between death and moral values” (157). Brown would not go so far as to argue that British ideas about death were decisive in the campaign to end the slave trade, but his perspective sheds new light on the subject. He shows that high slave mortality rates became a moral problem for an increasingly large segment of the British population, leading to a fear of national damnation that could be prevented only by ending the slave trade and, ultimately, slavery itself.

But before that could happen, the death practices of Afro-Jamaicans would be shaped by a new influence: Protestant missionaries. By the early part of the nineteenth century, increasing numbers of slaves and free blacks began to embrace Christianity and its mortuary rituals. What some plantation owners looked upon as a positive development came back to haunt them, however, in the Baptist War of 1831–1832. Organized largely by recent Baptist converts, the largest slave rebellion in the island’s history sounded the death knell of slavery in the British West Indies.

Brown’s concept of mortuary politics will prove a powerful tool for scholars of colonial societies around the globe. From Jesuit efforts to shape the deathbed scenes of Huron Indians in New France, to British officials in Calcutta being buried in elaborate tombs in the Indo-Muslim style, death practices have been a point of contact, contestation, and conflict between colonists and the subaltern. *The Reaper’s Garden* stands as a model for future studies in this paradoxically generative field.

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