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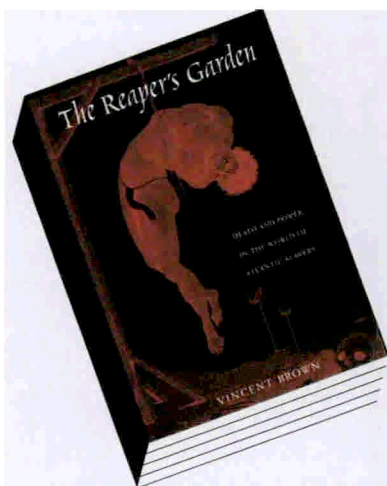
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**The Reaper's Garden:
Death and Power in the World of
Atlantic Slavery**
By Vincent Brown
Harvard University Press
368pp, £22.95
ISBN 9780674024229
Published 28 February 2008

Following its devastating defeat in the Seven Years' War, France wanted to re-establish its American empire. What it needed was a new and better New France. The Duc de Choiseul settled on Kourou in French Guiana, thinking it a kind of balmy Massachusetts. He arranged for 14,000 people to move there in 1764. White migration on this scale was extraordinary. If the project had worked, then France would have had a wonderful base of white settlement in the Americas.

Of course, it didn't work and didn't have a chance of working. The Caribbean was a killing ground for Europeans. More than 9,000 of the Kourou settlers died within a few months from disease or despair. Kourou followed a host of demographic disasters, such as the Scottish plan to settle Darien in the 1690s, in which the deadly climate of the Caribbean foiled white settlement. Moreover, even

when white settlement led to viable societies and to stunning economic profits, as happened in 18th-century Jamaica – the subject of Vincent Brown's engrossing new book – death was ever-present. White survival rates in places such as Jamaica were dismal, despite relatively higher immigration rates. Death shaped social life, as engaging prints of the life of Johnny Newcomer, an aspiring would-be planter who lived merrily but died quickly, attested.

Death was a constant for blacks as well. Jamaica was far and away the leading importer of African slaves in British America. The total number of Africans sent to Jamaica was close to a million. But unlike America, where relatively small slave importations led, through natural increase, to large Creole slave populations, Jamaican slavery never became demographically self-sustaining. A million African migrants resulted in a population of about 300,000 people of African descent by 1807.

Brown notes these demographic realities, though without much empirical detail. This is unfortunate. That Jamaica remained a land full of first-generation migrants from Britain and West Africa, few of whom had descendants, shaped its social patterns profoundly.

Brown's major concern, however, is the cultural significance of death in a land marked by high mortality. Here, his account is compelling and highly original. He is especially interested in how both whites and blacks used death to control the strange environment they found themselves in.

He argues that while death destroyed individuals it generated a society, or rather two societies. One was European, "careless of futurity", as one contemporary chronicler put it, debauched and irreligious almost as a way of



laughing in the face of impending mortality. The other was African, traumatised by brutal treatment but gaining some small solace through memories of African mortuary practices.

Death brought them together. It was a common idiom through which they communicated. Whites used African understandings of death to terrorise slaves physically and emotionally. Death and terror went together, allowing planters to keep slaves in check but in the long run dramatically lowering their status in a metropolitan

world increasingly hostile to them. That planters could not maintain slave populations without recourse to the slave trade was a damning indictment of the immorality of slavery as an institution. Slaves, for their part, used rituals about death to oppose slave holders.

Brown emphasises how important the sacred realm was for slaves. It gave them solace. It also gave them, through obeah and then through Christianity, the means to challenge white supremacy. Whites hated obeah as superstition. They detested Christianity because Christianity meant missionaries. Through missionaries slaves were able to develop a moral critique of slavery, employing imagery about death and the dead that metropolitan elites were bound to accept.

Jamaican blacks showed that if you wanted to see hell on earth, you need only go to Jamaica. It was, and unfortunately still is, a place where death is a vital presence.

Thomas Thistlewood and His Slaves in the Anglo-Jamaican World (2004).

Trevor Burnard is professor of American history, University of Warwick, and author of *Mastery, Tyranny, and Desire*: