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

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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. ISBN-13: 978-0674057128

The Atlantic World was steeped in violence and death: Europeans decimated native populations, tormented millions of souls through the Atlantic slave trade, and themselves were susceptible to new pathogens and resistance to their own brutal tactics. Over the past few decades scholars have become increasingly aware of the ways that violent cultural contact shaped the societies which formed around the Atlantic world. In British colonial Jamaica, a colony built on the coerced labor of hundreds of thousands of saltwater slaves, violence was in no short supply. Vincent Brown argues, in his book *The Reaper's Garden*, that a force more omnipresent than violence played a pivotal role in shaping the ways that Jamaica's diverse population navigated their tenuous social relationships: death. Brown uses death as a sociopolitical theme to explore how the treatment of the dead reflected the society of the living, as well as how the constant specter of death influenced the interactions of those still alive.

Jamaica, as a British colony, was a lethal place. During its years as a sugar-centric slave colony, the population of Jamaica, both European and enslaved, was unsustainable. Birth rates simply could not keep pace with the staggering momentum of the grim reaper's work. This deadly environment provides a perfect backdrop for Brown to examine how a society, continuously confronted by death, used certain ideas regarding death and the dead to navigate social spaces. *The Reaper's Garden* discusses many aspects of the cultural constructs associated with the end of life. These include ideas about what should be done with a person's body, who should have access to a person's physical belongings after death, what happens to a person's spirit when they die, and what, if any, moral role does society have in protecting people from

death. By looking at how these different aspects were approached throughout the British Empire's control of Jamaica, Brown makes a compelling argument for understanding death as a sociopolitical tool used by both sides in a struggle to establish, maintain, and restructure power.

Brown uses the structure and flow of his book in a clever way, moving from the stark contrasts in material wealth between slave and master towards a conclusion which highlights how death and burial practices epitomize the creolization process undergone by both free and captive Jamaicans. While not strictly chronological in nature, *The Reaper's Garden's* chapters follow a social transformation which Brown argues was uniquely shaped by the omnipresence of death. Brown makes his case in seven well formulated chapters, separating the major themes of his work, while still allowing them to inform his overall argument. Chapter One focuses on the disparity of material grave culture between Europeans and enslaved Africans, which serves to showcase the lived gap in access to wealth and power. Brown then examines the availability and purpose of burial rituals among the two groups as a means of exploring changing views of the afterlife and its meaning to society. Chapter Three discusses the ways in which the dead held power over the living, and the evolution of this sway as a means of navigating the enormous sociopolitical divide between Europeans and those of African descent. The book continues to explore how death was used as a tool, with both sides manipulating its meaning to cope with the harsh conditions of colonial slavery. Chapters Five, Six, and Seven discuss the legacy of death and the dead, from how astronomical casualty rates in colonies like Jamaica bolstered the British abolitionist movement, to how modern Jamaica remembers its earliest Old World residents and their struggles for human agency, even in death.

The Reaper's Garden offers an extensive bibliography, comprised of both well researched primary documents and pertinent pieces of more contemporary academic sources. Brown weaves

these together in a well-paced and approachable piece of original scholarship which explores Jamaica in a novel yet important way. Jamaica's extraordinary mortality rate has not escaped past historical analyses, but *The Reaper's Garden* goes well beyond the scope and intent of past research in an effort to understand what death meant for both the people of, and society in, Jamaica. Brown's argument is bolstered by his examination of death through the lenses of Europeans in Jamaica, Africans in Jamaica, and most importantly how death was viewed/used between these two groups of people. Some things in death, like in life, are literally black and white (e.g. statistical data about death rates), but the book uses the gray areas around the margins of death to explore how people used non-concrete notions of death, dying, and the dead to negotiate their own place in society. In *The Reaper's Garden*, Brown offers a compelling argument for reexamining the power that death has over a society, and paves the way for further scholarship in other areas of the Atlantic World using this unique approach.

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About the author

Micheal Williams is a senior history major at Middle Georgia State University. Micheal has been a peer tutor in his department for two years, as well as serving as vice president of the History Student Organization for three semesters. He has presented his research at local, state, and national undergraduate conferences, and enjoys learning and sharing his interest in history with others. His research interests lie in the cultural and sociopolitical histories of Native Americans

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