

was the text of the common African' (p. 226). Perhaps, but where Desch Obi does rely on documentary evidence, he does not inspire full confidence. For example, he writes that African American 'women were frequently wrestlers' in the South Carolina low-country (p. 84). This claim is entirely unsubstantiated in the text, and the endnote provides only a single anecdotal reference. Similarly, on two occasions, Desch Obi claims that North American blacks were present in Brazilian 'capoeira societies' as early as 1812, continuing through the 1860s (pp. 170, 210). Again, he provides no evidence in the text, and the endnote simply cites a secondary source. Wanting to substantiate this fascinating possibility of connection between African Americans, Afro-Brazilians and Central African-derived martial arts, I consulted the book in question, only to find that two American free blacks were jailed in Rio in 1812 for a street altercation that the arresting officer first documented as 'capoeira', which was then scratched out and replaced with the word 'pancada' ('brawl'). There is nothing to indicate that these two men were members of 'capoeira societies', let alone that other African Americans remained involved in 'societies' through the 1860s.

Setting aside Desch Obi's tendency to overstate his evidence, *Fighting for Honor* still makes crucial contributions to our understanding of African continuities and changes in the Americas. Desch Obi reminds us that the traditions of *engolo* literally lived in the bodies of those martial artists who performed *ladja*, *capoeira*, etc. These 'living traditions' served various roles across history, passing from one generation to the next, but the common threads that tied them all together were the inverted kicking style and the persistent claims to human dignity, respect and honor. By recognizing the expressions of Central African tradition embodied in the unique fighting moves of African-descended peoples in the Americas, Desch Obi 'assures that the honor fought for and hard-won in the state of bondage will not be lost in their historical legacy' (p. 217).

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## THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF SLAVERY IN THE ATLANTIC WORLD

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*The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery.* By VINCENT BROWN. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2008. Pp. xvii + 340. \$35 (ISBN 978-0674024229).

KEY WORDS: Diaspora, popular culture, slavery, slave trade.

In the 1960s through the 1980s, studies of the Caribbean tended to be focused on social statistics, on plantation management practices and on slaves. Since the 1980s, however, more and more scholars have begun studying culture in the shadow of slavery, and indeed, as this trend has developed, Africa and the African background is gradually entering the history of the Caribbean. Vincent Brown's study of death and the culture of death in Jamaica is a fitting new addition to this culture-centered trend in Caribbean history.

From the start, Brown reminds us that death was one of the critically defining aspects of Caribbean life in the eighteenth century. Jamaica was not only, as most readers realize, a death trap for its African slaves, it also killed Europeans off in great numbers. High mortality was commonplace in the eighteenth century but, in

stable populations such as Europe and Africa, it was mostly the elderly and young children who died. Death in Jamaica upset this regime by taking not only the very young, the old and the infirm, but also apparently strong and healthy adults. Although Brown does not engage in much statistical research, neither trying to discover death rates in Jamaica, nor seeking to compare those of Jamaica with European or African rates, he has in fact demonstrated that, even by eighteenth-century standards, Jamaica was unusually deadly, and not just for the exploited and abused slaves, but also for their European and even Euro-Jamaican masters. To drive this latter point home, Brown uses a late eighteenth-century illustrated book, *Johnny New-come in the Island of Jamaica*, as a sort of illustration and trope for the ubiquity of death for white Jamaicans.

It is not surprising, in a world defined by high mortality, that Jamaica should develop a culture in which death became almost a pre-occupation. Brown skillfully uses this obsession with death to write a much broader social history of Jamaica than he might have using the more mundane measures of social statistics. He advances his argument in parallel sections, contrasting Euro- and Afro-Jamaicans' manner of dealing with death. He argues, for example, that white Jamaicans used death to assert and reassert status (whether in announcements, monuments or funerals), while black Jamaicans used the ceremonial of death to seek regeneration of a shattered society. Elsewhere, he seeks to demonstrate how masters understood and sought to manipulate African and Afro-Jamaican religious beliefs to give torture and execution an extra, spiritual dimension, while the same Afro-Jamaicans used spiritual poisons as counter-terror. A meditation on the *Zong* case, in which a ship captain threw slaves overboard to cheat insurance companies, reveals the widespread influence of the case, and others like it, in shaping Abolitionist appeals, and how the economic costs of high slave death rates helped spur 'amelioration' and, ultimately, the end of both the slave trade and slavery. High death rates among the missionaries sent to Jamaica made full-scale conversion of Afro-Jamaicans to Christianity more difficult, and resulted in a sort of half-way ground, rooted in the death culture of the slaves, mixed with African religions and Catholicism from Africa or (later) Haiti.

Given the wide-ranging nature of Brown's study, this book is in fact much more than simply a study of death and mortuary practices. It examines social status and hierarchy, religious beliefs and conversions, perceptions of crime (or social control) and punishment, and finally, as befits a topic so weighted with symbols, provides a fine study of symbolism. It is an important contribution to our understanding of the cultural context of slavery, so often absent in the more economically focused studies of the past, but much more in tune with the study of slavery in the context of Atlantic history.

From an Africanist perspective, the book is much more firmly rooted in Jamaica than it is in Africa. While Brown is cognizant that many Jamaicans he studies were born and socialized in Africa and were thus likely to bring their ideas about death and the afterlife to their observances of death rituals, he presents the study of death in Africa more as background than as a fundamental part of the dynamic. The slave trade had profound demographic effects in Africa, for example, and death and deportation led to substantially skewed sex ratios over time, but this and other dynamics that might have been relevant are unexplored in the book. Brown does engage existing secondary literature quite well, and has explored fruitfully a good range of African primary literature too, so the criticism is rather more one of emphasis than one of neglect.

In total, however, Brown's work is engaging and original, and raises important questions about the African diaspora. He is certainly cognizant that many

Jamaicans were Africans and keeps Africa in the picture. His contribution to the study of Jamaican and Caribbean history is substantial and the book is likely to be frequently noted in the emerging new culture-focused studies of Caribbean history.

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## THE FRAGILITY OF DISEASE BOUNDARIES

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*Plague Ports: The Global Urban Impact of Bubonic Plague, 1894–1901*. By MYRON ECHENBERG. New York: New York University Press, 2007. Pp. xvi + 349. \$50 (ISBN 978-0-8147-2232-9).

KEY WORDS: Colonial, comparative, health, medicine, urban.

*Plague Ports* is a comparative study of the impact of bubonic plague on ten ports around the world during the third plague pandemic from about 1894. The ten ports are: Hong Kong (1894), Bombay (1896), Alexandria (1899), Porto (1899), Buenos Aires (1900), Rio de Janeiro (1900), Honolulu (1899–1900), San Francisco (1900–1), Sydney (1900) and Cape Town (1901). The book underscores the global impact of the third pandemic, when empire and global trade had connected ports around the world and transformed an epidemic that began in Asia into a world-wide health concern across five continents. The book examines the responses to the pandemic of medical and public health authorities, politicians, the print media and the general population in these urban ports.

The book's introduction (Part 1) provides a discussion of medical developments in the second half of the nineteenth century that would frame medical knowledge and the response to bubonic plague. It gives a short overview of the three historic plague pandemics, outlines the epidemiology and ecology of the disease, and the transmission links between fleas, rats and people. Hong Kong was one of the first ports to experience plague in 1894, whence the disease had made its way from the mainland city of Canton. It was in Hong Kong in 1894 that bacteriologists Kitasato Shibasaburō and Alexandre Yersin independently discovered the plague bacillus that would later bear Yersin's name. From Hong Kong, British commercial links would facilitate the introduction of plague to Bombay. During the Bombay epidemic, a Jewish Ukrainian bacteriologist, Waldemar Mordechai Haffkine, would produce and successfully test an anti-plague vaccine. Haffkine's vaccine would be in demand around the world during the third plague pandemic. An important theme in the book is the rivalry between the sanitarians and the bacteriologists – the latter, proponents of germ theory – and how these theories of medicine overlapped in the late nineteenth century. In both Hong Kong and Bombay, plague severely affected those who worked at docks or lived close to ports, and dwellers in slum areas. The outbreak of plague in Alexandria would bring the disease to the doors of Europe. Plague made its appearance in Porto, Portugal, in 1899, causing great concern among its neighbors – especially France and Spain – who feared the permeability of boundaries to disease. Plague struck Honolulu and San Francisco in the United States, two cities with large Chinese immigrant populations, who lived in poor housing close to the ports. Plague incidence would be notable among Asian immigrants, who also bore the brunt of official anti-plague measures. Echenberg points out that plague mortality in