From "Numbered Notations" to Named Ancestors: Finding Contemporary Meaning in Vincent Brown's *The Reaper's Garden*

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Uncanny, really, how *The Reaper's Garden* landed on my desk during the period in which Jamaicans were rehearsing some of the very issues that Vincent Brown revisits in his book.[1] The period in question was 2007–2008, when plans were being made and implemented to mark the bicentennial of the passing of the British Slave Trade Abolition Act, and death and murder by colonialism were on everyone's mind. We were recalling the evidence that quantitative historians—from Philip Curtin through Michael Craton, Richard Dunn, Stanley Engerman, B. W. Higman, Meredith John, Kenneth and Virginia Kiple, and Richard Sheridan, to David Eltis and his team (all sources Brown found critical in writing his book)—had long revealed: slavery and the trade in Africans created a demographic disaster for the Caribbean.[2] That

1 Vincent Brown, *The Reaper's Garden: Death and Power in the World of Atlantic Slavery* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); hereafter cited in text.

2 See Philip Curtin, *Migration and Mortality in Africa and the Atlantic World, 1700–1900* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2001); Michael Craton, *Searching for the Invisible Man: Slaves and Plantation Life in Jamaica* (Ontario: Historical Reflection Press, 1974); Richard S. Dunn, "The Demographic Contrast between Slave Life in Jamaica and Virginia, 1760–1865," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 151, no. 1 (March 2007): 43–60; Stanley L. Engerman and Eugene D. Genovese, eds., *Race and Slavery in the Western Hemisphere: Quantitative Studies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975); B. W. Higman, *Slave Populations of the British Caribbean, 1807–1834*, with a new introduction (1984; Kingston: The Press University of the West Indies, 1996); Meredith John, *The Plantation Slaves of Trinidad, 1723–1816: A Mathematical and*

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demographic disaster was attributable in large measure to the factors that caused a high mortality rate in the region and the inability of the fertility rate to compensate for the drastic population loss. A similar population loss was noted among Europeans, who were both victims and perpetrators (albeit unequally so) of this world of death. And, if one follows Brown's peek into the minds of the enslaved (3), death was a social leveler and equalizer.

The period was one in which chairs of bicentennial committees in the Caribbean were giving numerous public lectures on the subject of slavery in the region and introducing audiences to the cultural rituals of the enslaved, including slave funerals. I recall how amused my students were when they first heard Ebenezer's funeral sermon, "Dea Belubbed."[3] It was a period in which controversy reigned over the plans to observe the bicentennial (with many wanting to leave the memory of slavery and the trade behind). Controversy also reigned over Jamaica's plans to hold a national ancestral funeral rites ceremony at Kingston Harbor and erect monuments to the dead ancestors at three places: in Montego (on the site of some of the hangings after the 1831–32 emancipation war), at Kingston Harbor (to mark the arrival point of so many Africans), and at Black River (in memory of those on the slaver *Zong*). Two of the three monuments have since been constructed and unveiled. It was a period in which many sectors in the Jamaican society were asking for the list of ancestors whose names could be recalled and mourned like never before, thereby ensuring that they transitioned from mere "numbered notations" (44), in Brown's characterization, to the status of named and honored ancestors. The most accessible list, gleaned from testimonies and punishment lists, was of those implicated in the1831–32 emancipation war in Jamaica—a war that Ahmed Reid and I had, since 2004, been serializing in the *Jamaica Journal*[4]—and this list was inscribed on the monument in Montego Bay. It was a period in which the evidence of the crime of slavery, as represented by the horrors of the Middle Passage and plantation experience, was fueling the renewed call for reparation.

So, published as it was during the bicentennial (which was observed in the former British colonies in the Caribbean in 2007–2008 and in the United States in 2008), *The Reaper's Garden* came as a welcome reminder of the crime of slavery. It was a welcome piece of additional evidence for the reparation cause. It was a welcome reminder—to those who would wish to travel without a historical road map or, in Rex Nettleford's insightful words, "drive without a rearview mirror"—that it cannot be done. It was a welcome reminder that slavery is not only about the past but also about the present. The book should also provide further inspiration to

Demographic Enquiry (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Kenneth F. Kiple and Virginia H. Kiple, "Deficiency Diseases in the Caribbean," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 11, no. 2 (1980): 197–215; Richard Sheridan, *Doctors and Slaves: A Medical and Demographic History of Slavery in the British West Indies, 1680–1834* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985); and David Eltis et al., *The Slave Trade Database* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

3 Cynric Williams, *A Tour through the Island of Jamaica: From the Western to the Eastern End in the Year 1823* (London: Hunt and Clark, 1826). See also Hilary McD. Beckles and Verene Shepherd, eds., *Slave Voices: The Sounds of Freedom* (Paris: UNESCO, 2004).

4 See, for example, Verene A. Shepherd and Ahmed Reid, "Rebel Voices: Testimonies from the 1831/32 Emancipation War in Jamaica," *Jamaica Journal* 27, nos. 2–3 (April 2004): 54–63; and Verene A. Shepherd, "Monuments, Memorialisation and Decolonization in Jamaica," *Jamaica Journal* 29, no. 3 (December 2005–April 2006): 34–43.

those engaged in "applied history" or a history of the present and in the project of iconic and "symbolic decolonization," to use David Trotman's term.[5] Finally, it should remind those of us in the African diaspora of what the ancestors went through and what they had to cope with, if not overcome. It is a reminder of the horrors of slavery and of why we select, declare, and memorialize heroes and heroines of the slavery era.

So what should historians do with Brown's perhaps familiar to most of us but nevertheless timely rehearsal of the morbid tale of cruelty, death, and destruction that was the Caribbean experience with European enslavement of Africans? How are we supposed to feel after reading his reminders to those who may have forgotten about the search for wealth and power that led to colonization and settlement in Africa and the Americas? Other reminders are of the racism that created and sustained the slave systems and the plantation economies and the appropriation and expropriation of Caribbean resources to Europe for the latter's development. Still others are of the brutality of slavery and the inhumanity of enslavers that led to resistance and abolition. Brown confronts us with the unending tale of disease, death, burial, and "mortuary politics," and the reality that death and destruction ("evil and deadly magic") were such pervasive aspects of the trade in Africans and slavery that they inevitably "generated new stories and understandings to account for the enormity of the social disturbance" (41). What actions does this tale, this reminder, inspire? For certainly *The Reaper's Garden* calls for action. It cannot simply be read and lauded (as many reviewers will no doubt do) for its articulation and rearticulation of a slice of Caribbean sociocultural history.

Before I explore that "call to action," politics-of-death dimension, which is the aspect of the book of most interest to me (I so like the title of the last chapter—"Gardens of Remembrance"), let me invoke Brown's statement that "attitudes toward death often lie at the heart of social conflict, and the dead are frequently objects of contention and struggle" (5). Why invoke this? It reminds me of the debates generated by the bicentennial over whether it was important to memorialize the dead, regardless of why and how they died. It reminds me of the internal wrangling over reparation, which involved remembering not only the "death throes of slavery" (in terms of the struggle for abolition and the realization that slavery was seeing its last days) but also the deaths wrought by slavery. This latter is, of course, an essential dimension of the calculation for repair. The annual bickering in Jamaica about the celebration of birthdays as opposed to "deathdays"—which resulted in some heroes/heroines (whose birthdays are known) having more "honoring moments" than others—is also called into memory.

The end result of those wranglings and debates and discussions—at least in Jamaica—was partial consensus. Jamaicans realized (as did the enslaved) that, to borrow from Brown, "the deaths of the enslaved were more than disappearances, absences or extinctions" (41). Just as the enslaved had to make sense of the tragedy, so did their descendants.

5 David Trotman, "Symbolic Decolonization and the City Landscape in Trinidad," City Life in Caribbean History (paper presented at the third Text and Testimony Collective Conference, University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus, Barbados, 11–13 December 2003).

Conscious that so many of the Africans along the route to the Americas "passed without communal care" (43), that they were never commemorated, and that the African tradition requires that the dead be mourned and properly "sent off," as well as that mortuary practices and funeral rituals help the living to heal and are ways of honoring and memorializing the dead, the Jamaica Bicentenary Committee and the Ministry of Tourism, Entertainment, and Culture organized an Ancestral Funeral Rites Ceremony as the major bicentennial commemorative event. The ceremony was performed under the direction of a priest from Ghana—without any reflection of rank or exhibitions of internal hierarchies. The popular radio station, IRIE-FM, through Andrea Williams's program "Running African" and in collaboration with the Jamaica National Bicentenary Committee, held its own funeral rites ceremony in the early morning of 25 March 2007, under the direction of a Yoruba priestess. Brown points to the importance of such actions in his observation that the "grieving process" (an essential aspect of the ceremonies) is "crucial to acknowledging and healing the disruptions caused by death," because "burial ceremonies, as final rites of passage, provide an outlet for anguish and an opportunity for commiseration" (61). The ritual was not without criticism. Die-hard Pan-Africanists felt that the organizational elements were not authentically African. At best, it was a creolized form of African burial rituals; but it comforted many descendants, some of whom plan to return to that space for annual commemoration. Once the proposed Ancestral Arrival Point Monument is constructed at the major historical disembarkation point of Kingston Harbor, such an annual ritual will take on more visibility and meaning.

The second event that commemorated resistance, and death as a result of resistance, was the unveiling of what the Jamaica National Heritage Trust called a "freedom monument," in honor of those who were punished, mostly by hanging, for their roles (or alleged roles) in the final emancipation war led by Samuel Sharpe in 1831–32 (see fig. 1). Brown outlines the course and consequences of this war in chapter 7, using the usual secondary sources on which most of us have come to rely. (It is not clear to me that he consulted the manuscript source—C.O. 137/185—that brings a human face to many of the activists because of the many names and testimonies it contains.) The freedom monument's function is to inscribe the names of the martyrs on the Jamaican landscape and to help shift from text to public space the history of death and destruction by colonialism. This monument may not be as impressive as the monuments to the appropriation of Caribbean resources and the labor of the enslaved apparent on the Jamaican and British landscape (I think here of Beckford Tower, surviving "Great Houses," monumental inscriptions, etc.).[6] But it cannot be faulted for its symbolic value as a site of memory.

Unlike the monument to Tacky's war of 1760, located in Port Maria, St. Mary (a monument on which there are no names), the names on the freedom monument help to address the fact that the enslaved resided mainly as what Brown calls "numbered notations" (44) for much of

6 See Brown, *The Reaper's Garden*, 236–54.

1. Freedom monument erected by the Jamaica National Heritage Trust to honor those who were accused of participating in the 1831–32 emancipation war in Jamaica.

their lives and at their death. Because we know, and Brown reinforces, that planters profited even from the deaths of the enslaved, it would be interesting to calculate the "value" of those who were executed, and for whom their owners no doubt placed claims to the Assembly for "loss of property," and add that total to the reparation claim.

Death was also commemorated in the form of a plaque to memorialize and remember the victims of the *Zong* tragedy. At this ceremony, like the one in Montego Bay, "the dead were invoked to commemorate particular interpretations of the history of [slavery]," to use Brown's words, "and to provide symbolic positions from which to fight future battles between former slaves and former masters" (235).

Vincent Brown asks, "How in a frenzied, high stakes game of chance, did white immigrants build a society on the ruins of human life and dignity?" (57). We may not be able to answer that question, although we know that they did—and profitably. But perhaps our task is to try by way of memorialization to restore that dignity—lest we forget. In the meantime, we ask, as Jamaican artiste "Mr. Perfect" does: who is going to pay reparation for their souls? And because so many are martyrs, we continue to press regional governments for more memorials. We need to press for more sites of remembrance in an attempt to establish "some continuity in the midst of flux, rupture, and loss" (231), not just monuments to modern politicians.

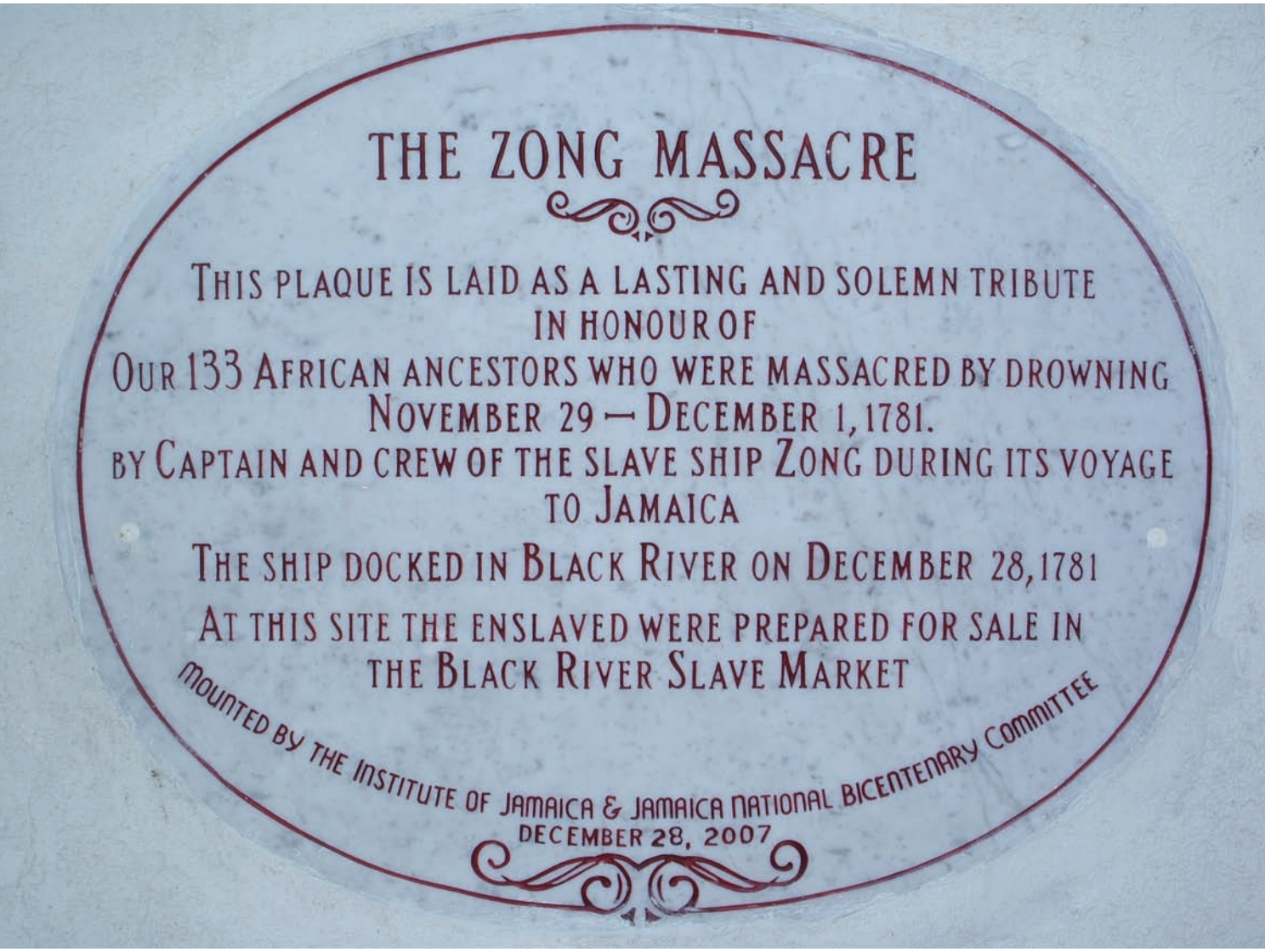
Such memorials may be scoffed at as encouraging "dark tourism," but we need these tangible sites of memory because they can guide us as we attempt to recover "the fragmented, silenced, screaming memories of slavery."[7] Among those whose deaths we mourn are the following from St. James, martyrs in the 1831–32 emancipation war.

7 Joanne Braxton, "Monuments of the Black Atlantic: Introductory Remarks," in Joanne Braxton and Maria I. Diedrich, eds., *Monuments of the Black Atlantic: Slavery and Memory* (Berlin-Hamburg-Munster: Lit Verlag, 2004), 7.

NAMES	PROPERTY OR ENSLAVER	SENTENCE
William Clarke	Bamboo	Death
Sam Clarke	Retirement	Death/executed
Cuffee	Lima	Death/executed
Henry Collman	Belfield	Death/executed
Samuel Cleland	Belfield	Death/executed
Cyrus	Vaughansfield	Death/executed
Sam Dickson	Welcome	Death
William Dodd	Concordia	Death/executed
John Dunbar	John H. Morris	Death/executed
George Duhaney	Mrs. R. Grizzell	Death
Thomas Duhany	Williamsfield	Death/executed
Nicholas Doman	Roehampton	Death
Duncan alias Thomas Denniston	Ann G. Morris	Death/executed
Dennis	Rebecca Grizzell	Death/executed
Daniel Dehany	Worchester	Death/executed
George Edwards	Mrs. Warburton	Death/executed
Prince Edward	John S. Waite	Death/executed
William Ellis	Welcome	Death
James Ellis		Death
Martin Fowles	Wiltshire	Death/executed
Thos Flemming	Friendship	Death/executed
Joseph Fitzroy	Retirement	Death/executed
Edward Fowler	John Irving	Death/executed
Adam alias Thos Gordon	Moor Park	Death/executed
Richard Gillespie	John S. Waite	Death/executed
Thomas Galloway	Unity Hall	Death/executed
John Gordon	Unity Hall	Death/executed
James Guy	Belfield	Death
George Grant	Retirement	Death/executed
John Guthrie	Argyle	Death/executed
Charles Gordon	Unity Hall Est.	Death/executed
Robert alias Sam Griffith	Summer Hill Penn	Death/executed

2. Monument to honor the victims of the *Zong*. Photograph by Walter Aarons.

May their souls rest in peace and may their descendants continue to seek compensation for their unlawful execution and death by colonialism. And thanks to Vincent Brown for reminding us of the morbid realities of slavery right in the midst of the celebration of agency.



3. Detail of monument to honor the victims of the *Zong*.
Photograph by Walter Aarons.