CONSTRUCTING A PICTURESQUE LANDSCAPE:
Picturing Sugar Plantations in the Eighteenth-Century British West Indies

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The importance of sugar to the establishment of the African slave trade in the British West Indies is an issue that has been acknowledged and discussed in great detail by scholars of various disciplines, historical periods, and regions of focus. It is an established fact that the transformation of the British Caribbean into a sugar monoculture was one of the driving forces behind the increased demands for labor by early British inhabitants which was filled by the forced transplantation of millions of African slaves. Sugar, in all aspects of its production, has played a critical role in shaping the imperial history of settlement, colonization, and economic development of the British West Indies. As a focus of academic scholarship, sugar goes back very far in history. It has not only been studied how the production of sugar affected the West Indian islands occupied by the British, but sugar has also been investigated in connection to the history of European development, commerce, and the rise of modern industrialization and urban growth. While sugar has had the attention of historians, scientists, and anthropologists, little scholarly work has focused on the visual representations of this valuable commodity. The present study engages visual representations of sugar plantations as a source of insight from which to consider how imperial ideologies worked to construct notions about West Indian agricultural production generally, sugar production specifically, and their relations to plantation slavery. As such, this essay aims to expand on existing scholarship on sugar by introducing an art historical perspective that will consider how visual representations of sugar production communicated specific notions about slavery and the African slave labor involved in the production of this valuable commodity.

This essay explores landscape images produced by British artists such as George Robertson and considers the artistic and aesthetic devices employed in the construction of the West Indian sugar plantation as a picturesque ideal. All landscape images, even those that stress truthfulness and documentation, remain representations of a place that encompass social, personal, and political dimensions. This paper focuses on the employment of one such approach to the representation of the natural world—the theory

of the picturesque as applied to landscape images of the West Indies. The theory of the picturesque in relation to landscape was formally articulated during the eighteenth century in the writings of, among others, William Gilpin and Uvedale Price.[1] In their definition of the picturesque landscape, these authors placed a certain value on its roughness, irregularity, and variety. However, before these writers articulated the concept of the picturesque in their publications, the theory itself was already in place and frequently practiced, serving to materially transform and translate the colonial periphery for consumption by the British center. The picturesque focused on the representation of idealized and imaginary landscapes in which the artist, rather than striving for absolute accuracy, was inclined to select the more painterly aspects of a given view. By relying on his imagination, the artist then arranged them into aesthetically pleasing sketches and descriptive accounts. Through the promotion of the concept of variety of natural life, the West Indies were transformed into depictions of a picturesque landscape that suppressed the presence of the laboring African slave body under the hardships of the plantation system. This erasure of the black laboring body from landscape scenes of sugar plantations served both the imperial and personal agendas of those invested in the plantation system. An analysis of how the black slave body was marginalized in the picturesque West Indian landscape reveals how these images were used to support the position of those anti-abolitionists interested in the continuation of the slave trade and further development of sugar plantations.

PROMOTING VARIETY

The tradition of British writing and engraving that overtly addressed the slave body in the sugar plantation sought to construct the impression that sugar cane represented only a small fraction of the plants and natural life cultivated in and introduced to the West Indies. By emphasizing the variety of flora and fauna to be found in the Caribbean, the landscape of the sugar plantation became transformed into a paragon of managed diversification.[2] The species of natural life that are symbolically evocative of the Caribbean even today were in fact transplants from Europe, Asia, Africa, and the South Pacific. Plants such as the coconut palm, mango, breadfruit, and banana that are now almost exclusively associated with the West Indies were colonial transplants introduced to the region by the various colonial powers since the fifteenth century.

Jill Casid notes that "the mythic image of the plantation landscape dominated by sugar cane as, instead, a prodigious variety of introduced flora held in place by an ordering system of careful segmentation spanned the century as a means to justify colonization."[3] The alleged diversity of nature was promoted in an effort to suppress sugar cane as the most important commodity of the British Empire in the eighteenth century. Diversity and variety played a significant role in the European conception of the West Indies. From the early modern period, the aesthetic principle of variety was widely understood as adding visual interest and value to land or a garden and, in fact, it was considered the requirement that transformed "land" into a "landscape."[4] Through the promotion of this concept of variety, West Indian plantations were transformed into "landscapes," in which the realities of the condition of slavery were suppressed.

Before looking at specific images that illustrate the promotion of variety in the West Indian landscape, the transformation of the West Indies into a varied landscape through introduction of foreign species shall be considered as a form of propaganda used to justify colonization. At the time of British colonial settlement in the West Indies, an agriculturalist argument based on Roman legal principle emerged in support of colonial settlement and rule. According to the Roman imperial legal principle of *res nullius*, "All empty things, which included unoccupied lands, remained the common property of all until they were put to some, generally agricultural use. The first person to use the land became its owner."[5] This Roman rule was broadly applied by British colonists and their champions from the 1620s onwards and worked in support of the system of plantation rule established in the West Indies.

The very use of the term "empty" is one that requires some consideration, as the concept of emptiness reflects a European understanding that is connected to ideas of development and progress. When Europeans first "discovered" the West Indian islands, they were inhabited by Natives that were most definitely using the land for shelter and daily sustenance. Because the Native inhabitants of the West Indies conducted their farming and extracting of natural resources in a sustainable fashion, the look of their habitation differed from that of European civilization. This difference in appearance between Native and European use of the land was exploited for the benefit of European colonization of the Caribbean.

The construction of sugar plantations involved vast deforestation, the clearing of all undergrowth, and the burning of any remaining roots before the process of planting the sugar cane could proceed. This process of land preparation transformed a majority of the islands into the virtual *tabula rasa* required by the principle of *res nullius*. This concept of *tabula rasa* was also applied as a means of justifying the forced migration of thousands of African slaves to supply the labor for the sugar plantations. Ideologically and discursively then, as Jill Casid points out, the term "plantation" was often used as a synonym for "colony". The two terms were interchangeable "precisely because effective colonization with 'justification' depended on disindigenating, transplanting, and relandscaping the British West Indian island[s] such that the land was made empty and then (re)possessed by its ostentatious cultivation, its agriculture."[6] The main cash crops of the plantation systems that were used to justify colonial occupation of the West Indies were not only transplants from other parts of the world, but they also served to radically alter the landscape of the Caribbean. As such, the whole concept of "tropical landscape" can be viewed as both a material and aesthetic invention of colonization of the Caribbean that was put in practice by the Roman imperial law of *res nullius* and an idea of "enlightened scientific rationalism" based on political and economic considerations.[7]

Extending her analysis of how British imperial power was constructed, produced, and justified through the large-scale relandscaping of the British West Indian colonies, Jill Casid introduces the concept of the "picturesque intermixed landscape" as a device employed by writers and artists presenting the plantation system to West Indian, metropolitan, and international readers and viewers. According to Casid, the plantation was transformed into an intermixed colonial landscape in an attempt to articulate an imperial discourse of hybridization as a sign of the successful imposition of colonial power.[8] *The Oxford English Dictionary* claims that the term "hybrid" was used to describe experiments in crossbreeding of plants, which was a subject of fascination in the eighteenth century and a mark of seemingly progressive scientific rationalism and experimentation in the service of empire.

DEFLECTING BRITISH IMPERIAL EXPANSION

For the present consideration of how the bodies of both African slaves and white plantation owners were represented in relation to sugar production in the West Indies, Hans Sloane's lavishly illustrated two-volume set titled

Voyage to the Islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers, and JAMAICA, with the Natural History of the Herbs and Trees, Four-footed Beasts, Fishes, Birds, Insects, Reptiles etc. of the last of those Islands (1710, 1725) provides a productive point of departure. This publication, commonly referred to in its short title form *Natural History of Jamaica*, was published in two folio-sized volumes with volume one published in 1707 and volume two in 1725. A British physician and naturalist, Sir Hans Sloane was offered the opportunity to travel to the West Indies by Governor of Jamaica Christopher Monck, the 2nd Duke of Albermarle. While in the West Indies, Sloane collected, observed, and illustrated the new and exotic natural life he encountered to later publish his observations in a two-volume illustrated text upon his return to England. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the West Indies were seen as a new and unexplored territory, filled with unusual and exotic natural life. This "exoticism" attracted many European travelers who were in search of adventure, wealth, and prestige. When first encountered by European travelers, these areas of imperial expansion were unknown, uncertain, and dangerous places where foreigners had to rely on local knowledge and contact with the Native inhabitants for survival.[9] Travelers frequently produced accounts of their journeys to these exotic islands that were then circulated in Europe. These accounts, guidebooks, and narratives relayed the experiences of a traveler and quickly became an integral part of European popular culture in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, serving as a form of entertainment and recreation. Publications such as Sloane's sold an idea of the Atlantic world that appealed to readers, viewers, and consumers across Europe, and this idea marketed a world that was identifiably "exotic."[10] The written and visual accounts produced by travelers to the West Indies provided accessible and plentiful models for those in the European center who wished to contemplate the exotic world. Sloane's *Natural History of Jamaica* is representative of this tradition of West Indian travel writing and, as Kay Dian Kriz has noted, his publication would have been consumed "by readers with widely different interests and capacities for engaging with the written and visual material on offer."[11]

Of interest for the current discussion is an engraving by Michael van der Gucht that appeared in volume two of Sloane's *Natural History of Jamaica* and depicts Natives harvesting cochineal beetles in Mexico. While the engraving in question does not deal specifically with the African slave body

in the context of West Indian sugar plantations, it is nonetheless of interest because it engages with many issues regarding the portrayal of the "other" in the history of colonial rule. Moreover, it provides a framework from which the visual vocabulary employed by artists in the representation of African slaves and sugar cane can be considered. Sloane's two-volume publication on the West Indian islands does not include a single image or engraving of a West Indian sugar plantation, instead, the reader is presented with a view of Indians laboring in Mexico. In fact, depictions of African slaves at work on plantations in the West Indies were largely absent in other eighteenth-century publications as well, in spite of the overwhelming presence, in reality, of African slaves laboring on plantations throughout the Caribbean.

The engraving produced by Michael van der Gucht is located after the introduction of volume two and is entitled *The manner of propagating, gathering & curing the Grana or Cochineel, done by an Indian in the Bishoprick of Guaxaca in the Kingdom of Mexico in America* (1725) (Figure 1). It shows Indians in Oaxaca harvesting cochineal beetles from pear cactus plants to produce a rich scarlet dye, which was a very profitable and demanded commodity from the New World. The lucrative dye was made from the dried, pulverized bodies of the female cochineal beetle that is indigenous to Mexico and feeds parasitically on two genera of cacti—the nopal and the prickly pear.[12] This Mexican landscape depicts the relation of the Indians, who are shown as the producers of cochineal dye, and the Spanish, who oversaw this venture and were the direct recipients of the profit produced from Indian labor. Why would Sloane reproduce an image of Spanish colonial domination over the Indians in Mexico in a volume dedicated to the West Indies? Without a doubt, Sloane would have been surrounded by displays of British power over the African slaves who toiled on the Caribbean islands since the middle of the seventeenth century. Sloane's decision to commission an engraving in a Mexican setting cannot be dismissed without further investigation, especially when we consider the more accessible alternatives that surrounded him throughout his time in the West Indies.

The engraving of cochineal harvest and production combines various compositional techniques without a consistent type of perspective being maintained throughout. In the background of the engraving a classicized landscape is depicted, which, according to Kay Dian Kriz, "loosely follows

FIGURE 1. Michael van der Gucht, *The manner of propagating, gathering & curing the Grana or Cochineel, done by an Indian in the Bishoprick of Guaxaca in the Kingdom of Mexico in America*, 1725, engraving. From Hans Sloane, *Natural History of Jamaica*, vol. 2 (London, 1725). Courtesy of John Hay Library, Brown University.

European conventions, based on academic seventeenth-century Franco-Italianate painting, for rendering the landscape as a series of receding planes framed by side screens of tress and hills."[13] Placed before this classical backdrop is a spatial and temporal conflation of the stages required for the production of the beetle dye, a device that derives from a pictorial tradition for representing agricultural production.[14] In contrast to the traditional Albertian perspective of the background, the middle ground of the composition, which shows Natives gathering beetles from the cactus plants, is steeply tilted forward in an almost documentary manner, thereby allowing the viewer to observe the specific processes undertaken in the manufacture of the final product. Similar to the overall perspective of the engraving, the human figures represented are also depicted in an inconsistent manner as they undergo irregular variations in scale depending on their positions within the composition. The composition is labeled with numbered tags to identify each item represented and to describe the details of each process in the conversion of the raw product into the 'refined' dye. The varying scales of the human figures and the different perspectives and artistic traditions combined within the composition all work in support of Sloane's claim, which is noted at the bottom of the engraving along with the title of the image. According to Sloane, the engraving was based on a drawing "done by an Indian in the Bishoprick of Guaxaca in the Kingdom of Mexico in America" though, as he points out, the engraving was not made from the original, but from a copy that had been sent to the South Sea Company.

While there is no way to know for certain if the engraving produced by van der Gucht was based on a drawing executed by a Native inhabitant of Mexico, the claim that Sloane makes serves to enhance the value of the image as a curiosity and an object of exotic appeal. The naming of Native as the original producer of the image can be seen as a device employed by Sloane to further distance himself, and the entire British Empire by extension, from the mistreatment of slaves practiced on plantations. The Native's adoption of Western artistic traditions in the original drawing not only suggests his colonization by European powers, but also demonstrates his ability to adapt under oppressive systems of rule. The Native of Mexico under Spanish rule, not the British plantation owner, is the person who originally documents the scene presented for the viewer. In fact, this is further highlighted by Sloane in one of the accompanying texts that comment on the identification tags dispersed throughout the composition. The description of the two men below the composition identifies them as "A Gentleman Indian Descendent of the Family of Montesuma called a Casique who beareth command over the rest" and "A common Indian man receiving Orders…[from the] Casique being his Superior." The common Indian is depicted removing his hat from his head as he bows before the *cacique* in a display of supplication toward the man who commands the other laborers.[15] This interesting inclusion of a display of power and control between the two Natives in the foreground overtly ignores the more oppressive control and exploitation that would have been experienced by the Native population overall, regardless of their internal ranking or lineage. The white body is not visualized as a powerful force of control and domination over the Native inhabitants of the West Indies and Mexico, and, even more accurately for the period, the African slaves who actually provided the majority of labor on plantations in the British Empire. Moreover, as noted previously, the only commodity depicted in its stages of growth, harvest, and production on a plantation was set in Mexico and was thus removed from the British colonial legacy to which Sloane belonged.

This act of deflecting the negative consequences of colonialism to the Spanish had a long tradition that predated Sloane's publication. The concept of the "Black Legend" was frequently invoked by other European countries in an attempt to avert negative attention and criticism in relation to their own colonization practices in the Caribbean. As the "discoverers" of the New World, the Spanish were implicated in all aspects of the conquest of the

Caribbean, as well as the subsequent slave trade that was established. The "Black Legend" promoted the sixteenth-century narrative that the Spanish slaughtered most of the indigenous people on islands such as Jamaica and Mexico when they resisted attempts of enslavement.[16] Employing the concept of the "Black Legend," Spain's British, French, and Dutch rivals emphasized the differences between the Spanish militaristic style of conquering which brought about the overwork, disease, and ultimate death of the Native Caribbean populations, and their own style of settler colonialism that implied alteration of the land only through planting. While the British, Spanish, and French thus all conquered the West Indian islands, they employed different methods of extracting wealth which was the focus for defining differences among them. For instance, the Spanish usually prospected for semi-sacred precious metals which depleted the natural resources of the land while distributing overtly visible signs of wealth to those in control. As opposed to this, the British extracted wealth by directing efforts and labor toward the cultivation of plants such as sugar cane that could be traded and sold as a commodity. These differences contributed to the enemies of the Spanish referring to their colonies as 'kingdoms' which were ruled over and plundered for selfish gain.[17] While the act of conquering remained the same, the nature of the labor that resulted from colonization distinguished the European imperial powers. This attempt to conjure, in the minds of viewers of the engraving, an association between the Spanish and their role in the plantation system, forced labor, and the eventual demise of the Native population of the West Indies, demonstrates Sloane's attempt to suppress the realities of British colonization activities in the Caribbean. He explicitly calls attention to Spain's difference in colonization practices in relation to the British through his use of the word 'kingdom' in the title of the engraving. Other British writers also commonly used this strategy in an attempt to remove blame for the many deaths brought about by the colonial project from British hands. Sloane's attempt at suppressing the existence of plantations in British colonies effectively worked to distance the toiling African body from the British West Indian landscape. This absence of visual representations of sugar plantations and the African bodies that maintained them now provides a suitable backdrop from which to consider how sugar plantations were visually constructed by European artists and engravers.

PLANTATIONS OF THE BRITISH WEST INDIES

The majority of images of the West Indies produced during the seventeenth

and eighteenth centuries were landscape images in the form of illustrations, engravings, and, in some instances, paintings. While these landscape views of the Caribbean islands were widely circulated throughout Europe and informed the European imagination about "exotic" islands, surprisingly few images exist that included the African slave body at work in the composition. The landscape reproduced in Sloane's book that is discussed above, chose to represent Natives in Mexico engaged in the production of a commodity that was significantly less labor intensive than sugar cultivation.

In fact, sugar proved to be an incredibly cumbersome incredibly cumbersome and labor-intensive staple and labor-intensive staple to cultivate, produce, and transport. Sugar cultivation in the West Indies served to transform this region of the world into a carefully regulated system in which wilderness was converted into agricultural land for the fruitful and profitable production of crops. As the economic importance of and demand for sugar increased, more and more West Indian land was transformed into a completely new agricultural face characterized by the orderly arrangements of man-made systems and acres of sugar cane.[18] The plantation was seen as a means of settlement, economic development, labor management, and political control. Within a short amount of time, it began to yield immense material returns from which not only European settlers, traders in the West Indies profited, but their backers at home and the governing circles in the European centers as well. The plantation system, however, required more labor than the indigenous populations and pioneering settlers could provide. When the West Indian islands were initially conquered, overwork and the diseases of the Europeans effectively destroyed the indigenous inhabitants. To make the cultivation of sugar possible, millions of African people were transported to the Caribbean to supply the ever-increasing labor demand. This vast and intricately designed institution was held in place by military power on both the sea-lanes and the islands. Sweetness, according to James Walvin, flowed from military and commercial strength.[19]

With an official lifespan of about four centuries, Caribbean slavery began around 1503 and ended in 1886. Historians and scholars have estimated that during the course of the slave trade about nine and a half million enslaved Africans reached the Americas.[20] The first enslaved Africans brought to the Caribbean region between 1503 and 1505 worked on sugar plantations, and the last enslaved Africans smuggled into Cuba in the 1860s or 1870s worked

on sugar plantations as well—according to Sidney Mintz, a depressingly enduring continuity.[21] The life these transplanted Africans encountered on West Indian plantations was one of unending labor and great physical, emotional, and psychological hardship and trauma. As James Walvin notes,

> It [sugar] required labor which was itself shipped across the Atlantic (after having been kidnapped and herded together in Africa), labor which was alien, which did not (at first) speak the Europeans' languages, was unaccustomed to the stinging peculiarities of sugar's laboring system; it was a labor which died in horrifying numbers, which rebelled and resisted as a matter of course.[22]

Walvin's description succinctly captures the realities that the plantation slaves were forced to endure. In addition to the intensive manual labor associated with the planting, maintenance, and cultivation of sugar cane, the harvested product also had to be turned into a form that would allow transportation to Europe. After the canes were harvested, they were crushed in mills and the sugar was then boiled out of the cane in a series of open vats in a sugar house. Refining sugar was similar to refining oil, with the heavier and blacker fractions coming off first, followed by the whiter and finer ones. On West Indian sugar plantations, the heat of the process would have been fierce, since there was no means of cooling the sugar house. Temperatures of one hundred and forty degrees Fahrenheit were recorded and, even at night, temperatures near the vat would have reached over one hundred and twenty degrees.[23] Moreover, the humidity on the islands would have been very high as well, adding to the physical demands placed on plantation slaves and the extreme conditions they were forced to endure. Countless slaves died of overwork, exhaustion, and of various types of injuries, such as burns and loss of limbs, that were suffered as a result of the working conditions on the plantations. As such, the plantations required a large number of strong manual workers who could withstand a hot, humid climate and were not as easily affected by European diseases as the indigenous populations originally encountered in the West Indies.

According to Jill Casid, written and visual accounts produced about West Indian plantation culture in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries,

"acted primarily as vehicles for the dissemination and production of imperial power."[24] In addition to the promotion of an imperial agenda, they also reflected personal opinions about how West Indian plantation systems should be represented, since the majority of texts and illustrations were either completed by plantation owners or individuals invested in the plantation system. As seen in Sloane's *Natural History of Jamaica*, writers and artists were reluctant to promote the importance of sugar to the culture and fortunes of the West Indies. Those artists and writers who were commissioned to represent a specific location and were therefore not able to apply this technique of distancing, embraced other conventions to address the issue of the slave body in relation to the sugar cane plantation.

THE PICTURESQUE INTERMIXED WEST INDIAN LANDSCAPE

The British landscape painter George Robertson provides an informative case study for the complex relationships that emerged in the process of suppressing the realities of the monocultural plantation and the slave system in the West Indies. Under the patronage of William Beckford of Somerley, Robertson traveled to Jamaica in 1772 to produce paintings and drawings that were later displayed for a London audience upon his return in 1774. While in Jamaica, Robertson produced several landscape scenes of the country and, more specifically, scenes of the sugar plantations on the island that were owned by his patron. Thomas Vivares, J. Mason, and Daniel Lerpiniere are some of the engravers who later made reproductions of the drawings created by Robertson. George Robertson therefore stands as the central figure that links all the men who collectively constructed a view of Jamaica that was in keeping with the desires of the sugar plantation owner and patron, William Beckford of Somerley.

Beckford of Somerley was born in Jamaica in 1744 and was the son and heir of Richard Beckford and his common law wife Elizabeth Hay. It is known that he went to England sometime before 1762, because in that year he matriculated at Balliol College, Oxford and was designated a Master of Arts a few years later.[25] According to Beckford's own account, he and his wife returned to Jamaica in 1764 and spent a total of thirteen years there until returning to London in 1777. His long sojourn in Jamaica was brought about when he and his cousin William Beckford of Fonthill inherited twenty-two sugar plantations that he personally supervised and which generated income

for both men. Upon his return to London in 1777, Beckford of Somerley was arrested and imprisoned for debt in Fleet prison. Beckford's imprisonment was a result of financial mismanagement and a devastating hurricane that destroyed most of his plantations in Jamaica.[26] The other inheritor of the Jamaican plantations, William Beckford of Fonthill, never even visited Jamaica and remained in England living a life of decadence and luxury, partially supplied by the wealth created on the Jamaican sugar plantations overseen by his cousin. In addition, Beckford of Fonthill was also the sole legitimate heir of Alderman William Beckford, the lord-mayor of London and thus inheritor of what was reputed to be the greatest single fortune to be extracted from the sugar plantations of the British West Indies.

The images commissioned by Beckford and produced by Robertson are exceptional for many reasons, most obviously for providing visual representations of plantation life on the British West Indies, which are rare. Geoff Quilley argues that the paucity of visual material on plantation culture in the Caribbean reflects the lack of artistic patronage by plantation owners and individuals with interests in West Indian crop cultivation. The absentee planter classes, of which William Beckford of Fonthill was a member, usually employed the fashionable artists of the European social scene to produce images of European history, allegory and portraiture, thus "dislocating their display of cultural refinement from the source of their prosperity."[27] On the other hand, the West Indian planters and slave traders who resided in the Caribbean were not usually concerned with issues of aesthetics and artistic pursuits and, as a result, very rarely commissioned artists to capture the environment in which they lived. In fact, many seventeenth- and eighteenth-century literary accounts of the Caribbean usually focused considerable time and detail on the excesses of the slave-owning English planters, noting their materialism, quarrelling, drinking, whoring, negligence, swearing, and deceptive business practices.[28] The planters were typically portrayed not only as greedy capitalists intent on getting rich quickly by exploiting their slaves and servants, but also as ill-mannered and immoral, lacking the culture and refinement that were required for an interest in the arts and a desire to become patrons of practicing artists. Beckford, however, is an exception in this regard, since he had a personal interest in presenting an image of Jamaica and the plantation culture that he inherited. In 1790 Beckford published a book on the West Indian island he had resided on

for many years entitled *A Descriptive Account of the Island of Jamaica*. The book was written while Beckford was in confinement in Fleet Prison, which, based on several allusions made to personal financial insolvency and loss of freedom throughout the text, might have been one of his motivations for writing this text.

When we consider Beckford's text, the paintings and drawings produced by Robertson, and the subsequent reproductions made by the three engravers mentioned earlier, a complex relationship between written and visual representations of Jamaica emerges. Beckford's publication is a substantial work of over eight hundred pages that comprises two volumes. According to the title page of *Descriptive Account*, his volume features "[r]emarks upon the Cultivation of the Sugar-Cane…[and] Observations and Reflections upon what would probably be the Consequences of the Abolition of the Slave Trade, and of the Emancipation of the Slaves." In essence, Beckford's publication is an anti-abolitionist text that seeks to promote the interests of those involved in the West Indian plantation system. Of most interest to the current discussion are the devices employed by Beckford to promote these agendas and the ways that these same devices are manifest in the views of Jamaica completed by Robertson. Beckford's application of aesthetic terms to celebrate colonial agricultural production is clearly evident in his pictorialized description of the sugar cane plant itself.

Following a discussion of how to cultivate sugar in his *Descriptive Account*, Beckford describes the sugar cane as "rich and singular[ly] exotic." He continues his description noting, "A field of canes, when standing, in the month of November, when it is in arrow (or full bloom), is one of the most beautiful productions that the pen and pencil can possibly describe."[29] This written description is accompanied by a reproduction of Thomas Vivares' engraving titled *View of Roaring River Estate, Westmoreland* (1778) (Figure 2).

None of Robertson's views were actually reprinted to accompany Beckford's publication. However, Robertson's original view of the Beckford estate of Roaring River was initially exhibited twelve years before the publication of *Descriptive Account*, and John Boydell had published two series of engravings of Robertson's views of Jamaica during the 1770s and 1780s.

FIGURE 2. Thomas Vivares after George Robertson, *View of Roaring River Estate, Westmoreland*, 1778, engraving. Courtesy of National Library of Jamaica.

Beckford addresses this absence by relating his textual account of Jamaica to the previously released images in the introductory pages to *Descriptive Account*,

> It was my wish, as a confirmation of the fidelity of the scenes which I have attempted to delineate, to have introduced engravings from some particular views of the Island that were taken on the spot; and their accuracy cannot surely be doubted when I quote, as the artist, the respectable name of Mr. Robertson.

By referencing Robertson's views, Beckford connects the landscape views that had previously circulated in London to his textual account of the Jamaican landscape. Beckford also ensures the believability of Robertson's images by reminding the reader that they were "taken on the spot," thus confirming their accuracy as true representations of the Jamaican landscape. In fact, Beckford repeats his lament about the absence of Robertson's views at crucial junctures throughout his text, according to Casid, in an effort to conjure "an absent presence that might serve to verify the purported authenticity of Beckford's colonial relandscaping."[30] By continually referencing Robertson's images, Beckford employs the visual to confirm his claim about

transplantation as resulting in a picturesque spectacle of overwhelming variety. According to Beckford, "[t]he variety and brilliancy of the verdure in Jamaica are particularly striking; and the trees and shrubs that adorn the face of the country are singular for their richness of tints, the depths of their shadows, and the picturesque appearance they make."[31] Beckford's text describes the Jamaican landscape as a perfect scene of art that is painted and planted with "tints" and "shadows," thus further solidifying the association with the visual traditions of the picturesque and its precondition, variety. This continually articulated fiction that both the artist and writer are simply producing faithful copies of what actually exists in nature acts to transform the colonial landscape into a painting or engraving. It is noteworthy that Beckford insisted upon the repetition of the term "picturesque" to situate his text and Robertson's images as authentic representations of the Jamaican landscape. With regard to the representation of picturesque spaces, it has been noted that, in essence, artists aimed to create a "specific but elevated landscape in which the essential character of the topography was retained, with subordinate and inconsequential parts modified or redistributed to meet the compositional requirements of the classical landscape and thereby assisting in the generation of mood."[32] Signifying that a select view was like a picture, the picturesque, by translating terrain into an established compositional type, was a way of seeing that served to transform land into landscape.[33] Beyond the definition of the concept of picturesque, the theory and practice of landscape aesthetics can also be linked to ideas concerning taste, which was a powerful discursive marker of both class and gender. Whether by birth or through education and opportunity, the man of taste possessed the qualities necessary to appreciate the beauty and sublimity of natural scenes. These qualities enabled access to the pleasures of the imagination, a necessary condition for capturing and appreciating the idealized picturesque landscape. Taste then, as Elizabeth Bohls notes, "both expressed and fostered the immense sense of entitlement that pervades eighteenth-century writings on aesthetics: a consciousness of distinction from the majority who lacked access to these rarefied sensations."[34] The aesthetics of land, and picturesque landscapes in particular, were infused with a proprietary tone which suggested that landownership could take on the symbolism of high culture as distinguished from the landless and thus tasteless and vulgar.

The notion of taste as it relates to the picturesque also raises the issue of how wealthy landowners employed this aesthetic concept to deflect many of the problems that resulted from both the agricultural revolution and enclosure taking place in the eighteenth-century British countryside.[35] Enclosure entailed the fencing and redistribution of open portions of land in order to maximize agricultural productivity. Eighteenth-century British landscape paintings demonstrated anxiety about the management of the rural poor during a period in which, according to John Barrell, the basis of power and wealth was shifting toward industrial and commercial ventures.[36] Within the context of Britain, the picturesque landscape served to reassure the British landowning classes of the security of their position and property it can be read as "an attempt to wipe out the fact of enclosure and to minimize its consequences."[37] Just as the concept of the picturesque was applied to mitigate anxieties in the English countryside, it was also well suited to serve the political and imperial agendas of Jamaican plantation owners such as Beckford. By applying theories of the picturesque to his *Descriptive Account* and to the views he commissioned by Robertson, Beckford both presented and identified himself as a colonial gentleman planter while erasing traces of African slave labor from the represented Jamaican landscape in order to advance his pro-slavery agenda.

Robertson's composition *View of Roaring River Estate, Westmoreland* follows traditional conventions of picturesque composition that include contrasts between light and shade and winding paths that lead the eye from the foreground to the background of the composition. Depicted in the foreground of the engraving is a variety of carefully rendered vegetation with partial tree trunks inserted on the far corners of the composition that almost serve as a framing device for the entire image. In keeping with picturesque aesthetic conventions, a pathway runs across the foreground and wraps its way around a partial view of a mountain framing the composition on the left, thus serving to guide the viewer's eye toward the background. Adding to this guiding effect is a river that mimics the direction of the path and emerges directly in front of a small elevation that marks the transition to the composition's background. Situated on top of this elevated portion of land are the main plantation buildings, some of which are nestled behind even more varied vegetation, while others are exposed to full view. The buildings are comprised of a mill and a refinery with smoke billowing from its chimney stacks. To the right of the refinery, a black slave leads a group of oxen drawing

a cart behind them in the direction of the river, perhaps to allow the animals to have a drink. There is the vague impression of slaves working in a cleared field between the buildings, but these bodies are dominated by signs of the fruits of their labor that are transported by the more visible oxcart to the right. Situated in an almost imperceptible distance, the slaves working in the clearing between the buildings are highly abstracted. In the middle of the composition, a seated black male slave, a horse, and a black female slave are positioned along the pathway. The woman is pointing to the left, guiding the viewer's eyes to another man further down the path, who is carrying a load on his back. A female slave with a child holding onto her skirt emerges from the hidden portion of the path behind the mountain and walks toward the load-bearing man and the two slaves at the center of the composition.

This image presents a very striking view of plantation life on Beckford's sugar estate and promotes carefully rendered fallacies of slave life and the slave body's relation to the land. Most striking is the notorious fiction highlighted in the scene placed at the center of the composition. The male slave is shown seated and at rest, while the woman beside him directs attention to other figures that are moving freely along the path. This constructed view promotes the belief that slave life was easy and not potentially fatal as a result of the demanding work requirements. The inclusion of the small child hanging on to the skirt of the female slave suggests that births among slaves outnumbered deaths. The demands of plantation life, it appears, did not impact the ability of slaves to procreate. The presence of the woman and child also evokes the fiction that harmonious family life among slaves was possible on West Indian sugar plantations. In Robertson's view of Beckford's sugar plantation at Roaring River Estate, not a single white body is represented in the entire composition. Instead, the landscape is limited to the depiction of black slaves that symbolically represent the stages of man—as the old man who carries a load on his shoulders walks along the path, another young black slave is born to take his place (as seen in the child holding onto the skirt of the female slave), thus maintaining the "natural" system of plantation culture. The "naturalness" of the mother-child relation pictured in the composition also works to disavow the endemic sexual violence and abuses that were commonly practiced against slave women, since they were considered the property of their owners and, as such, subject to their whims and desires.

Jill Casid convincingly argues that, "the visual and textual discourse of the picturesque intermixed landscape distinguished by its purported variety and yet harmony attempted to naturalize slavery as part of a georgic plantation Eden of slave labor, 'peace and plenty.'"[38] Variety in the landscape is clearly evident throughout the composition, but interestingly, sugar cane, which would certainly have existed over vast acres of land, is not represented. The only potential evidence of sugar production and cultivation is the billowing smoke emanating from the refinery that suggests the processing of the harvested plant.

Engravings such as those produced by Thomas Vivares after George Robertson's views of Jamaica were circulated in Europe and served to present the lives of African slaves in the West Indies as one of happiness and contentment, thus obscuring the hardship, torture and never-ending labor which would have been closer to the reality of their existence on sugar plantations. Visual representations that refused to show slaves employed in the structured process of sugar cultivation and refinement in favor of depicting them at rest and during moments of leisure, acted to naturalize the African body in the West Indian landscape. Such images implied that the forced movement of slaves from Africa to the West Indies had enabled a better life for them, since a sense of their unity with the West Indian landscape is implied. Casid claims that through the concept of the picturesque, George Robertson "endeavored to produce and reproduce the sugar plantation colony as an intermixed garden with a diverse and extensive variety of vegetation from tropical, subtropical, and temperate climates around the globe, the emblematic sign of a colonial power rooted to its appropriated place now ostensibly improved."[39]

Another such image produced by Robertson and later engraved by Thomas Vivares is *A View in the Island of Jamaica of Fort Williams Estate with part of Roaring River belonging to William Beckford Esq* (1778) (Figure 3). The plantation buildings are shown nestled in the left part of the composition, with Beckford's grand white house set into the mountains at the center, in a customary position that ensured complete surveillance of the lands and people below. The mountains in the background are completely covered with dense vegetation, thereby representing an area that still remains to be cultivated and relandscaped. In the foreground of the composition, a river flows beneath a bridge over which slaves are walking or riding, engaged,

it appears, in casual chatter. The slaves are shown traveling back and forth over the bridge and along the road to the plantation unrestrained, suggesting their freedom of movement. Similar to the other view produced by Robertson, gates, barricades or any sense of confinement is excluded from the composition, suggesting that the concept of controlled plantation life was not a reality of their existence in slavery.

Just below the center of the composition, two black males are standing on a rock formation by the river, surrounded by more carefully delineated vegetation. A basket of produce is balanced on the head of one of the men, while the other man is seated and reaching up to the basket of produce to partake of what was collected. Once again, leisure, freedom and relaxation of the black slave body are presented to the viewer, all the while serving to naturalize the presence of African slaves in the West Indian landscape. Also, white bodies are absent in the landscape, thus further supporting the notion that slaves harmoniously live unsupervised and are able to consume the varied produce of the plantation at any time and without consequences.

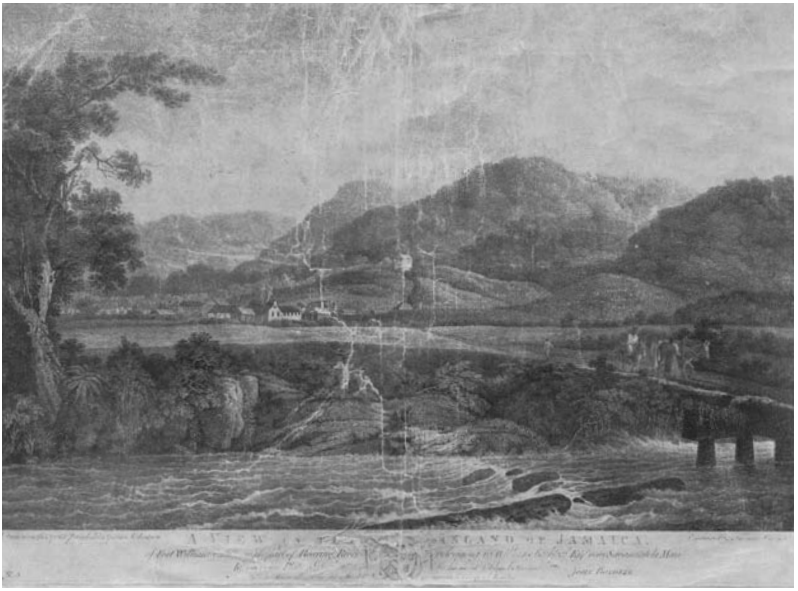

FIGURE 3. Thomas Vivares after George Robertson, *A View in the Island of Jamaica of Fort Williams Estate with part of Roaring River belonging to William Beckford Esq. Westmoreland*, 1778, engraving. Courtesy of National Library of Jamaica.

The only reference to the white owner and master is the grand house that is depicted on the mountain in the background. While the land depicted in the middle ground between the river and the mountains is cleared, no effort is made to depict the type of plant that would very possibly have been cultivated on that very site. Instead, Robertson uses an abstract rendering of cleared land, making it impossible for the viewer to identify any specific plant or vegetation. However, painstaking detail is used to represent all the other elements of the composition, the varied natural life and the leisured and unrestricted activities of the slaves. Robertson's images of sugar plantations in Jamaica suppress the actual presence of the sugar cane plant in order to enable the patron to distance himself from his source of material wealth. In turn, this act of suppression also works to avoid representations of the laboring African body under the conditions of sugar production and refinement.

Upon reading Beckford's text in conjunction with the views of Jamaica produced by Robertson, it becomes evident that Beckford was attempting to present his account of the Jamaican landscape in a manner similar to an artist. Beckford's writings about Jamaica are not only reminiscent of paintings due to their continual reference to artistic terminology and concepts, but they also promote the colonial transformation of the landscape, which is then formulated as art.[40] Beckford takes artistic license to transform the Jamaica he describes into a hybrid land of varied places that becomes a condensed picture of imperial control. This strategy of conflation and condensation of various colonies into one unifying theme helped men like Beckford, and the planter classes more generally, to manage the image of their possessions in ways that would prove beneficial to their interests. Beckford stated:

> There are many parts of the country that are not much unlike to, nor less romantic than, the most wild and beautiful situations of the Frescati, Tivoli, and Albano; and the want of those picturesque and elegant ruins which so much ennoble the landscapes of Italy, are made some amends for, in the painter's eye, by the appearance, the variety, and the number of buildings.

Jamaica has become abstracted, anesthetized and transformed by Beckford into a colonial hybrid of Italy and the Caribbean in order to justify the colonial plantation system. These metaphors in Beckford's picturesque

travel writing act to conflate one foreign place with another. The "beautiful situations" of the foreign Italian landscape become interchangeable with the views of Jamaica and thus the West Indian island becomes less unknown and more naturalized through metaphorical linking with Italy. The Italian landscape, while still foreign to a British audience, would have been far more familiar as a result of the tradition of the grand tour, a customary practice for the eighteenth-century British upper class. The metaphorical construction of a colonial hybrid of Jamaica and Italy was also extended to other colonial islands, serving to formulate a perfect and innocent Eden—a return to a prelapsarian state of being.

Many eighteenth-century writers, including Beckford, also turned to the South Sea Islands of Otaheite or Tahiti in order to graft an idea of island paradise onto an island like Jamaica. In one of his descriptions of a landscape view of Jamaica, Beckford stated he could "fancy an exact resemblance, as given us in the prints, of the Island of Otaheite." On Captain James Cook's third voyage of "discovery" around the Pacific in 1776, he took with him an officially appointed artist, John Webber, who provided upon their return arguably the most comprehensive visual record of any of Cook's voyages. These images by Webber, most notably those produced of Tahiti, were circulated throughout Europe and influenced many writers and artists who wanted to exploit the similarities in landscapes in promotion of pro-slavery ideologies. While George Robertson's views of Beckford's sugar plantations were published by John Boydell in 1778, just after Cook's third voyage and before the final publication of the illustrations produced by Webber, Beckford retrospectively overlays the views of Tahiti, which were available around 1790, onto Robertson's views of the Jamaican sugar plantations. The prints of the island of Otaheite to which Beckford refers were most likely Webber's since they were first published in 1784 and were reproduced quite frequently in the following years. Both sets of images share many similarities, most notably their focus on specific botanical specimens.[41]

The vegetation of both Jamaica and Tahiti was indeed very similar, since transplants to Jamaica, such as coconut trees, breadfruit, bamboo and plantain, were also found on the shores of Tahiti. By conjuring these similarities in vegetation with Tahiti in his writings about the Jamaican landscape, Beckford aimed to focus attention on the variety of his West Indian sugar plantations. The laboring African body, which was peculiar to

Jamaica, was actively erased from the West Indian sugar plantations through Beckford's metaphorical linkage of the two tropical islands. In instances where slavery was not straight-out denied, its good intentions and positive effects were emphasized. The West Indies were often referred to as a tropical paradise and slavery as a vast civilizing mission through which Africans were offered a better life than they would have had in their homeland. As such, maintaining this concept of an island paradise through conflation with other similarly vegetated places like Tahiti, was a way of constructing a new Eden, where African slaves could live a life of happiness. According to this constructed theory, those who lived in the tropics had to do nothing more than gather nature's bounty that existed all around them. Tropes of Arcadia, Eden, Paradise and the Golden Age were used in the writings of natural and civil historians, as well as by travel writers and artists to describe the tropical islands of the Caribbean as a site of unlimited natural resources. In addition, the aesthetic rendering of cultivated landscapes and the slave body at rest, naturalized in a West Indian setting, obscured the unsettling economic relations of exploitation underlying such images.

This essay has explored the ways in which writers and artists employed the concept of variety and the transplantation of flora and fauna to transform the West Indian land into landscape. This transformation suppressed the picturing of the laboring slave body on sugar plantations in favor of images of leisure and happiness. It also worked to naturalize the African body within the landscape of the West Indies, thus projecting a sense of wellbeing and contentment with the new environment that these slaves now occupied.

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NOTES:

[1] William Gilpin, *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty, On Picturesque Travel, and On Sketching Landscape: To Which is Added a Poem, on Landscape Painting* (London: printed for R. Blamire, 1792); Uvedale Price, *On the Picturesque* (Edinburg: Cadwell, Lloyd, 1842).

[2] Jill H. Casid, *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 8.

[3] Ibid., 4.

[4] Ibid.
[5] Anthony Pagden, *Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain, and France, c. 1500- c.1800* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 76.
[6] Casid, *Sowing Empire*, 7.
[7] Ibid., 8.
[8] Ibid.
[9] John Gascoigne, *Visions of Empire: Voyages, Botany, and Representations of Nature*, ed. David Philip Miller and Peter Hans Reill (Cambridge, New York, Melbourne: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge Press, 1996), 108.
[10] Benjamin Schmidt, "Inventing Exoticism: The Project of Dutch Geography and the Marketing of the World, circa 1700," in *Merchants and Marvels: Commerce, Science, and Art in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Pamela H. Smith and Paula Findlen (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 349.
[11] Kay Dian Kriz, *Slavery, Sugar, and the Culture of Refinement* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), 11.
[12] Londa Schiebinger, *Plants and Empire: Colonial Bioprospecting in the Atlantic World* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2004), 39.
[13] Kay Diane Kriz, "Curiosities, commodities and transplanted bodies in Hans Sloane's *Voyage to….Jamaica*," in *An Economy of Colour: Visual Culture and the Atlantic World, 1660-1830*, ed. Geoff Quilley and Kay Dian Kriz (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), 99.
[14] Kriz, "Curiosities", 99.
[15] The term *casique* refers to an Indian chief and was most commonly used in the Spanish West Indies during the colonial period.
[16] Rachel Doggett, ed., *New World of Wonders: European Images of the Americas, 1492-1700* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1992), 164-5.
[17] Anthony Pagden, *Lords of All the World*, 79.
[18] James Walvin, *Fruits of Empire: Exotic Produce and British Taste, 1660-1800* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 135-6.
[19] Ibid., 194-5.
[20] Philip Curtin, *The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), 87.
[21] Sidney W. Mintz, *Tasting Food, Tasting Freedom: Excursions into Eating, Culture, and the Past* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 37.
[22] Walvin, *Fruits of Empire*, 127.
[23] Henry Hobhouse, *Seeds of Change: Five Plants that Transformed Mankind* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1985), 58.
[24] Casid, *Sowing Empire*, 2.
[25] Richard B. Sheridan, "Planter and Historian: The Career of William Beckford of Jamaica and England, 1744-1799," *Jamaican Historical Review* IV (1964): 42.
[26] Geoff Quilley, "Pastoral Plantations: The Slave Trade and the Representation of British Colonial Landscape in the Late Eighteenth Century," in *An Economy of Colour*, ed. Quilley and Kriz, 108.
[27] Quilley, *Pastoral Plantations*, 107.
[28] Larry Gragg, *Englishmen Transplanted: The English Colonization of Barbados, 1627-1660* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 7.

[29] William Beckford, *A Descriptive Account of the Island of Jamaica: with remarks upon the cultivation of the sugar-cane,...also observations and reflections upon what would probably be the consequences of an abolition of the slave-trade, and of the emancipation of the slaves*, vols. 1 and 2 (London: Printed for T. and J. Egerton, 1790), 50-51.
[30] Casid, Sowing *Empire*, 9.
[31] William Beckford, *A Descriptive Account of the Island of Jamaica*, 31.
[32] Michael Spender, *The Glory of Watercolour—The Royal Watercolour Society Diploma Collection* (Newton Abbot, London: David & Charles Inc., 1987), 45.
[33] Casid, *Sowing Empire*, 45.
[34] Elizabeth A Bohls, "The Gentleman Planter and the Metropole: Long's *History of Jamaica* (1774)" in *The Country and the City Revisited: England and the Politics of Culture, 1550-1850*, ed. Gerald Mac Lean, Donna Landry, and Joseph P. Ward (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 183.
[35] Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740-1860* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1986), 83.
[36] John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting 1730-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 8.
[37] Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology*, 75. For more on the concept of the picturesque and its application to the representation of the British countryside in relation to the peasant classes, see also: Michael Rosenthal et al., ed., *Prospects for the Nation: Recent Essays in British Landscape, 1750-1880* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997).
[38] Casid, *Sowing Empire*, 13.
[39] Ibid., 207.
[40] Ibid., 60.
[41] Ibid., 62.