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Landscape with Storm (Unfinished)

NATHAN K. HENSLEY

THE VISUAL archive of the unfree Caribbean is, in general, hard to look at. White supremacist fantasias such as James Hakewill's *Picturesque Tour of the Island of Jamaica* (1825) offer up the geography of that slave colony like a female body to the gaze of an implicitly male viewer. Bays extend, hills roll, trees puff and flower, grottos beckon. It is the master's view. Only oblique notation tells us that these charming landscapes have been produced in disaster, that their supposed charm is identical to disaster.¹ Like all of imperial England's West Indian colonies, Jamaica had, by the nineteenth century, long since been stripped bare and fully remade to the requirements of an early and still ongoing extractive capitalism: cleansed of indigenous life and deforested, parcelled out and converted to a monoculture production in sugar that would exhaust the soil in just generations.² By 1823, three centuries after the first white planters settled there, the catastrophe of modernization was already far advanced; it was already an aftermath.³ But the pristine vistas in Hakewill's volume make little note of such processes. They show even less interest in the human beings entangled in the disastrous agro-industrial system he tries to romanticize—lives conscripted into a labour scheme legendary in its mortality and perfectly at odds with any concept of liberty being developed in the pages of Romantic-era poetry or elsewhere. Instead, in plate after plate, Hakewill gives us a planter-figure dressed in coattails, proxy for the viewer. This man gestures to a field, points at water, shows a monument to a Black man and a dog. He enjoys a "commanding view," as Hakewill's commentary specifies, the earth falling always "beneath his eye" (56). I won't reproduce any of this; you can look it up yourself if you have to.

What such visual essays depict is how the abstracting gaze of white power converts the particularities of foreign terrain and exotic climate—strange weather—into interchangeable instances of property, human beings into units of value to be "overseen." As scholars have long known, the visual technology of the picturesque works as a cognitive tool for effecting this switch from life to commodity. Its codes inscribe human and non-human being into circuits of value extraction and abandonment that continue to

organize our present. Pigment choice, perspectival ordering, horizon lines, and the management of negative space: these aesthetic mechanisms for converting life into chattel are no less efficient at that task than the spreadsheets of export sugar tonnage interspersed among Hakewill's colour plates.⁴ Both genres of thought—the figural protocols of landscape painting and the statistical rationality of the export table—should be recognized as the cognitive infrastructure sustaining an episteme of extraction, a way of knowing whose disastrous culmination gathers around us today in the form of supercharged hurricanes, calving ice sheets, burning hillsides—landscape with storm. This regime of thought should constitute one primary object of study for scholars of the nineteenth century, I suggest, our work being at least in part to track the extractive episteme across the periods of its emergence and flourishing and through to its terminal crisis in the present.⁵ We could go even further, I think, to seek out wobbles in that system of ecocidal reason, cracks through which the possibility of other and livable worlds might be glimpsed. In this sense, Hakewill's images remain contemporary.

In the chapter of *In the Wake* titled "The Weather," Christina Sharpe writes poetically that "the weather is the totality of our environments; the weather is the total climate," and "that climate is antiblack" (104). The gesture pulls "weather" from the domain of clouds and barometers to denote instead the socio-biophysical systems by which the violence of enslavement is perpetuated into the present. In this, Sharpe alludes to something like the ongoing relation to a history of racist extraction I mean to evoke in recalling Hakewill's obscene views to mind here. Sharpe's tactically mystified weather concept posits a totalizing milieu or organizing backdrop inherited from the past. In this densely historical atmosphere (another metaphor), the air we breathe can be seen as what it is, namely the material residue of a whole history of human activity under capitalism, from Manchester factory-smoke and petroleum exhaust during the Great Acceleration to, as Sharpe reminds us, the "atoms of those people who were thrown overboard" in the Middle Passage, whose bodies remain, converted, "out there in the ocean"—and, as water vapour, in the atmosphere—"even today" (40). Weather thus becomes a trope for an etherized and finally tragic ecological historicity that is granted, in Sharpe's account, an almost but not entirely determining status with respect to action in the present. An unfinished antiblackness, born in slavery and continuing still, is "pervasive" (106), a "total environment" (104); but it also "necessitates changeability and improvisation" (106). The formula acknowledges that structure-concepts like "weather" demand to be particularized, and thought against: traced down to the historical agents whose specific improvisations and concrete gestures constitute countermovements to the otherwise deterministic social totalities naturalized in tropes such as even Sharpe's weather.⁶ The gathering storm of historical process, in other words, does not only smother; it doesn't only choke. But in the context of our vast and finally inescapable inheritances, the category of freedom must

be pulled away from the master's fantasies of self-sovereignty and recast at smaller scale, in the subheroic, vernacular languages of figures experiencing "a state that [is] neither autonomy nor capture" (Hartman 63). Traces of such halfway freedoms exist in the white supremacist archive only as minor notes, blank spaces—in Hakewill's work, arguably not at all.

By contrast to Hakewill's sweeping views, the tiny and unfinished watercolour by William Berryman that provides the title of this short essay is roughly the size of a greeting card, never published (fig. 1). It depicts a weather event gathering darkly above the Jamaican mountains, sometime between 1808 and 1816. The notations in pencil at the bottom of the sketch are codes, ciphers for idioms of sky: "1. blue de[ep?], 2. indigo, 7. 'darkest blue green with some appearance of [] color at bottom'" (Berryman, *Landscape with Storm*). What we know of Berryman is minimal. The notes that accompany the painting at the Library of Congress, among the only known records of his work, say that he is "a British artist of whom little is known." The same notes state that he made a "group of 292 pen, pencil, and watercolor sketches of Jamaica as it appeared during his tour from 1808 to 1815." An unpublished dissertation by Rachel Grace Newman suggests Berryman may have been a sign painter or bookkeeper, and tried to gain favour with the son of a key political figure there: that he was an aspirant



FIG. 1 : William Berryman, *Landscape with Storm (Unfinished)*. [Between 1808 and 1816], watercolour on paper, unbound sketchbook. Library of Congress LC-USZC4-4981.

to the white supremacist intelligentsia (91). He seems not to have made it. The archive will not disclose conclusions.

The subjects of Berryman's studies range from generic-seeming landscapes such as the one just discussed to much more intimate tableaux, scenes of labour and daily life: cotton-spinning and cane-threshing, water-carrying and hole-digging, heaving plantains on a pole—these interleaved with depictions of family life among the enslaved and, incredibly, stolen moments of rest. Another unfinished work called *Piazza & Stairs at 4 Paths*, 2 *Negro Children at Work* is done in pencil, uncoloured but for two bright shocks of green—shutters on a house (fig. 2). On stairs below, two young women bend over handwork. One face is visible, the other turned away. As Newman explains, Berryman consistently trained attention on spaces of Black life that were of little interest from within the genre confines of the white picturesque. The “alternative space[s] of production” that most interested Berryman, Newman says, “had no part in the export economy that dominated the colonial sphere,” nor yet its official visual genres. In this, “Berryman presents us with a view and concept of the plantation that we do not see in the work of any of his contemporaries” (104). On the young women's faces, no expression is discernable; the interior life of these enslaved individuals is noted as existing—it is the subject of the work—but remains locked away from our gaze. It is marked for the white viewer as unreachable: held as opacity.

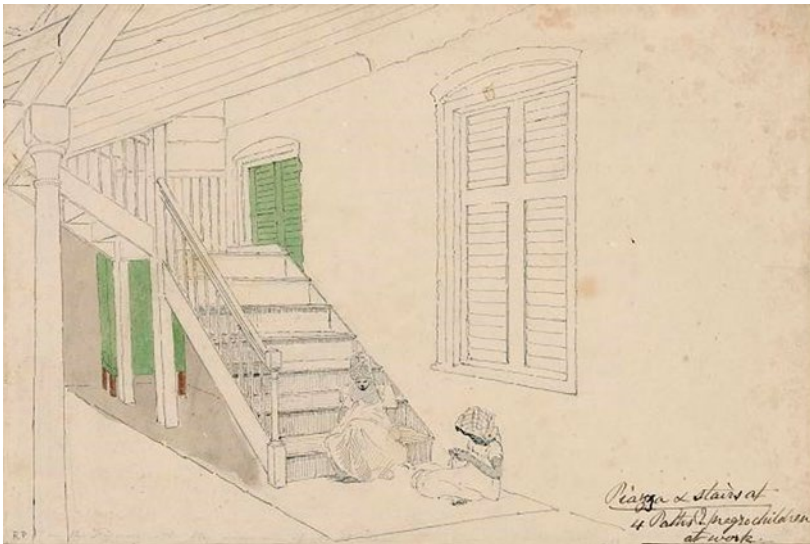


FIG. 2: William Berryman, *Piazza & stairs at 4 paths, 2 negro children at work, Jamaica*. [Between 1808 and 1816], pencil and watercolour on paper, unbound sketchbook.

Library of Congress LC-DIG-ppmsca-13411.

Berryman's Jamaica had already been "liberated" but was not yet free, if it ever would be. The new transportation of human beings for purposes of forced labour had ended 1 March 1808, just before he seems to have arrived; enslaved Africans were emancipated by decree in 1834, long after he'd gone. Like *Piazza & Stairs*, the other watercolours he made during this interregnum wobble on a razor's edge of undecideability, refusing to coalesce for the purposes of our moralizing. Instead they bear witness, from within the vocabulary of white supremacist visual representation, to shards of life that will not be contained by that language. They testify to forms of experience improvised in the ruins of a fully modern industrial system, local gestures and particular lives that fall out of notation by our most canonical genres and are, even here, finally unavailable to full reconstruction. The Library of Congress notes say, "The sketches, which are 24 × 33 cm or smaller, were received in an album with a modern 20th century binding of unknown origin. The Library dismantled the album and left the drawings numbered as they were arranged in the album." Thus has the life's work of one witness to Black life in the long hiatus between slavery and freedom been collated into just a few boxes. That is where I saw them last year, before the world was locked down and public life sealed into a memory of semi-available childcare and a halfway functioning state apparatus. The paintings were small, more delicate than the generously scanned digital copies had suggested to me. Minor, you could say.

One point of these brief notes is to insist that the project of treating "weather" in its full amplitude requires that we track the genealogy of dispossession and human misery that developed alongside "ecological crisis" in what is known in professional circles as the long nineteenth century. (This century is still unfinished.) Inside the archives of this extractive modern system, this weather, our work might be to scan for moments of hesitation, blank spaces and instances of impenetrability. Such eddies in the flow of representation might offer chances for attending to the human capacity over-coded by established genres, the improvisation and endurance only barely registered in the archives on which many of us were trained. Attention to these wobbling forms might do more by opening up the *unfinished* as concept and practice, and as an object of knowledge in its own right. But none of that will be possible without turning our eyes to the young women on the stairs, who nevertheless refuse to meet our gaze.

Notes

- 1 Landscape painting "is ideological in the sense that it presents an illusionary account of the real landscape while alluding to the actual conditions existing in it" (Birmingham 3).
- 2 John McNeill recounts that Barbados went from being what one early visitor called "soe full of wood and trees" to almost entirely deforested in a span of just fifty years (qtd. in McNeill 27). According to David Watts, "the sugar revolution

of the mid-seventeenth century had the effect of removing practically all of the standing forest of Barbados by 1665” (qtd. in Sheridan 60)—little surprise, given that an average eighteenth-century sugar mill burned “the equivalent of one huge tree per hour” (McNeill 27). Unlike Barbados, Jamaica retained wooded areas because these were on mountains and uncultivable for sugar, beyond the reach of (that sort of) extractive development. Writing of Barbados, Richard Sheridan lists the adaptations to agricultural process, including “extending the growth period of cane . . . , improved and extended manuring practices, and specialized dung” (61), that became necessary as the sugar island’s soil became increasingly drained of nutrients.

- 3 For a powerful recent analysis of the residual character of the West Indies’ agro-industrial regime in the rising Victorian system, see Taylor.
- 4 See, for example, Hakewill 30.
- 5 For recent examples of such work in Victorian studies, see Lesjak, Miller, Tondre.
- 6 On such apparently small-scale but crucially political moments of resistance within systems of domination, see Scott, who alludes to “a host of down-to-earth, low-profile stratagems designed to minimize appropriation [under extractive regimes of domination]. In the case of slaves, for example, these stratagems have typically included theft, pilfering, feigned ignorance, shirking or careless labor, footdragging, secret trade and production for sale, sabotage of crops, livestock, and machinery, arson, flight, and so on. In the case of peasants, poaching, squatting, illegal gleanings, delivery of inferior rents in kind, clearing clandestine fields, and defaults on feudal dues have been common stratagems” (188).

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Atoll Weather: R.L. Stevenson and Rising Tides

CARLA MANFREDI

IN THE global imagination, Pacific atolls are sites of past, present, and future disaster: colonialism, nuclear detonation, and the crisis of climate change. During the 2015 United Nations Climate Summit in Paris, Enele Sosene Sopoaga, the prime minister of Tuvalu, stood before the international community and asked: "Will we survive? Or will we disappear under the sea?" (2). For Tuvalu and other Pacific Island nations, global warming and the associated sea-level rise are a persistent threat: within a couple of generations, thousands of people will witness the Pacific Ocean washing over their homes (Kumar et al. 5).¹ Indeed, many scientists view low-lying atolls (islands that are characterized by a ring-shaped coral reef with a lagoon in its middle) as "an early warning system on global warming" (Berger and Shor 99) because atolls are particularly sensitive to rising sea levels and other meteorological hazards, including high tides, storm surges, and drought.² In addition to recognizing these threats, some commentators recognize the reductive and paternalistic claims about "vulnerability" that permeate media representations of climate change in the Pacific Islands. There are ten thousand individual islands characterized by enormous environmental, cultural, and social differences. Thus, current interdisciplinary, oftentimes collaborative, research projects (with teams comprising, for example, natural scientists, social scientists, health experts, and policy analysts) aim to change public perceptions of the region as environmentally homogenous and are interested in how different local populations have adjusted in the past, and can adjust now, to their changing environments (Campbell and Barnett 2).³

Atolls have incredibly dynamic ecosystems and have always been "among the most precarious environments settled by Pacific peoples" (Kirch 43, 50; Campbell and Barnett 26); this ever-changing environment makes it difficult to differentiate between the consequences of human-driven climate change and the result of natural causes and human intervention (Campbell and Barnett 27–28).⁴ There is no doubt that atolls are sensitive to changes in climate, but we also know that atolls themselves are capable of adapting;