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Dale W. Tomich, Reinaldo Funes Monzote, Carlos Venegas Fornias, and Rafael de Bivar Marquese, *Reconstructing the Landscapes of Slavery: A Visual History of the Plantation in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2021. 176 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4696-6313-5.

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The University of North Carolina Press released *Reconstructing the Landscapes of Slavery: A Visual History of the Plantation in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World* in April 2021, adding to their repertoire of recent publications pertaining to African American studies. (fig. 1) This interdisciplinary book is co-authored by four distinguished scholars – Dale W. Tomich, Reinaldo Funes Monzote, Carlos Venegas Fornias, and Rafael Bivar Marquese – who each offer a unique perspective on the topic of Transatlantic Slavery's visual history. With nearly eighty images focusing on the Lower Mississippi Valley (USA), Cuba, and Brazil, the analysis of visual culture is the primary essence behind this book's formation. Although the authors break away from a single disciplinary approach and no doubt enrich the scholarly conversation surrounding landscape studies, this text only partially achieves its intended function of explicating the role of the landscape as an instrument of colonial control. If the authors of *Reconstructing the Landscape of Slavery* had worked with a specialist in visual studies and had also considered the preexisting body of scholarly work on landscapes, the book could have made a more valuable contribution to ongoing academic discussions.

Reconstructing the Landscape of Slavery was published by the University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill in both a hard-copy and digital format, the latter of which the publishing house writes is a critical tool in the dissemination of information in the modern digital world. As written in their mission statement, the press chooses projects which they consider to “challenge personal and public thinking and...enlighten and delight us. The idea was – and is – to publish books that have an impact and make a difference.”¹ A cursory examination of the press's recent publications reveals that much of their works deal with the history of slavery, US Civil Rights, and racial equality. In this vein, *Reconstructing the Landscapes of Slavery* is a welcome addition to their recent repertoire, yet there is somewhat of a disconnect between the way the book is advertised and the intended goal of the authors.

The press endorsement states that *Reconstructing the Landscape of Slavery* is “an innovative study of visual culture” which “reveals the productive organization of plantation landscapes in the nineteenth-century Atlantic world.”² This vague statement may be interpreted in two ways – that the book will explore objects of visual culture as representations of the surrounding social, economic, and political sphere as they were amalgamated on a two-dimensional surface, or that the book will explore the literal, material, plantation landscapes of slavery. The authors' stated purpose is a bit challenging to identify amidst their lengthy introduction, but reads, “[The book] seeks to understand the social, economic, and environmental history of plantation landscapes through

the visual record they have left behind.” (24) *Reconstructing the Landscape of Slavery*, then, is not solely focused on the visual culture itself, but rather what the visual culture of landscapes reveal.³ The authors further write that their discussion of landscapes is not meant to be “a socioeconomic history of slavery.” (27) Yet, because the book is authored by an economist and historical sociologists, the methodologies through which it was written very much conform to these fields of study.⁴ The book then hovers somewhere on the peripheries of economic history, sociology, and art history. The main issue that arises from this is that there is a continuous examination of visual culture without any evidence of the rigorous visual and cultural knowledge and analysis that is typical of Art History. The lack of clarity in the publisher's statement and the challenge in pinpointing the authors' specific purpose may create uncertainty among readers regarding the content they are about to encounter.

The authors somewhat denounce the art historical presence in landscape studies pre-dating their publication. They incorrectly write that such approaches consider landscape painting “in isolation from the material practices and historical relations that transform the practical landscape,” and the result of “circumscribing the field of investigation” is that important questions are left unasked and unanswered. (19-20) They further state that the eighty images they discuss in their book “break with conventional notions of picturesque nature that characterize the art historical concept of landscape and portray an overtly industrial and commercial landscape.” (160) This statement shows a blatant lack

of understanding and engagement with the discipline of Art History, particularly its recent critical engagements with precisely these issues through the field of the Visual Culture of Slavery and, as critics like Ana Lucia Araujo point out, ignores the preexisting work of art historians including Charmaine A. Nelson, but also that of scholars like John Michael Vlach, Geoff Quilley, Kay Dian Kriz, and Jill Casid.⁵ In her book *Slavery, Geography and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Marine Landscapes of Montreal and Jamaica* (2016), Nelson uses landscape to consider how “a geographical location comes to be identified by and through specific populations, natural, and human made sites and landmarks, forms of social, cultural, and commercial interaction and exchange.”⁶

Several other scholars should also have been acknowledged for their work in moving scholarship away from the body towards the landscape. Jill H. Casid's book *Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization* (2005), referenced only once in a footnote, is highly relevant to the work of Tomich, Monzote, Fornias, and Marquese. Casid brilliantly researches the “psychogeography” of plantations, shifting the paradigm of Postcolonial Studies towards the landscape in an interdisciplinary manner. In doing so, she reveals the visual manifestation of imperial power exerted on English and French colonies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Another scholar who could have been acknowledged is Krista A. Thompson, whose book *An Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean* (2006) is highly pertinent to the second half of *Reconstructing the Landscape of Slavery* for her focus on photography.⁷

Thompson considers the picturesque framework of tropical paradises but her approach critically deconstructs this notion of the picturesque. In doing so, she achieves the very approach that Tomich, Monzote, Fornias, and Marquese claim is lacking in art historical scholarship. Nelson, Casid, and Thompson focus on different locations than what the authors of *Reconstructing the Landscape of Slavery* do, but they are nonetheless important elements of the foundation on which the book rests.⁸

Reconstructing the Landscape of Slavery is divided into two parts, "Making Landscapes: New Atlantic Commodity Frontiers" and "Spatial Economies and Plantation Landscapes." Each part is further divided into three chapters organized based on the primary crops that were cultivated in specific regions: Mississippi Valley cotton, Cuban sugar, and Brazilian coffee. The mass production of these three commodities became integral to the global economic system and have remained highly relevant in the contemporary world.

The first section, "Making Landscapes" focuses primarily on maps and how they functioned as key components of spatial organization as the global demand for cotton, sugar, and coffee skyrocketed due to industrialization. The authors argue that, "...maps and the landscapes they represented were not merely functional. Their symbolic, cultural, and aesthetic values shaped the perception, meaning, and experience of the landscape." (162) The authors use these maps not so much for an analysis of their literal organization of the

plantation, but more so for what they reveal about the ecological, geographic, and individual social 'master-slave relations' within these three settings. The authors further argue that the specific type of maps used also reveal very distinct information about the perception of the landscape, exemplified in something like the topographic map of *Plano general del curso de los canales proyectados de Güines y de Batabanó*.⁹ (fig. 2) Here, the elevation contour lines are abstracted to emphasize elements of the landscape that would have been of particular interest to enslavers like unplatable natural marshes and manmade elements including settlements and roads. In the authors' words, "By disclosing objects and spatial relations that could not otherwise be perceived, the map enabled the sugar interests to visually control the landscape and project the expansion of sugar production into a new area."¹⁰ What at first may appear to be innocuous depictions of the landscape are inherently politically and economically motivated, offering a depiction of slavery that overtakes and controls the natural environment. Maps, then, abstract slave labour within a calculated, controlled space.

The discussion of cartography is fascinating to consider, but as Araujo writes in her review, the authors "...hardly discuss why artists, travelers, and scientists produced these images, who commissioned them and why, and their intended audiences."¹¹ It must be noted that the authors' engagement with the extant art historical scholarship on landscapes and Transatlantic Slavery would have led them to probe these aspects further. While the first part of this book

does adhere to the authors' stated purpose of considering the physical environment of slavery through visual culture, it largely ignores their statement about not wanting to focus on the socioeconomic history of slavery.

Part I: "Making Landscapes" primarily looks at maps while Part II of *Reconstructing the Landscape of Slavery* gets more intimate with the inner functioning of the plantations through botanical illustrations and photographs. Entitled "Spatial Economies and Plantation Landscapes," Part II delves deeper into industrial components captured in visual imagery, highlighting the mechanisms that powered plantations. These landscapes serve as a testament to how seemingly unproductive lands transformed into global capitalist forces, with highly efficient systems geared towards maximizing production and profit. Regarding the sketches of A.R. Waud's *Scenes on a Cotton Plantation* (1867), the authors write, "Waud's artwork naturalizes and racializes the slave community by making it a permanent part of the plantation landscape." (85) (fig. 4) They argue that the sketches are significant for the visual information they provide, but do not deeply delve into what exactly this information is and why it matters. A reference to Nelson's work on the racialization of lands may have fruitfully expanded this claim. Much like the first part of the book, "Spatial Economics and Plantation Landscapes" feels as if it is somewhat incomplete, leaving a reader wishing that the book had been longer so that it may offer a deeper analysis of the many images.

It is worthwhile to briefly consider the academic backgrounds of the four authors who co-wrote this book. One of the authors, Professor of Sociology Dale W. Tomich, has previously posited the notion of a “second slavery,” which specifically involved plantation labour in the nineteenth century, especially within the United States, Cuba, and Brazil.¹² Cotton, sugar, and coffee, produced respectively in these countries, were a driving force behind industrial capitalism which led to the massive growth of the United States and European economies. *Reconstructing the Landscape of Slavery*, then, uses Tomich's framework to explore the visual manifestations of plantation production through maps, photographs, and landscape paintings. The book is a follow-up to a 2012 exhibit at the Binghamton University Art Museum curated by Tomich entitled “Plantation Places,” yet this is only briefly mentioned once in the acknowledgements.¹³

Reinaldo Funes Monzote is a Professor of History at the University of Havana. Monzote published a book in 2004 titled *From Rainforest to Cane Field in Cuba*, which was met with widespread praise by scholars.¹⁴ In this book, Monzote takes the approach of environmental history to explore the devastating colonial impact on the tropical rainforest in Cuba. Although ecocritical art history is a developing field that may be captivatingly intertwined with landscape studies by future scholars, *Reconstructing the Landscape of Slavery* largely avoids this approach.

Carlos Venegas Fornias is a researcher at the Centro de Investigaciones Juan Marinello in Havana. His work has primarily dealt with the history of slavery within Cuba, usually working in conjunction with other researchers to publish texts about sugar plantations and art as a form of propaganda.¹⁵ Lastly, Rafael de Bivar Marquese is a Professor of History at São Paulo in Brazil with a particular focus on the colonial American economy. His previous work includes a 2016 co-authored publication titled *Slavery and Politics: Brazil and Cuba: 1790-1850* which explores the geographically separate realms of Brazil and Cuba and the unification they have in terms of global challenges. Other than this book, Marquese has authored a number of academic papers dealing with the Brazilian coffee plantation and how it contributed to the global capitalist economy. Evidently, *Reconstructing the Landscape of Slavery* is collaborative in its approach, but there is a glaring lack of consultation with art historians or visual culture specialists who undoubtedly would have provided an indispensable element of critique in this examination of landscapes.

Although the authors put much thought into the images they selected to “reconstruct” the landscapes, it should be noted that there is sometimes less-than-ideal image quality. This issue is most palpable in the digital eBook, where many of the images have been manipulated in terms of resolution, cropping, and colour tone. The aforementioned topographical map, *Plano general del curso de los canales proyectados*, is in the public domain and accessible in high resolution yet a lower quality image appears in the book. A comparison of the

way the image appears in the eBook and the original image reveals that the colour tone has been warmed, the image has been slightly cropped, and the sharpness has been very much diminished. (figs. 2, 3) The remarkably complex intricacies of land plotting are almost entirely lost in the re-print, and the reader has no way of zooming in closer to focus on specific aspects of the image. The reasoning behind the decision to change the visual quality of the original image is not clear, and it leaves the reader entirely reliant on the authors' descriptions rather than having the opportunity to draw their own conclusions from visual scrutiny of the image itself.

A bigger problem exists in the reproductions of the hand-coloured aquatints of William Clark, which are blurred and converted into a gray scale by the authors. Clark's original images offer fruitful information about mechanisms on the plantation, but the detail of these scenes is obscured when these images are manipulated. In Clark's painting *Holeing a Cane-Piece* (1823) which depicts a scene of sugar production on the island of Antigua, the version of the hand-coloured aquatint shown in *Reconstructing the Landscape* is of significantly lower quality than the original print. (figs 5, 6) The scene is turned into a grey scale and details have been blurred into obscurity. Again, this image is accessible in colour in the public domain at a high resolution. The change of the images is likely the result of the publishing house attempting to cut production costs, and while these issues may seem minute and may not pose a problem in certain other book genres, in an academic work that relies so heavily on visual

images the lack of accurate reproduction is a concern. One must question whether this issue would have occurred had an art historian been more involved in the book-writing process.

Although *Reconstructing the Landscape of Slavery* is eloquently written and attempts to engage in a fascinating interdisciplinary discourse, there are issues with the various, sometimes confusing methodologies of approaching the text and with the poor quality of reproductions. Ultimately, the short nature of this publication does not allow ample opportunity for the authors to elaborate on their points and grow from a pre-existing body of scholarship. The book undoubtedly contributes to the growing academic discourse on Transatlantic Slavery's visual history, but by neglecting to acknowledge and engage with relevant pre-existing art historical scholarship the authors do not entirely achieve their goal of writing a visual history of the landscape.

¹ The Press further states that they were among the first scholarly publishers to publish books about African Americans within the United States and that they are at the forefront of identifying emerging areas of scholarship. Anonymous, "About," [University of North Carolina Press](#) (date of last access 9 April 2023).

² Anonymous, "Reconstructing the Landscapes of Slavery," [University of North Carolina Press](#) (date of last access 11 April 2023).

³ Importantly, the word 'landscape' here is not in reference to a genre of art but to the literal landscape as it existed and was manipulated to comply with the capitalist forces behind Transatlantic Slavery. Tomich et al., [Reconstructing the Landscape](#), p. 160.

⁴ Tomich et al, [Reconstructing the Landscape](#), p. 26.

⁵ In addition to Nelson's book, her 2017 article "Interrogating the Colonial Cartographical Imagination" is highly relevant to the first part of [Reconstructing the Landscape](#). For Araujo's reference to Nelson please see Ana Lucia Araujo, "Reconstructing the Landscapes of Slavery: A Visual History of the Plantation in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World," [Hispanic American](#)

Historical Review, vol. 102, no. 3 (1 August 2022), p. 552. For Nelson's article, please see Charmaine A. Nelson, "Interrogating the Colonial Cartographical Imagination," American Art, vol. 31, no. 2 (2017), pp. 51–53. John Michael Vlach, The Planter's Prospect: Privilege and Slavery in Plantation Paintings (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Geoff Quilley and Kay Dian Kriz, An Economy of Colour: Visual Culture and the Atlantic World, 1660-1830 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003); Jill H. Casid, Sowing Empire: Landscape and Colonization (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Kay Dian Kriz, Slavery, Sugar and Refinement: Picturing the British West Indies 1700-1840 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008).

⁶ Charmaine A. Nelson, Slavery, Geography and Empire in Nineteenth-Century Marine Landscapes of Montreal and Jamaica (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), p. 8.

⁷ Krista A. Thompson, An Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

⁸ For further art historical scholarship that engages with themes of slavery and colonialism see Denis E. Cosgrove, Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1998), Geoffrey Quilley, "The Lie of the Land: Slavery and the Aesthetics of Imperial Landscape in Eighteenth-Century British Art," in Representing Slavery: Art, Artefacts and Archives in the Collections of the National Maritime Museum, ed. Douglas J. Hamilton and Robert J. Blyth (London: Lund Humphries), pp. 118–35, and Nicholas Green, The Spectacle of Nature: Landscape and Bourgeois Culture in Nineteenth-Century France (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992).

⁹ The authors write that the methodology used to examine these images is influenced by John Berger's 1972 book Ways of Seeing. See John Berger, Ways of Seeing: Based on the BBC Television Series with John Berger (London: Penguin Books, 1977).

¹⁰ Ana Lucia Araujo, review of Reconstructing the Landscapes of Slavery: A Visual History of the Plantation in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World, Hispanic American Historical Review vol. 102, no. 3 (1 August 2022), p. 556.

¹¹ Araujo, review of Reconstructing the Landscapes, p. 552.

¹² Dale Tomich, "The Second Slavery and World Capitalism: A Perspective for Historical Inquiry," International Review of Social History, vol. 63, no. 3 (December 2018): 477–501.

¹³ To view the brief reference made in the Tomich et al., "Acknowledgements," Reconstructing the Landscapes of Slavery, p. 11.

¹⁴ Monzote won the Elinor Melville Prize for Latin American Environmental History for his seminal book. Additional praise can be found in Myrna I. Santiago, "From Rainforest to Cane Field in Cuba: An Environmental History Since 1492," Hispanic American Historical Review, vol. 89, no. 3 (1 August 2009): 544–45.

¹⁵ For an example of Fornias' previous work on Cuba, please see Carlos Venegas Fornias, Narciso G. Menocal, and Edward Shaw, "Havana between Two Centuries," The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts, vol. 22 (1996): pp. 13–35

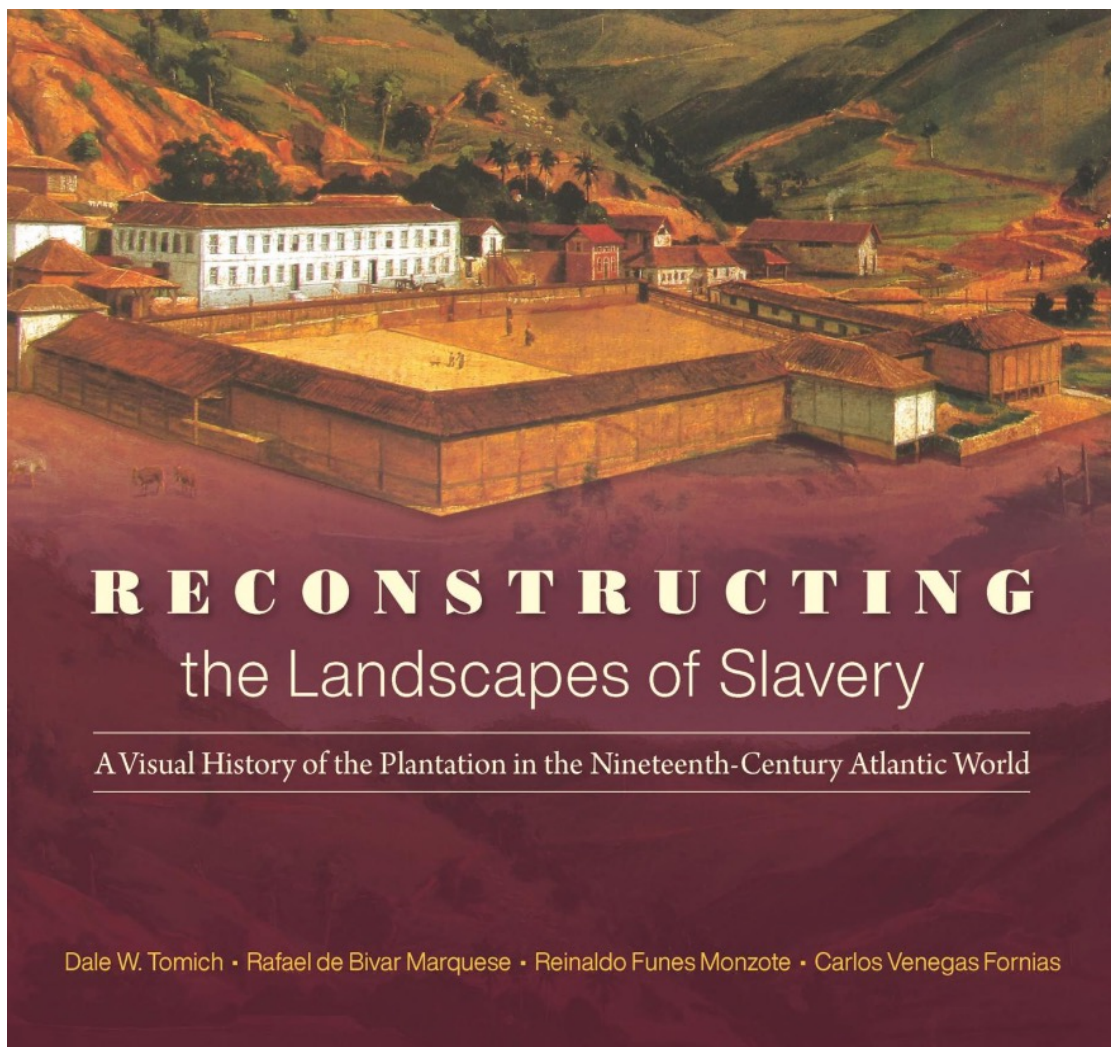


Fig 1. Johann Georg Grimm, “Fazendo Calçado em São José do Rio Preto,” (1879), 56.4 x 75.7 cm, oil on canvas Dale W. Tomich et al., Reconstructing the Landscapes of Slavery: A Visual History of the Plantation in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press Books, 2021), np.



Fig. 2. Francisco Lemaux “Plan of the course of the two projected channels of Güines and Batabanó” (1801), 48 x 78 cm, cartographic print, Dale W. Tomich et al., *Reconstructing the Landscapes of Slavery: A Visual History of the Plantation in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World* (Durham, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), p. 56.

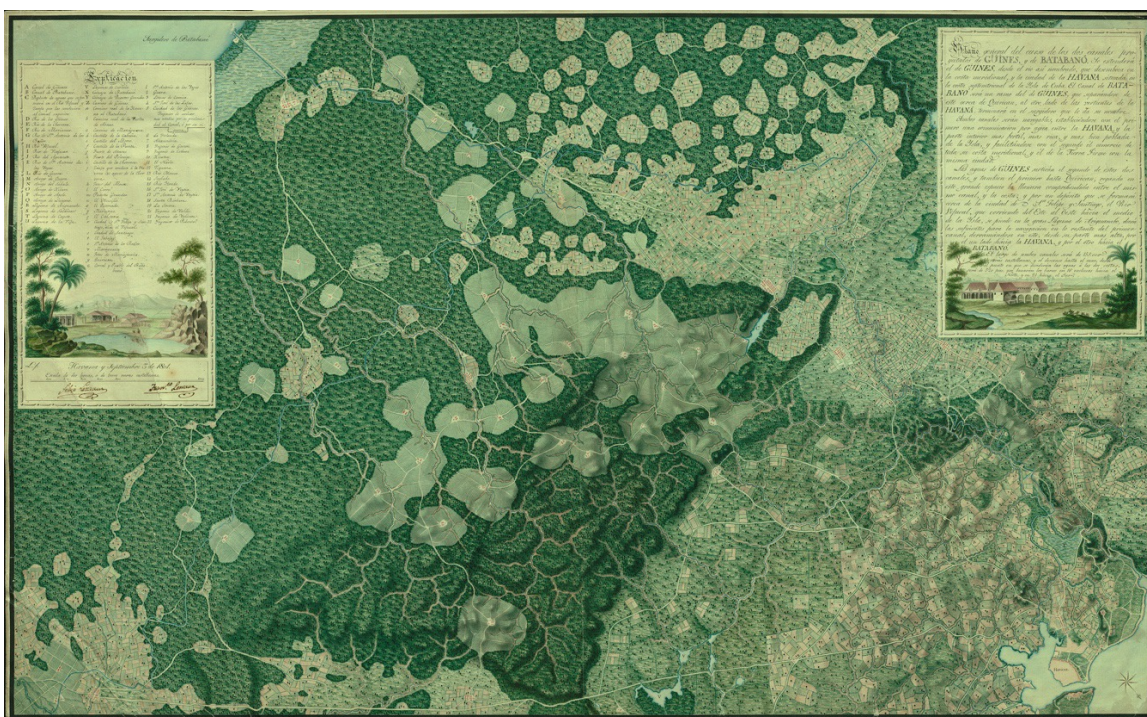


Fig. 3. Francisco Lemaux, *Plan of the course of the two projected channels of Güines and Batabanó* (1801), 48 x 78 cm, cartographic print, Ministerio de Defensa, Archivo del Museo Naval, Madrid, Spain.



Fig. 4 A.R. Waud, "Scenes on a Cotton Plantation" (1867), engraving, 35 x 52 cm, Dale W. Tomich et al., Reconstructing the Landscapes of Slavery: A Visual History of the Plantation in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World (Durham, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), p. 86.



Fig. 5. William Clark, "Holeing a Cane Piece" (1823), 38 x 45 cm, aquatint in grey scale, Dale W. Tomich et al., Reconstructing the Landscapes of Slavery: A Visual History of the Plantation in the Nineteenth-Century Atlantic World (UNC Press Books, 2021), p. 106.



Fig. 6. William Clark, Holeing a Cane Piece (1823), aquatint in original color, 38 x 45 cm, London, England: The British Library.