Mia L. Bagneris, *Coloring the Caribbean: Race and the Art of Agostino Brunias*.

Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018. (Cloth US\$115.00)

Coloring the Caribbean is—remarkably—the first book devoted to Agostino Brunias's paintings of Caribbean life, though much work has been done on this Italian artist in recent years by, among others, Dian Kriz, Lennox Honychurch, and Rosalie Smith-McCrae. Brunias was born in Rome c. 1730 and studied at the Accademia di San Luca. He came to England to work for Robert Adam, but his fame is based on the paintings he did after he accompanied Sir William Young, 1st baronet, to the Lesser Antilles about 1770. Mia Bagneris focuses on paintings he made of conversation groups of the non-white inhabitants of the Ceded Islands of Dominica and St. Vincent.

Perhaps the strongest chapter in the book is the account of Brunias's paintings of Caribs, which follows tendentious differentiation of them by Young and his son into biddable and peaceful (Red) versus dangerous and challenging (Black). Peter Hulme has noted that although “linguistically and culturally, Black and Red Caribs were identical, the British planters were still determined that the Black Carib should be seen as distinctly African” (quoted on p. 54). In such paintings Brunias can be viewed as adhering to a “planter ideology,” but his other paintings of island life are more problematic. Bagneris justifiably rejects the idea that the paintings represent a racial taxonomy, arguing that the very ambiguity of skin color in so many paintings makes it unlikely. She further claims that “the artist's reputation as the ‘plantocracy's painter’ has precluded the serious consideration of how his images frequently subvert the very racial categories they ostensibly worked uncomplicatedly to support” (p. 184), dismissing the claim that Brunias simply expressed the ideas of the slave owners. She does not, however, demonstrate quite how he “undermines the plantocratic script” (p. 115).

The book contains astute readings of the paintings, and makes comparisons with other artists, such as Isaac Mendes Belisario in Jamaica, who worked in the very different historical circumstances of the late 1830s in the aftermath of the revolt in Haiti and the abolition of slavery in the British Empire. Such wide-ranging comparisons point to a significant lack of historical coherence in the book. There is no discussion of the particular circumstances of Dominica and St. Vincent, ceded by the French to the British in the treaty ending the Seven Years' War in 1763. Legally, the islands were reserved by Anglo-French agreement for Caribs, though they were extensively settled by French smallholders, and were beyond the bounds of international trade. They developed a relatively unrestricted way of life, attractive particularly to those of mixed race, who were

faced with special challenges in other colonies. Their economy was based not on sugar, but on less labor-intensive crops and provisions for nearby islands, so slavery was generally less systematically cruel than on sugar islands.

It was Sir William Young's brief from the British government to create a profitable sugar economy on the islands ceded by the French. Young thus set about destroying the previous economy, bringing in large numbers of slaves, imposing the social and racial rigidities of a modern colony. The islands were also affected by the upheaval of the American Revolution, which brought economic uncertainty and resistance by the enslaved population. All these factors demonstrate the unreality of Brunias's picture of life in the islands, and raise the question of planter attitudes, which were very diverse. Edward Long, an intellectual apologist for slavery and biological racism, was at one pole, and at the other were greedy and lecherous chancers, like Thomas Thistlewood, for whom the Caribbean islands were a sexual paradise ripe for exploitation. Others like Sir William Young also wanted to bring refinement to the colonies, and most occupied ground somewhere in between these various positions.

This reading could support Bagneris's claim of Brunias's subversion of planter values. Though he undoubtedly targeted his paintings toward planters, he did settle in Dominica after Young's departure, almost certainly living with a *mulatresse* by whom he had two children. He was an Italian Catholic who might have identified himself more with the earlier settlers on the island, but we can only speculate on this.

Bagneris's study of Brunias is energetic and stimulating, but it also shows the limitations of an approach that does not take into account the historical context. The considerable literature produced recently on the Lesser Antilles in the eighteenth century enables us to see that what Brunias depicts as a settled and harmonious society was in reality in a state of dramatic upheaval.

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