

African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter

Volume 13

Issue 3 September 2010

Article 40

9-1-2010

Slavery, Sugar, and the Culture of Refinement: Picturing the British West Indies, 1700-1840

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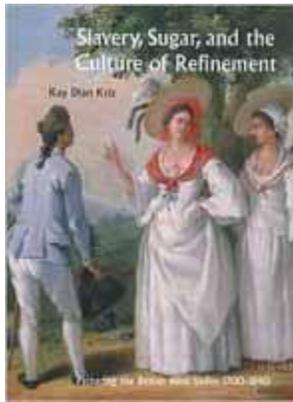
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Recommended Citation

Kriz, Kay Dian and Petley, Christer (2010) "Slavery, Sugar, and the Culture of Refinement: Picturing the British West Indies, 1700-1840," *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 3 , Article 40.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/vol13/iss3/40>

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H-NET BOOK REVIEW

Published by H-Caribbean, <http://www.h-net.org/~carib/> (July 2010).

Kay Dian Kriz. *Slavery, Sugar, and the Culture of Refinement: Picturing the British West Indies, 1700-1840*. Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art. New Haven, Yale University Press, 2008. Illustrations. 288 pp., \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-14062-0.

Reviewed for H-Caribbean by Christer Petley

Visual Cultures and Representation of the British Caribbean

In *Slavery, Sugar, and the Culture of Refinement*, Kay Dian Kriz seeks to explore the relationship between British society and the Caribbean by looking at visual representations of the West Indies and slavery. Kriz begins by emphasizing the need for art historians to recognize the ways in which the production of art in Britain depended on the circulation of goods, ideas, people, and money around the world. She is also particularly keen to trace the role of visual culture in the creation of a "culture of refinement" during the period of her study. She argues that the idea of "refinement," which was linked to notions of "civility" and "purity," was assessed and judged via pictorial representations of the Caribbean and of people associated with the region. Those from the metropole tended to represent the colonial periphery of the empire and its nonwhite inhabitants as rude and unrefined, although Kriz also demonstrates that these binary oppositions were never firmly set. By addressing these themes, this book helps to provide new perspectives on empire and Englishness during the long eighteenth century.

The book is divided into five substantive chapters, each of which look at the work of individual artists or groups of artists. Kriz does not seek to provide a narrative or comprehensive overview of the development of visual representations of the Caribbean. Rather, her chapters act as case studies. Each casts light on a specific moment in the history of Britain's relationship with the Caribbean, while strands of analysis seek to link the chapters together, highlighting continuities, tensions, and changes.

The first substantive chapter focuses on the illustrations in Sir Hans Sloane's "Voyage to Jamaica", which was first published at the end of the seventeenth century, before Britain had emerged as the predominant European power in the Atlantic region. Kriz draws attention to the ways in which fears about the dangers and strangeness of the tropical outer-reaches of an expanding empire were expressed in images of flora, fauna, and human artifacts. She provides nuanced analyses of imagery that represented threatening animals, such as crabs and jellyfish, as well as artifacts, such as Spanish coins. These, she argues, echoed the violent struggles of conquest, imperial conflict, and enslavement that had come to be associated with the islands of the Caribbean.

This is a lavishly illustrated book, and some of the most striking of the color prints are to be found in the second chapter, which considers the work of the Italian artist Agostino Brunius, who worked on the island of Dominica during the 1760s. Kriz looks at the ways in which Brunius depicted free mixed-race women in his paintings of Dominica, arguing that he presented these typically Caribbean people as both seductive and desirable. Although Kriz does not do much to examine the types of sexual relations that white European sojourners like Brunius often enjoyed with such women, she fully explores how such paintings presented viewers with a celebration of West Indian life. Indeed, throughout *Sugar, Slavery, and the Culture of Refinement*, Kriz provides valuable, and overdue, analysis of pro-colonial and proslavery culture both before and after the rise of organized abolitionism. This helps to ensure that the book not only broadens our appreciation of the importance of visual culture to metropolitan understandings of the Caribbean but also provides new perspectives on the debates over the region that raged throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Kriz argues convincingly that visual representations of the West Indies and of black people often served both to defend slavery and to reinforce racial thinking. For example, in chapter 3, she considers the use of humor in prints depicting the Caribbean and enslaved people in the period immediately before the abolition of the slave trade, highlighting the lines of connection that linked the burgeoning field of racial science with the cartoons and low comedy that accompanied debates over abolition. Some of these themes are continued in the fourth chapter, which explores Isaac Belisario's *Sketches of Character*, a series of twelve lithographs depicting ordinary people in Jamaica at the point of full emancipation in the late 1830s. The implication of Kriz's careful analysis of art during the era of abolitionism seems to be that although the antislavery movement achieved its political aim of ending slavery, the debates over slaveholding and emancipation invoked racialized stereotypes, in both texts and

images, which fueled ideas about black racial inferiority that persisted and developed in the wake of emancipation.

In chapter 5, Kriz considers landscape painting in the period between 1825 and 1840, examining the ways in which the artist James Bartholomew Kidd portrayed health and disease in his pictures of Jamaica. In some ways, the themes of this final chapter echo those of the first, focusing on depictions of the natural world. However, while Sloane depicted the natural hazards of Jamaica, such artists as Kidd sought to "detoxify" the Jamaican landscape, counteracting the image of the island as "the white man's grave" and presenting it as a place where white settlers could survive and thrive, in spite of the economic challenges presented by the ending of slavery. Kriz argues that Kidd achieved this, in part, by introducing "respectable" white women to his paintings of rural Jamaican scenes and by emphasizing the civility and modernity of the white colonists. In these ways, his work was an exercise in what Kriz calls "damage control": like other examples of West Indian visual culture, Kidd's paintings sought to rebuff metropolitan critics of white colonial life, presenting Jamaica as a viable place in which to settle, make a profit, and live in respectability and "refinement."

Sugar, Slavery, and the Culture of Refinement, therefore, opens new ways of understanding those on either side of the Atlantic Ocean who produced and consumed pictorial representations of the West Indies during the period between the late seventeenth century and the mid-nineteenth century. In her carefully observed studies of various images, Kriz casts important light on the desires, fears, and cultural values of various artists and their publics. Throughout the book, the case studies are all analytically rich, and Kriz provides readers with a uniquely well-informed and astute series of insights into the images under discussion. Throughout the book, she displays an impressive eye for detail and meaning. Nevertheless, at times, the search for meaning in the pictures might have been better matched with analysis that placed them in the broad context of political, social, and economic change within the British Atlantic. Such analysis is not entirely lacking, but might have featured more heavily, particularly in the conclusion, especially since the pieces studied in the book tell us so much about the rise and fall of British slaveholders, white West Indian culture, the triumph and discontents of abolitionism, and the passage from slavery to freedom. Such connections, however, will not be lost on the many scholars who will turn to this book, and Kriz's work will receive a warm welcome from the growing community of scholars with interests in British art, the Atlantic world, slavery, and the history of empire.

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