

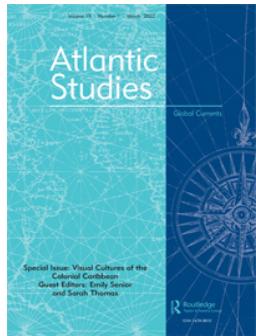
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Swollen detail, or what a vessel might give: Agostino Brunias and the visual and material culture of colonial Dominica

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ABSTRACT

This essay asks how colonial visual imagery might be interrogated alongside material culture in order to recover some knowledge of the quotidian lives of the enslaved. It encourages viewing that focuses on the material traces hitherto neglected by scholars: vessels for carrying fresh water. If archaeologists have focused on the tangible remains of pots, we suggest ways in which artistic representation might also offer insights into everyday living. Detail has become a recurrent theme in Art History precisely because it offers a methodology which allows the humble things of the everyday to become the focus of attention. Here we explore attention to detail as a way of thinking anew about colonial visual culture, focussing on the work of professional artist Agostino Brunias, a long-term resident of Dominica.

KEYWORDS

Agostino Brunias; enslaved life; Dominica; vessel; gourd; colonial material culture; colonial Caribbean visual culture

I know no town in the world which could be watered more copiously, easily and purely than Roseau; the river which runs at less than half a mile distance would, if they would just show it the way, glide down the gentle declivity into every man's washing-bason [sic]

Henry Nelson Coleridge, *Six Months in the West Indies, in 1825*¹

In the foreground of Agostino Brunias's oil painting, *View on the River Roseau, Dominica*, (1770–80) (Figure 1), a bare-chested man in red trousers sits by the riverbank smoking a clay pipe, his dark skin, hat and pipe clearly silhouetted against the blue-grey of the fast-flowing expanse of water behind him (Figure 2). Next to him stands an earthenware pot. On the other side of the river a woman, barely visible, stands idly chatting whilst balancing a similar vessel on her head (Figure 3). From their proximity to the Roseau River, a source of drinking water running through (and named after) Dominica's capital city, we might reasonably presume that the vessels were being used to carry and transport the precious liquid. As is often the case in Brunias's pictures, the scene promotes a racialised vision of social harmony in which labour – here shown as washing, bathing, selling fruit and vegetables, collecting fresh water – is viewed as a gentle affair, one that bonds a racially and culturally diverse community together. As scholars have long noted, what is invisible here is precisely what such apparent harmony rested upon: the harsh and often brutal realities of enslaved labour.²

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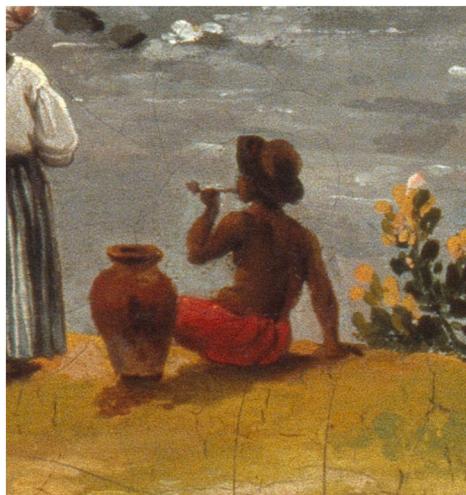
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Figure 1. Agostino Brunias, *View on the River Roseau, Dominica*, 1770–80. Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago.

It has become a growing moral imperative for scholars and contemporary artists alike to attempt to reimagine the everyday life of enslaved people and other people of colour.³ The problem of recovering such knowledge from the colonial archive has been much discussed in recent years, as scholars remind us of its inherent partiality and the paucity of extant material traces. In his seminal study of the visual representation of slavery in abolitionist era Britain and America, *Blind Memory*, Marcus Wood questioned the very possibility of “seeing” the enslaved.⁴ Saidiya Hartman argued similarly in her discussion of what she called “scenes of subjection”: “the other’s pain is acknowledged to the degree that it can be imagined, yet by virtue of this substitution the object of identification threatens to disappear.”⁵ The more we understand about the agency of visual culture both prior to, and during, the divisive abolitionist period – how images circulated; what kinds of affective responses they evoked – the more they seem to deny access to the lived experiences of their subjects. The longer we look, the less we see.

Laura Ann Stoler has argued for colonial sources to be read “along the archival grain” before reading against it. She urges us not to see archival labour as a process of extraction, but rather as a “consequential act of governance, as a field of force with violent effect, and not least as a vivid space to do ethnography.”⁶ She writes: “this is the ethnographic space of the colonial archives, where truth-claims compete, impervious or fragile, crushed by the weight of convention or resilient in the immediate threat of the everyday; where trust is put to the test and credibility wavers.”⁷ While Stoler’s archival sources are largely textual, our interest is in looking beyond the written word to the visual and the material. In following her advice and attempting to recognise archival labour as a “field of force” and the crushing weight of its conventions, we can begin to look selectively at what Edward Said has called the “swollen details” and start drawing on a range of material, visual and textual sources, seeking corroboration, telling juxtapositions and troubling contradictions.⁸ Scholars such as Hartman and Nicole Aljoe have also confronted the problems of accessing slave narratives that are embedded within European texts. Aljoe calls for a:



Figures 2 and 3. Agostino Brunias, *View on the River Roseau, Dominica* [detail], 1770–80. Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago.



Figure 3. Agostino Brunias, *View on the River Roseau, Dominica* [detail], 1770–80. Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago.

sort of recombinant reading, what Saidiya Hartman has called “critical fabulation” [...] Despite its negative connotation, to my thinking “critical fabulation” does not mean fictionalizing or making things up out of whole cloth but rather, like reggae dub recordings, involves turning up the volume and refocusing on what had only seemed to recede into silence in comparison to what was going on in the foreground.⁹

This essay amplifies those details in Brunias’s paintings that have until now remained silent. While the colonial visual archive elucidates much about the fears and desires of the planter class, as the example of Brunias demonstrates, this should not serve to silence it in our endeavour to recover histories.

This process of retrieval is corroboratory, interdisciplinary and polyphonic: it focuses on objects not subjects, and encourages the mind’s eye to linger on a succession of individuated details rather than on the sum of such parts. These details can be considered against their material counterparts that can in some cases be traced today (not always without difficulty), as ethnographic, historical and archaeological “artefacts.” Significantly, such material traces are not the whips and heavy metal objects of confinement and barbarity that have fiercely resisted the corrosive effects of time and which most often constitute the dominant material narratives of slavery found in museums today. For these fragile objects (fabrics, vessels, musical instruments, clothing) made and fashioned by the enslaved and other people of colour, speak not only of subjection but of slave agency: as such they have the power to re-inscribe the history of transatlantic slavery with the humanity of individual lived experience. This essay argues for the recuperation of visual and material sources in the endeavour to further understand enslaved lives.

Scholars of the visual have favoured the grand narratives of maritime trade, the Middle Passage, the horror of slaver atrocities, shipwrecks, or the poetics of the shoreline rather than considering the power of fresh water and the quiet details of the everyday. In

focusing here on what might otherwise be dismissed as a small and unremarkable earthenware pot, and later the gourd ("slavery in small things," to quote James Walvin), we move away from art historical orthodoxy which necessitates acknowledgement of visual conventions. Such conventions include well-documented aesthetic schemas such as the Picturesque or the Sublime which tell us much about why the art of the British West Indies looked, on the surface at least, so much like that of colonial New South Wales, India or the Cape Colony, often serving to normalise scenes of colonial servitude and erase any form of barbarity or ill-treatment.¹⁰ Here we respond to Mieke Bal's call to "look in," to allow the eye to linger on a seemingly insignificant detail in a work of art in order to inscribe meaning onto it.¹¹ Our aim is to "unsettle the poetic description," in Bal's words, focussing here not on the sweeping panoramic nature of Brunias's landscape, nor the carefully sanitised scene of genteel and hierarchical sociability that occupies the foreground, but rather on the material details of the everyday that quietly puncture the familiarity of painterly convention.

Brunias's *œuvre* might at first seem to reveal a great deal about everyday lives, as his subjects – both enslaved and free people of colour – dance, flirt, buy and sell, wash clothes, bathe, and otherwise entertain themselves in the Ceded Islands at a time when the region's slave economy was burgeoning. Indeed, it is because they constitute such a detailed and colourful set of visual narratives that they remain compelling, and are so often reproduced, all too frequently without the benefit of critical scrutiny. The artist's visual repertoire was in many ways limited and repetitive: he deployed the same tableaux with a range of "ethnographic" details – clothing, fabrics, headscarves, parasols, baskets, fighting sticks, jewellery, drums and other musical instruments. Such motifs contributed to the imagery's "reality effect," denoting the subject matter as peculiar to the Ceded Islands in the latter decades of the eighteenth century.¹² We refute the long-held characterisation of Brunias as an "ethnographic artist."¹³ Nevertheless, his attention to the material culture of slave societies is indisputable, suggestive of a much larger and comparatively neglected body of objects whose residual traces can still be found in museum collections today. Here we focus first on ceramics, noting archaeologist Mark Hauser's assertion that:

[...] pottery does not erase the silences that mark the historical record when it comes to the lives of the enslaved nor does it perfectly illustrate the legal status or extents of the markets in which it was traded. But as an artifact made and used by people of African descent that survives the destructive processes of archaeological sites, pottery proves to be a core text to understand enslaved life.¹⁴

Before we return to thinking about the professional artist's contribution to our understanding of the quotidian life of the enslaved, we deepen our enquiries into the significance of materiality to our understanding of visual culture.

Materiality and the vessel: art and the mercantile thing

In recent years the discipline of Art History has been informed by a turn to material culture. This material turn ranges from close looking (as expounded by Bal) to analysis of the "stuff" of artworks (such as conservation, the fetish, waste, rubbish, the lives of objects, and in particular the commodity) and what Bruno Latour terms 'Ding' democracy, which advocates a kind of world order that gives things agency.¹⁵ It is clear that Latour

(who has a strong investment in the visual as seen in many of his curatorial projects) has returned to an earlier age when the visual seemed central to western European philosophical concerns. The most cited essay on the power of the thing (as employed by art historians) remains Martin Heidegger's *excuses on technology*. Writing at a time of catastrophe, as evidenced by his recurrent references to the atomic bomb, Heidegger felt the need to redeem technology, to return it to the humble vessel – the water jug. In his eyes the water jug bears witness to the past and yields itself in and of the earth. The jug is a form of technology that is fashioned around the void and the potential of what a void can hold: "In the gift of water [...] sky and earth dwell. But the gift of the outpouring is what makes the jug a jug. In the jugness of the jug sky and earth dwell."¹⁶ Heidegger extends this as a way of thinking about the world: "The world's thingness does not lie at all in the material of which it consists, but in the void that holds."¹⁷

Scholars of slavery and Black Studies have also begun to take materiality seriously.¹⁸ Black feminist scholar Hortense Spillers reminds us that the black body was itself forged into a type of raw material under slavery, as: "the captive body reduced to a thing, becoming *being for the captor*." She distinguished between "body" and "flesh": the slave's body is stripped from her and turned into "flesh," denoting her availability as raw material.¹⁹ Alessandra Raengo engages with Spillers and returns to Heidegger's notion of the "thing":

While "blackness" might be a "thing" in Heidegger's sense of having an essence that always withdraws from human knowledge, in the context of slavery things are fundamentally *black* in their very "at-handedness," indeed, their fungibility. Blackness remains a sign of subjection as well as "property enjoyment" because it indicates something that is always *at-hand* for use and abuse.²⁰

With this in mind, in Brunias's *View on the River Roseau, Dominica* both the seated man in red trousers and his earthenware jug are fungible commodities participating in what Geoff Quilley and Kay Dian Kriz have, in their study of the relationship between visual culture and the transatlantic slave trade, called "an economy of colour."²¹

Our interest however is not with the human body, about which Brunias scholars have already written a great deal. Rather, we focus here on objects which have to date been largely overlooked by art historians: specifically, the humble earthenware jug. We want to think about a creole genealogy for the jug, one of an array of low-fired earthenware vessels that were the material expressions of enslaved African peoples in Dominica, and which were a result of African pottery technology, local clays and European inspired designs.²² Here we deploy Édouard Glissant's broad use of the term "Creole" to suggest the entanglement (or in his words "relation") between different cultures forced together by colonialism.²³ Brunias's jug, with its transcultural fusion of elements, reminds us of the everyday realities of diasporic lives away from the harsh realities of the plantation. Here we take the jug to be broadly defined as a vessel for water. There has been very little art historical research on water relating to slavery in the period under study, despite the turn to water as a major theme in material and visual culture. Our focus on fresh water moves away from discussions of migration and circulation that have come to be associated with the saltwater networks, seeking to further understand plantation spaces as sites of provision not simply extraction.²⁴

To date scholars have been intrigued by Brunias's attentions to racial hierarchies and dazzled by the liquidity of his depiction of whiteness. Indeed the whiteness of the dress of

his *mulâtre* figures, their headscarves, the bolts of linen they peruse, and the precarious pallidity of their skin has overshadowed the swollen details in his works.²⁵ That which is held in shadow or caught off centre is in fact what catches the eye. However, before we turn to Brunias's paintings in Dominica, we would like to consider the methodological and historical grounding for his quiet attentions to the earthenware pot. The artist had trained in Rome and worked with noted British architect Robert Adam at Kedleston Hall, where earlier in his career he had been fascinated with the neoclassical urn (Figure 4). No doubt for later eighteenth-century viewers this familiar neoclassical vocabulary would be disrupted by the details of the lowly pot in his work on Dominica.

In a provocative essay on mercantilism and technology, Lydia Liu shows how a simple earthenware pot encapsulates Robinson Crusoe's attempts at world making. If the wreck yields gold which is utterly useless outside of the familiar networks of international trading, the pot is the centre of Crusoe's universe. A slave trader, Crusoe is held enthral by the pot. He tries many times to fire earth – the agonies of which Defoe describes in much detail. Defoe, as is well known, became the proprietor of a brick yard: throughout volume two of Crusoe's *Adventures* he ridiculed the nemesis of English clay – porcelain. Inspired by Virginia Woolf's musings on Crusoe, Liu dwells upon the enigmatic symbolism of the pot and the "alchemy" or rather the trials and errors of its making. For Woolf, the pot, "an imperfect detail [...] emerges out of obscurity and becomes luminous all of a sudden. The illumination radiates from a plain earthenware pot that practically dominates the physical environment of Crusoe's world." Once Crusoe had mastered pot-making, he subordinated "every other element to his design; he has roped the whole universe into harmony. And is there any reason, we ask as we shut the book, why the perspective that a plain earthenware pot exacts should not satisfy us as completely, once we grasp it, as man himself in all his sublimity standing against a background of broken mountains and tumbling oceans with stars flaming in the sky?"²⁶ Liu views this as the reduction of the pot to fetish – that dangerous, seemingly arbitrary thing – the other of the art work.²⁷

In the most provocative essay on art and the creole which addresses the period – "Creole Europe" – Christopher Pinney ruminates on the power of the pot. He focuses not on Crusoe's toils with earth, but with porcelain as an entry point to thinking about how Europe has always been a reflection of other times and places. If for artists this was the age of neoclassicism, it was underpinned by empire as can be seen in Spiridone Roma's *Britannia Receiving the Riches of the East* (1778) (Figures 5 and 6 [detail]). Rather than thinking of Britannia as the focus of the painting (commissioned by the English East India Company as a ceiling panel for its Committee of Revenue chamber at its headquarters in Leadenhall Street, London), Pinney suggests that luxuries hold the viewer in thrall. In a draft of his essay Pinney begins with his own spade. Digging in his allotment (perhaps) his spade hits upon a porcelain shard. The shard glistens in its obduracy, its refusal to reveal its mode of making. It is unclear what this shard might have been. Possibly it is not porcelain at all but rather a product of the potteries, to which we will return. As a way of underpinning his discussion of the shard, Pinney shows how both material and visual objects are central to what he terms the "xeno figure." His definition of "xeno figure" (which borrows from Lyotard's notion of figure as that which defies discourse) argues that certain exotic objects and ornaments expose how Europe failed to colonise at the level of the visual and the material: "a land could never be 'fully' settled, so the shadowy presence of the xeno figure reveals a Europe that was always a



Figure 4. Agostino Brunias (painter); Robert Adam (designer), *Decorative Painting*, 1759-60. Courtesy of the Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

reflection of other times and places, never a self-present unity awaiting its replicatory colonial enunciation.”²⁸

Brunias, water and the predicaments of slavery

Brunias had arrived in the West Indies in early 1765 at the invitation of his patron, Sir William Young, who had been appointed President of the Commission for the Sale of Lands in Dominica, Saint Vincent, Grenada and Tobago.²⁹ Young’s official role involved promoting and overseeing the sale of land in the islands to British investors and by 1770 he was Governor of Dominica.³⁰ Today it is widely acknowledged that Brunias’s role as Young’s painter was to promote the “Ceded Islands” as a thriving colonial economy.³¹ As has been noted elsewhere, his imagery conveyed an impression that slavery could be a highly cultivated affair, sending a “same but different” message to its European public, suggesting pictorially that slaves could (perhaps even should) be civilised by the apparent benefits of European dress and culture.³²

View on the River Roseau is one of the artist’s most ambitious paintings, and likely to be one of two he exhibited at London’s prestigious Royal Academy in 1779 during the period he was back in England.³³ The scene shows a well-ordered and racially stratified society,



Figure 5. Spiridione Roma, *Britannia Receiving the Riches of the East*, 1778. Courtesy of the British Library. © The British Library Board.

one in which labour is a leisurely affair centreing around enslaved women washing clothes and selling produce, while others bathe, chat, or care for young children. Here a lush tropical landscape is the setting for gentle commerce and carefree sociability between small groups of men and women. The painting deploys a pictorial language that was familiar to the British leisured classes in the late eighteenth century: it has elsewhere, for example, drawn comparison with a similar if more consciously Picturesque painting of washing and other forms of riverside labour, *Dinas Bran from Llangollen* 1770–1771 by Richard Wilson (Britain's "father" of landscape painting).³⁴ In the eighteenth century the fine arts and literature – works of "imagination" – were thought to offer humanity some of the greatest pleasures available.³⁵ The visual pleasures offered by such a landscape were echoed in textual accounts of the period too, such as in a passage by Dominica's chief judge Thomas Atwood in his *History of the Island of Dominica* (1791):

The taking a morning or evening's walk in this island, by the sides of the rivers, whose glassy surface glides swiftly on, or murmuring water-falls foam to the view, is very pleasing. Does fancy lead him to *enjoy the scene*, a mile or two, he still finds *ample amusement* [...] From the tops and sides of these [woods] descend numberless springs and waterfalls, which form the most *delightfully romantic* cascades, of fine, cool, wholesome water, as clear as crystal.³⁶

What this passage captures is the designation of rivers and waterfalls as Picturesque sources of delight ("amusement"), a language that was commonly used in both textual

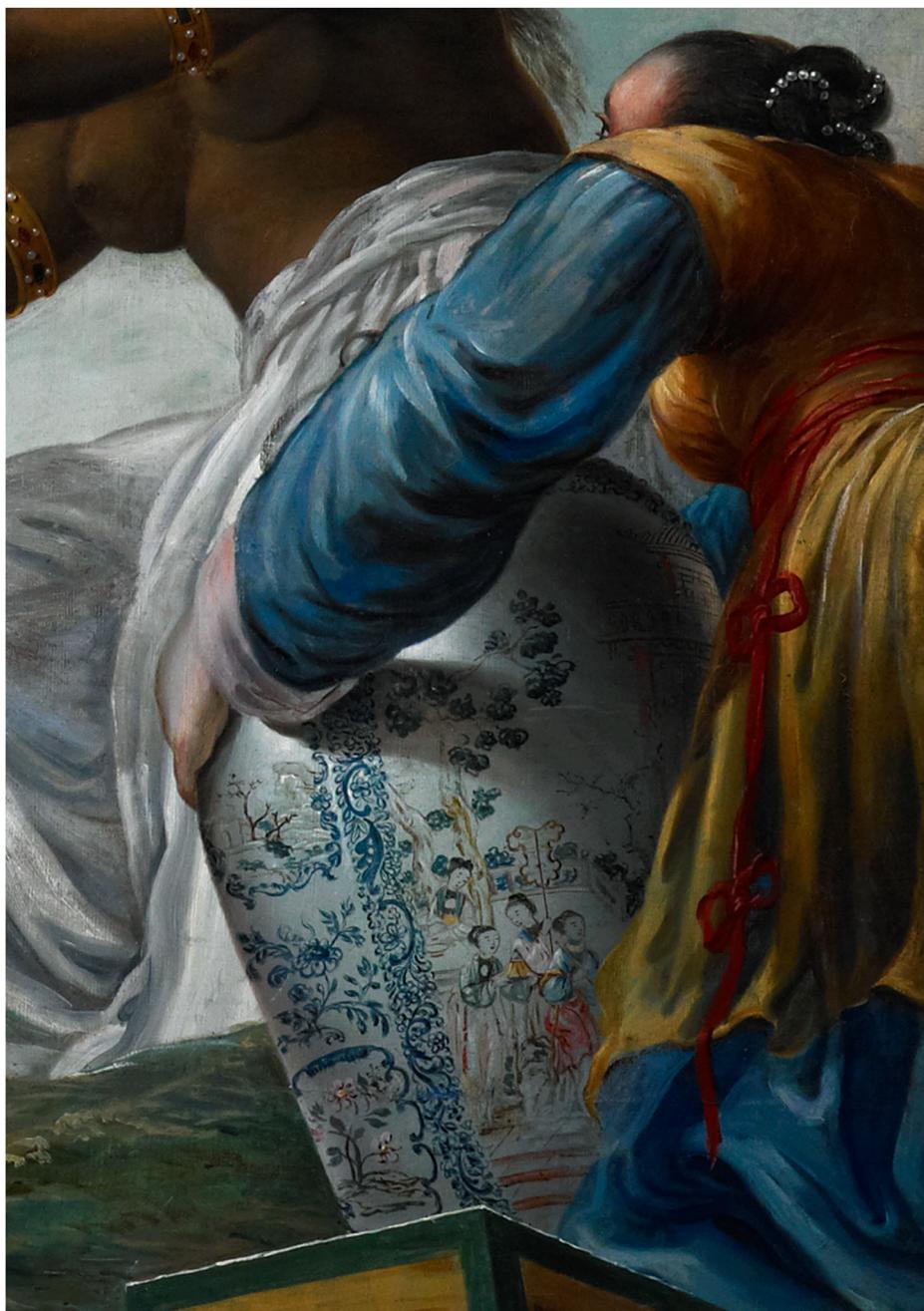


Figure 6. Spiridione Roma, *Britannia Receiving the Riches of the East* [detail], 1778. Courtesy of the British Library. © The British Library Board.

accounts and across a range of colonial imagery.³⁷ In Brunias's painting it is the *mulâtre* who appears to be drawn to the river purely for her own "amusement." Crucially, these women are not engaged in labour, but appear to be taking in the scenery for their own pleasure, just as Atwood described. Yet for the enslaved the river was a site of

labour – not plantation labour (the crop in the mid-ground is not being worked) but the labour of the domestic everyday (selling, washing, gathering wood, and collecting water are all shown here).

The unglazed earthenware pot so carefully painted in *View on the River Roseau* was in fact a *biot* jar (or *d'aubain*, reflecting the Ceded Islands' resilient French heritage. Records show that there were still many French settlers living around Roseau in the 1770s).³⁸ Such vessels came in different sizes, with the smaller type used to carry and cool water (unglazed, their porosity allowed for this), and larger ones for storage. Coarse earthenware, although not the only material made and used by enslaved labourers, is today by far the most common object found in archaeological assemblages, being less susceptible to disintegration over time than other natural materials.³⁹ We see virtually identical vessels elsewhere in Brunias's *oeuvre*: as in the well-known *Linen Market, Dominica*, c. 1780 (Figure 7), in which a bare-chested man (top, left), reminiscent of the earlier figure by the river, carries the same type of jar on his head; and also in another scene of the Roseau River, *View of Roseau Valley, Island of Dominica, Showing Africans, Carib Indians, and Creole Planters*, c.1780. (Figure 8). In this painting, reminiscent of *View on the River Roseau*, we see Brunias's attentions to the river as a site of domestic black labour, in contrast to the sartorial opulence and flirtations of the *mulâtresses* parading along the foreshore. In this painting we might even say that the humble earthenware pot (here in deep shadow carried on the head of a woman mid-left) serves, like the rush baskets holding washing and firewood, and the ceramic pipes being smoked, to distinguish the enslaved. In contrast, the artist draws our attention (here and elsewhere, such as in *Linen Market*) to the brilliant red of the parasol, which serves (beyond her distinctive clothing and headdress) as a regular attribute of the *mulâtress*.

Other vessels included leather and wooden buckets (seen, for example, in one of Englishman William Berryman's Jamaican sketches (1808–16) (Figure 9) and Scottish physician Jonathan Troup's diary sketch set in Dominica (c. 1791–97) (Figure 10), barrels, and jars which stored and carried ground or surface water for use and sometimes for sale. Gourds, krish (containing a spout, handle and lid), goglets (earthenware pitchers), and glass bottles were also used for the storage, transportation, and serving of drinking water: like the earthenware vessels they too were made and sold by the enslaved in regional markets.⁴⁰ In *Creole Women and their Servant* (c. 1770–80) (Figure 11) Brunias associates an earthenware pitcher and glasses with the *mulâtress*: here a servant holds two glasses on a tray, while in her right hand she carries a glazed ceramic jar (a type known in French as *faience*, the shape is a *gargoulette*), a more refined vessel than the unadorned *biot* jar.⁴¹ Atwood described women drinking: "so very remarkable are the English Creole women for sobriety and chastity, that in the first instance very few of them drink any thing [sic] but water, or beverage of lime juice, water, and syrup [...]"⁴² The painting appears to confirm visually his written description, although we cannot know with any certainty what beverage the women are drinking (paintings, sadly, don't allow us to taste or smell their subjects). Unlike other artists working in the British Caribbean, particularly Jamaica (James Hakewill, for example, or Joseph Bartholomew Kidd), Brunias had little interest in representing the planter class (despite a rare instance in Figure. 8 above): as a consequence, we see no indication of the wide range of glassware and porcelain that we know was widely used across the region by the European elite.



Figure 7. Agostino Brunias, *Linen Market, Dominica*, c. 1780. Courtesy of the Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, New Haven, CT.

In fact, Brunias appears to celebrate the joys of fresh water, which was used for cooking, drinking (including “sweet water”), washing, bathing, and religious purposes (“holy water”).⁴³ Several of his paintings, as we have seen, are located around Roseau and its ancient riverine economy. Situated on a large alluvial fan, the French settlement of Roseau was built over a Kalinago village which existed long before the arrival of Europeans during the seventeenth century.⁴⁴ Dominica is a particularly wet island, especially in the hurricane season (late summer and autumn) when it receives up to 37 cm of rain per month; the drier season sees a “green desert” where temperatures rise.⁴⁵ Ceded by the French to the British in 1763 at the conclusion of the Seven Years’ War, the island’s abundant supply of water, caves, rivers and its tropical climate made the colonial transition to intense sugar production under the British relatively swift.⁴⁶ Brunias’s patron, William Young, wrote in a 1764 pamphlet designed to encourage settlement:

[...] an estate of 500 acres properly and prudently supplied with slaves, cattle, buildings, and other requisites, in an island where the lands are new and fertile, and the rains frequent, cannot fail in a few years to produce a noble income. I think it would be capable of affording annually from three to four hundred hogsheads of sugar, and a large proportion of rum; especially as this last commodity is made to greatest advantage where there is plenty of water [...]⁴⁷

Beyond such economic advantages, the collection and transportation of fresh water was a key to survival in the tropics. In this regard daily life was hindered by the lack of civic infrastructure for the storage and transportation of water: Atwood writes of a “fine stone



Figure 8. Agostino Brunias, *View of Roseau Valley, Island of Dominica, Showing Africans, Carib Indians, and Creole Planters*, c. 1780. Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University, Gift of Louis V. Keeler, Class of 1911, and Mrs. Keeler; 59.088. Courtesy of the Johnson Museum of Art.

cistern" built by the French prior to the War being blown up by them as they evacuated the island in 1763, "thereby rendering it useless." He notes, however, the aqueduct, "by which it was supplied with water [...] is of great use to that fortification, which is, upon the whole, well calculated for the defence of the town [...]." ⁴⁸ The civic infrastructure around Roseau for storing and transporting water was poorly developed, even as late as the 1820s, following years of crippling hurricanes and political turmoil. ⁴⁹

Like his contemporary Roma, Brunias sought to woo London viewers (including patrons) with his depiction of a colonial economy. His careful delineation of earthenware pots invited a range of viewers to gauge their material, economic and artistic associations. Brunias's work prompts us to speculate on both commercial networks and his own ambition as an artist in an age of emergent abolitionism. Whilst art historians have considered his early work with Adam at Kedleston Hall where he fashioned a series of five murals, and his depictions of the *mulâtre*, his relationship with creole artists and his use of local materials have yet to be explored. Relatively little known artists include Le Masurier, based in Martinique, and Joseph Savart, who worked in Guadeloupe; however, they like other artists whose names we do not know, their work is remarkably similar to (and sometimes copies of) the work of Brunias.⁵⁰ Here in a view of a river by an unknown artist, *Scène de baignade* (c. 1776–1780; [Figure 12](#)) we see a more frivolous take upon the pleasures of bathing where the rocks and the river sway to portray a certain notion of what can be termed the creole rococo where the clay of the swathe of the river suggests the possibility of pot making.⁵¹ For an artist working with oil paint, clay was essential to the palette: in the Caribbean local ochre played a significant role. So whilst Heidegger evokes the pathos



Figure 9. William Berryman, [Negro portraits, 16 small drawings with notations], 1808–16. Courtesy of the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

and nearness of the pot, we can surmise that the clay of some of Brunias's pots was also the clay of his palette.⁵²

Mark Hauser reminds us that the existence of water vessels in the archaeological assemblages found today in Dominica and elsewhere in the Caribbean provide evidence of how the enslaved deployed creative strategies to "resolve some of the predicaments of slavery."⁵³ Such vessels used to capture, store and consume water, as well as other physical remains of water storage on plantation landscapes (such as irrigation channels, cisterns and engineered water holes), are testament to the fact that water scarcity in the region demanded creative strategies to survive. The collection of water, according to Hauser, also facilitated a modest degree of autonomy for the enslaved, in a system which was otherwise highly repressive: it allowed them not only to stay hydrated, but also to nourish animals, grow provision gardens, assist in the production of craft and practice rituals.⁵⁴ Riverine clay also came to the aid of maroons who drew upon ancient Kalinago technologies of using rolls of river clay as coiling for goblets and pots.⁵⁵ The mountains, caves and fresh water springs made ideal headquarters for marronage during Dominica's Maroon Wars (1785–1814). Runaway slave chiefs Jacko, Balla, Elephant, Angelique and Calypso hid in the back-o-water caves with Kalinago co-conspirators with bottle gourds for fresh water and conch shells to warn against marauding parties.

Brunias spent over twenty years living in the Ceded Islands – he died Dominica in 1796 – and while his oeuvre shows little overt evidence of slave resistance, his muted yet painstaking and persistent attentions to the material strategies of everyday survival are testament to his awareness of slavery's predicaments.

I was so much charmed at the man's sincerity that I went up to him & shook hands & told him openly before the assembly that he had done very well & deserved honor to call upon me for *Sherlock or Death*. The time will come when all Nations will come unto the true God & worship & adore his name -

Frequent flashes of lightning - They seeme

13 - Cool Morn & no clouds except a few white
stratus on M. as Sun rises now at noon - These clouds
increase in head & now they blue the white clouds appear of
golden colored bottoms & little rusty streaks of rain fall down
& little wind - all calm & clear orange & clouds & black
bottoms on M - Then 8A^o - Post M. one hour rain very
heavy from M - Not a motion in the clouds all fixed -
Post Rain



Water - J. Wm. Wykes has pushed himself into
good practice by his pretension to be skilled in Animal Magnetism
and made the girl sit down & frightened her by telling her he was
able to make her laugh or weep just as he pleased as
mention'd Dr Archbold who has been 20 years in New York
he had heard lectures upon Animal Magnetism - said Mr.
Old man would not believe him - However he is in good practice
said "Dat he" "Sorryful" I'm sorry for you boy "Wa if"
That is he ^{history of conduct} much with ^{intensity of conduct} ~~intensity of conduct~~
whose's there ^{or past} A kind of Tom Price and tried to do people

whose there A kind of a Team. Poor and poor to the people
they would wise to envy and have it not in their power & then like
the Fox - in a respectful manner cry out and send of a Lure pun
I am sorry for your loss! A girl says so if you despise her think
From Dr Archibald I have got Blair's Lectures on Rhetoric &
head of the author 2 Vol 1833 I have it from my Journal till he
return from Nevus - Introduction acknowledges Science must
furnish the materials that form the body of substance of
any valuable composition - The topic agrees to the
publish; and we know that none but from old bodies can
be published well - Providence has placed the pleasure of taste in a
middle station between the pleasure of sense & pure intellect
so instructed youth in the pleasure taste is an unpromising
symp. to had no relish on the fine arts They must grace

Figure 10. Jonathan Troup, [Sketch of woman carrying bucket on head], from *Journal*, c.1791-97, GB 231 3027. Courtesy of University of Aberdeen Special Collections.



Figure 11. Agostino Brunias, *Creole Women and their Servant*, c. 1770–80. CTB.1985.5. Courtesy of the Collection Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid.

Creole overlook: the bottle gourd

When thinking about the historiography of the detail, one of the most important contributions of recent years has been a concern with looking at the overlooked and what might be its religious connotations. This concern with detail would have come as no surprise to eighteenth-century viewers well versed in the art of still life. Still life extended to



Figure 12. Anonymous, *Scène de baignade à la rivière*, c. 1776-78. Courtesy of Mémorial ACTe — collection Région Guadeloupe.

stilled life – that is, a mode of viewing which could ruminate on the temporality of the thing depicted. Authors such as Bal, Victor Stoichita and Norman Bryson belong to a generation which draws our attention to detail with regards to European art.⁵⁶

If the enormous clay vessel and the pathos of its sick seller allowed Velazquez a means to critique the exuberance of the bodegón, for artist and Carthusian monk Juan Sanchez Cotán (1560–1627) the vessel is meant to convey a form of quiet mysticism. Cotán's profound still lives draw our eyes to the overlooked (Figure 13). Portrayed in the cantarero (cooling space), the sustenance value of simple fruits and vegetables is replaced with mathematical topology. Norman Bryson muses on the meditative beauty of Cotán's fruits illuminated in empty space as an extreme mark of abstinence:

[...] the images have as their immediate function the separation of the viewer from the previous mode of seeing [...] they decondition the habitual and abolish the endless eclipsing and fatigue of worldly vision, replacing these with brilliance [...]. In place of the abbreviated forms for which the world scans, Cotán supplies forms that are articulated at immense length, forms so copious and prolix that one cannot see where or how to begin to simplify them [...]. Cotán's renunciation of composition is a further, private act of self-negation.⁵⁷

The simple fruit becomes the space for contemplation.

It would seem that in the work of Brunias the gourd is that space for contemplation: it becomes the space for looking for the overlooked. Believed to be the most archaic form of drinking vessel, the gourd remains the most efficient, versatile and nomadic.⁵⁸ While

native to Africa, it was the only plant globally distributed in pre-Columbian times. Gourds have for millennia been used to hold fresh water and alcohol. Light to carry, easily transformed into vessels for any form of liquid or tobacco (think of Sherlock Holmes's pipe), the gourd has been associated with divination, as well as black and white magic. Fashioned into vessels once emptied of their flesh and steeped in water, they were light, easily carried from the cane fields or the markets and able to hold water, rum and other liquids. Decorated with careful cuts, dyed with indigo and ochres, or transformed into rattles, drums or stringed instruments – *ngoni* lutes or *gojes* fiddles – gourds fostered a transatlantic economy of which Brunias was surely well aware.

For Brunias the gourd might be the object which allows for a degree of contemplation. At times, the *mulâtre* inspects the gourd offered, or as in *Linen Market, Dominica*, it is hidden from her gaze whilst being visible to the viewer. In *A Linen Market with a Linen-stall and Vegetable Seller in the West Indies* (c. 1780), a *mulâtre* pauses before cloth, and in the corner of the foreground fashioned in partial chiaroscuro, a seated woman sells fruit and vegetables: a gourd is clearly visible. Brunias does not usually show them hollowed out and in use as vessels for fresh water, with one exception: his unusual "history painting," *Sir William Young conducting a Treaty with the Black Caribs on the Island of Saint Vincent* (c.1773) (Figure 14). Here gourds are carried not by enslaved people but by the "Black Caribs of Saint Vincent." The Kalinago sport gourds on their hips, indicating that they are the custodians of precious fresh water. More often,



Figure 13. Juan Sanchez Cotán, *Quince, Cabbage, Melon, and Cucumber*, c. 1600. Courtesy of the San Diego Museum of Art.

however, we see in Brunias the gourd in its unfashioned state becoming a commodified part of a local mercantile economy.

The gourd speaks too of water goddess Mami Wata.⁵⁹ Mami Wata, the most prominent transatlantic water spirit commands commodities to her presence whether it be in Guinea, Haiti, New Orleans or Dominica. Although Mami Wata helped to boost the morale of enslaved labourers in Haiti, her role in Dominica fighting against colonialism is still uncertain.⁶⁰ Given the mountainous landscape of Dominica it would appear that the gourd is the vessel that mattered. The gourd was used to gather water for maroons hiding in the hills and behind waterfalls. This scape of marronage had to be mobile, swift, light of foot. This is not the terrain of the clay pot. Clay pots, smashed in the river, could however yield more clay and water which was fit to drink.

Curiously, shortly after Brunias's works were shown at the Royal Academy, another British painting foregrounded the ministering of life-saving water from what appears to be a gourd. George Morland's *European Ship Wrecked on the Coast of Africa, known as African Hospitality* (1788–1790) (Figure 15), depicts an African refreshing a rescued white man, the small vessel clearly in evidence. The painting became a key element of British abolitionist visual propaganda via its broad circulation in print. The gourd as drinking vessel also appeared in the emancipationist period in a lithograph by English artist Richard Bridgens, who lived and worked in Trinidad in the 1830s – *Cutting Canes* (1836) (Figure 16) – in which a woman on the plantation drinks from a gourd in the lower left corner.



Figure 14. Agostino Brunias, *Sir William Young conducting a Treaty with the Black Caribs on the Island of Saint Vincent*, c. 1773. Courtesy of private collection.



Figure 15. George Morland, *European Ship Wrecked on the Coast of Africa, known as African Hospitality*, 1788-1790. Courtesy of the Menil Collection, Houston, TX.



Figure 16. Richard Bridgens, 'Cutting Canes', from *West India Scenery, with Illustrations of Negro Character* (London: Robert Jennings & Co., 1836?). Courtesy of the Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, New Haven, CT.

By viewing colonial visual culture contrapuntally, not only in relationship to textual sources, but also material culture that enslaved people created and/or used in their daily lives, we raise various complex questions. Not least of these is how might we learn to examine such entanglements of a mimetic imperial visual culture – representations of the enslaved – with the inherent indexicality of the material objects worn, washed, bought and sold, played, and otherwise utilised by the enslaved. In our case we have looked at how, in Brunias's hands, clay might have entered the canvas both as a subject – the earthenware pot – but also speculatively as the material of one of his key pigments, ochre. We see, too, the utility of the gourd, a gently repeated motif in many of Brunias's paintings. How the artist carried the water required for his own practice is less easy to determine: unless further evidence accrues in the archive, we may never know. Brunias, a resident of the Ceded Islands for over twenty years, must surely have born witness to the brutal realities of plantation life which also helped define the enslaved every day. Yet in his quiet but persistent attentions to the material details of daily life, the "swollen details," we recognise corroboration, juxtapositions and troubling contradictions which resonate powerfully with other sources in the colonial archive.

Notes

1. Coleridge, *Six Months in the West Indies, in 1825*, 139.
2. Brunias has been the subject of a growing literature in recent years. See especially Bagneris, *Colouring the Caribbean*. See also: Tobin, *Picturing Imperial Power*; Kriz, *Slavery, Sugar, and the Culture of Refinement*; Bindman, "Representing Race in the Eighteenth-Century Caribbean," 1–22; Thomas, *Witnessing Slavery*, 59–98.
3. See for example Jenson, *Beyond the Slave Narrative*; or Aljoe, *Creole Testimonies*.
4. Wood, *Blind Memory*.
5. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 19.
6. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, author's précis, back cover.
7. *Ibid.*, 24.
8. Said, *Orientalism*, 162.
9. Aljoe, *Creole Testimonies*, 33. Despite the issues, slave narratives were consulted for what they might tell us about the transportation of water in earthenware vessels during the preparation of this paper: further research along these lines is warranted.
10. Copeland and Thompson, "Perpetual Returns," 1–15; Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 19; Crowley, *Imperial Landscapes*. On British landscapes in the West Indies from the period see in particular Quilley, "Pastoral plantations," 106–128; Walvin, *Slavery in Small Things*.
11. Bal and Bryson, *Looking in*, 74.
12. Barthes, "The Reality Effect," 141–148.
13. See Hamy, "Alexander[sic] Brunias," 49–56. Hamy was the inaugural director of the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro, the first anthropological museum in Paris. See also Tobin, *Picturing Imperial Power*, 164; Barringer, Forrester and Martinez-Ruiz, *Art and Emancipation in Jamaica*, 458–459.
14. Hauser, "Roots and Routes of Empire," 443. See also Hauser, *Archaeology of Black Markets*, 120–159. Sarah Thomas would especially like to thank Mark Hauser for sharing his thoughts during several conversations when this essay was in its very early stages.
15. Latour, *Making things public*.
16. Heidegger, "The Thing," 170. In Old High German the word 'thing' means a gathering.
17. *Ibid.*, 167.

18. See for example the special issue of *Slavery and Abolition*, Petley and Lenik. "Material Cultures of Slavery and Abolition"; Higman, *Montpelier, Jamaica*; Bernier and Newman, "Public Art, Artefacts"; Copeland and Thompson, "Perpetual Returns."
19. Spillers, "Mama's Baby," 67. See also Raengo's discussion of the Spillers essay in *Critical Race Theory*, 54–55.
20. Raengo, *Critical Race Theory*, 56.
21. Quilley and Kriz, *An Economy of Colour*.
22. With thanks to the anonymous reviewer for clarifying this point.
23. See in particular Glissant, "Free and Forced Poetics"; Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 89–121. The term "Creole" has been the subject of much scholarly debate, particularly since the publication of Barbadian scholar E.K. Brathwaite's influential *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica*. For an insightful overview of the development of the term see Hall, "Creolité," 12–25. Hall makes the pertinent observation that amongst the Anglophone Caribbean islands the term "Creole" is far more prevalent in islands such as Dominica where French influence remains strong.
24. With thanks to the anonymous reviewer of this essay who pointed this out.
25. For work on the material cultures of the Caribbean see in particular Barringer and Modest, *Victorian Jamaica*; Arabindan-Kesson, *Black Bodies, White Gold*; Buckridge, *African Lace-bark*; Lafont, "Fabric, Skin, Color." The most comprehensive treatment of Brunias's art and life to date is Bagneris, *Colouring the Caribbean*. See also the essay by Nicole Willson in the current volume.
26. Woolf, "Robinson Crusoe," 48–49. Cited by Liu, 728–729.
27. Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish 1."
28. Pinney, "Creole Europe", 126–128. Lyotard, *Discors/figure*.
29. Bagneris questions the certainty of this date (ascribed by Lennox Honychurch), citing Edward Croft-Murray's mention of a 1766–1777 decorative commission for William Chambers in London ("Decorative Painting in England, 1537–1837," *Country Life*, vol. 2, 1970, 177). Bagneris, *Colouring the Caribbean*, 32. For more on Young's role in the Commission for the Sale of Lands see Mullan, 198–202.
30. Sir William Young was a British politician and sugar plantation owner. He served as President of the Commission for the Sale of Lands in the Ceded Islands, and was appointed the first non-military Governor of Dominica in 1768.
31. Kriz, *Slavery, Sugar, and the Culture of Refinement*; Thomas, *Witnessing Slavery*; Bindman, "Representing Race."
32. *Ibid.*
33. There is little evidence to prove this however. For more see Huth, "Agostino Brunias," 269, fig. 6; *Paintings in the Art Institute of Chicago*, 61; Wise et al., *French and British Paintings*, 198–200. Jamaican landscapes in the 'picturesque' style – both oil paintings and sketches – by George Robertson, Brunias's contemporary, had been displayed in London at the Society of Artists every year between 1775 and 1778, and it is tempting to speculate that he may have seen these when he briefly returned to London following Young's departure.
34. Thomas, *Witnessing Slavery*, 92.
35. Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, 105.
36. Atwood, *History of the island of Dominica*, 14, 20. Italics added.
37. Quilley, "Pastoral Plantations," 109–10.
38. Mullan, 193. The source is John Byres, *References to the Plan of the Island of Dominica*, n/p. Honychurch notes that in 1778, at the time of the French invasion of Dominica, there were "1, 574 whites, most of them French; 574 free mullatos and blacks, and 14, 309 slaves." Honychurch, *The Dominica Story*, 87.
39. Hauser, "Routes and Roots of Empire," 435–136. Hauser cites Armstrong, "The Old Village and the Great House"; Handler and Lange, *Plantation Slavery in Barbados*; Higman, *Montpelier, Jamaica*; Howson, "Colonial Goods"; Wilkie and Farnsworth, "Trade and the Construction of Bahamian Identity"; Wilkie and Farnsworth *Sampling Many Pots*.
40. Hauser, "A Political Ecology of Water and Enslavement," 234, 236.

41. Hauser, *Mapping Water in Dominica* (forthcoming).
42. Atwood, *History of the Island of Dominica*, 212. In contrast, he writes of the enslaved: "The field negros, when digging cane holes, have usually, in the afternoon, half a pint of rum and water, sweetened with molasses given to each of them, which is a great refreshment in that labour, and causes them to work with cheer [sic]," 257.
43. Hauser, "A Political Ecology of Water and Enslavement," 240.
44. The term "Kalinago" is used here in place of "Carib," which was commonly used by European observers (and which features in the titles of some of Brunias's paintings). The Kalinago ascribed their origin to the mainland of South America. See Keegan and Hofman, *Caribbean Before Columbus*, 231.
45. Ibid., 230; Taylor, "Climate of Central America and the Caribbean." Cited by Finneran, "The materiality of human-water interaction," 2.
46. In 1773 alone no less than fourteen ships from "Africa" arrived in Dominica, each of which would have carried up to fifty or more enslaved people. See Mullan, "A Web of Imperial Connections," 187–188. His source is the Shipping Returns for Dominica, 1763–1791. The National Archives at Kew, U.K, CO 76/4.
47. Young, "Observations," 31.
48. Atwood, *The History of the Island of Dominica*, 188–189.
49. Honychurch, *Dominica Story*, 2.
50. Lafont, "Fabric, Skin, Color," 137–139.
51. Laborie, "Joseph Savart," 12, 16.
52. Being based in Dominica for so many years, Brunias would have observed and experimented with a range of materials whether local or imported.
53. Hauser, "A Political Ecology of Water and Enslavement," 227.
54. Ibid., 240. Also Krysta Ryzewski's response, *Ibid.*, 247.
55. Kalinago women often shaped animals or humans known as adornos on the rims of their pots. They also fashioned complex geometrical decorations, instances of which can be seen in the Dominica Museum, Roseau, located at the heart of the Old Market in an old slave trading building and the colonial Post Office dating from 1810.
56. Bal and Bryson, *Looking In*; Stoichita, *The Self Aware Image*; Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*.
57. Ibid., 65–70.
58. The bottle gourd (*Lagenaria siceraria*) was one of the earliest domesticated plants. In this essay, the word *Sicera* means drinking vessel. Heiser, *The Gourd Book*, 71–87; bottle gourds will frequently be abbreviated to simply "gourd." See also Handler and Bergman, "Vernacular Houses," 12–13. For gourds in Dominica see Hauser, "Political Ecology," 229; Price, "When is a Calabash not a Calabash?," 69–82.
59. For Mami Wata see Drewal, *Sacred Waters*.
60. Finneran, "The Materiality of Human-Water Interaction," 8–9.

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