"A Land where Hunger is in Gold and Famine is in Opulence": Plantation Slavery, Island Ecology, and the Fear of Famine in the French Caribbean

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Introduction

Drawing on his experience as an indentured servant working on St. Christopher [St. Kitts] during the first decades of French colonization in the 1620s and 1630s, Guillaume Coppier published a travel account after his return to France which testifies to the confusion, continued misjudgements, and generalized lack of both knowledge and preparedness for everyday life displayed by French colonists in the tropical Caribbean islands which they set out to colonize. Reflecting on the precarious position of the French on St. Christopher, where Coppier was seeking his fortune, he declared, “I have found that this is a country where hunger is in gold and famine is in opulence. That is to say that the wealth here is but superficial, and the need for those goods that sustain life is very great.”

Although this reference to famine, to hunger and its relationship with the wealth produced by European colonies surely tilts towards the lyrical, in this short passage Coppier displays a pragmatic awareness and even fear of the ever-present danger of starvation, one of many colonial fears that fueled a state of widespread colonial insecurity that was at once a psychological disposition, a rich cultural imaginary, and an inventory of exceedingly concrete possibilities. The constant sense of insecurity that marked the experience of the first generations of settlement reflected Europeans’ encounter with unfamiliar landscapes, ecosystems and peoples in contexts in which Europeans were attempting to develop profitable ventures that would justify their continued presence.

Insecurity in the form of the perpetual insufficiency and inedibility of food rations that Coppier’s published narrative repeatedly evokes was not only a phenomenon linked to successful terrestrial settlement in the Atlantic world. It was also an integral and omnipresent feature of the maritime

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1 Guillaume Coppier, Histoire et voyage des Indes Occidentales, et de plusieurs autres regions maritimes ... (Lyon: Jean Huguetan, 1645), 25.
expeditions that launched these ventures and kept them supplied. Indeed, hunger made its first appearance in Coppier’s narrative well before he arrived in the Lesser Antilles in 1629, first evoked soon after his vessel’s departure from Le Havre carrying 600 Picards, Normans and Bretons. Here he described in detail the ship biscuit, “white-bearded with age,” the ration of rotten beef “penetrated throughout by plentiful numbers of enormously fat, round, long, greasy worms,” and the daily “half pot of stinking water resembling the double beer of Amsterdam in colour” that he needed to hold his nose to drink.2 However, once landed on St. Christopher, the fears stirred by rotting shipboard food supplies took on a different cast, one that was at once more collective and, as this chapter will argue, more structural in nature. Historians have written at length about colonial fears as a historical phenomenon: those inspired by the perceived potential dangers of plantation societies that were as varied as the tropical climate; sexual violence; miscegenation; as well as slave revolts, and other forms of slave resistance such as poisoning and marronage,3 culminating with the fear of the transmission of radical ideas of liberation and abolition.4

Few historians, however, have focused specifically on subsistence crises. The historiography of the colonial Atlantic world has neglected the fears linked to food insecurity, inadequacy and insufficiency, despite the fact that planters, merchants and colonial officials articulated these fears incessantly throughout

2 Coppier, Histoire et voyage des Indes Occidentales, Preface, 4.