**Anne Eller**

**Colony in Crisis review**

*Colony in Crisis* is a remarkable digital collection of documents curated, translated, and contextualized for a wide audience of academics, students, and the general public. Three primary site authors gather, translate, and introduce the pamphlets highlighted on the site, advised by an interdisciplinary group of experts. In the table of contents for each issue, a short description offers helpful orientation. Each document benefits from a longer introduction on its own page, where the French document is linked from [Internet Archive](https://archive.org/index.php) in its entirety and the authors present a 500-700-word English translation. The site is eminently accessible and welcoming for new users, well designed, with built-in link redundancies for excellent navigation between documents, explanations, and the rest of the project.

*Colony*’s authors hope to emphasize more of a “back and forth” between metropole and colony than traditional historiography has realized; the format, in the form of replies and counter replies in pamphlets, fruitfully highlights this objective.[[1]](#footnote-1) University of Maryland pamphlets figure prominently in these first issues. The university holds 12,000 French-language pamphlets, of which nearly 500 relate directly to France’s Atlantic colonies.[[2]](#footnote-2) Both issues focus on the relationship of white planters in Saint-Domingue with metropolitan France, as both sides offer entrenched positions on trade controls in the colony. The authors have selected documents that highlight discourses of permanent complaint, of fundamental conflicts between the financial interests of planters and the trade monopolies of the metropole.

Despite a shortage in France, there is some deep ambiguity about whether any actual “grain shortage” actually reached Saint-Domingue and whom it might have affected. *Colony*’s site authors call the grain “much needed,” and refer to a “potential famine,” echoing the language of the 1780s planter supplicants who spoke of a “*fear* of a food shortage.”[[3]](#footnote-3) This potential shortfall threatened almost exclusively the consumption of the planter minority, however, and the intendant of the colony denied any threat to planter diets at all, as he defended his own actions.[[4]](#footnote-4) Of all of the colony-side missives gathered in *Colony*, only two address the enslaved, although a helpful linked article suggests that other petitions often did, in a nakedly utilitarian manner.[[5]](#footnote-5) *Colony*’s hexagonal authors also take only a passing stab at addressing slave provisions in their grain trade debate. Only one pamphlet offers imprecise estimates of the number of enslaved working on coffee plantations, arguing (speciously) that food production there adequately supplied individuals enslaved on sugar plantations (a number they in turn minimized). The authors’ putative numeracy serves only to mislead, and other France-side writers reproduced in *Colony* avoid specifics altogether, evidently not out of yet another instance of willful dehumanization, but because enslaved men, women, and children were not consuming these grains at all.[[6]](#footnote-6) Colony-side writers admitted as how the enslaved were not receiving these grain foodstuffs and blandly suggested a meager allotment well out of proportion with their population in the course of their broader arguments.[[7]](#footnote-7)

So, the crisis was not about foodstuffs in any substantive way, even if the corruption, hoarding, and monopolies of high-level merchants and the intendant might have made planters feel frustrated and even, at some extreme, temporarily food insecure for their own households. Instead, planters used the moment as a flashpoint to try to break France’s economic monopoly and engage in regional trade, not only to seek nearby goods but also, crucially, to benefit from an expanded market for Saint-Domingue’s cash crops. Free ports, opened through the guise of supply trade, would have unleashed Dominguan coffee and sugar to eager nearby markets, particularly the United States, and they would furthermore easily have concealed trade in many other products. American flour offered a Trojan vessel for reduced oversight. Deregulation would have had widespread effects, including diminished importance of France, as the pamphleteers acknowledged.[[8]](#footnote-8) Both elite groups were frustrated with each other, and *Colony*’s point-counterpoint structure helps users understand the intransigence of each position, even a few months after revolutionary fighting began on French soil.[[9]](#footnote-9) France-based authors invoked interimperial rivalry with Britain, even as colonial planters were far more concerned with engagement to their immediate north, in the United States.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Several documents selected for Issue #2 seek “to provide a larger, transnational context for…1789 Saint-Domingue,” and they succeed promisingly. Two pamphlets in particular offer a regional view of French administrative questions in the Caribbean, tantalizingly pointing to new directions of inquiry: the functioning and life of regional ports, regional foodways, and intra-Caribbean traffic generally.[[11]](#footnote-11) The scholars aver that their initial goal for *Colony in Crisis* was to “speak to the conditions of the slaves, wealthy and poor planters, free people of color, and the reactions to the system of slavery in mainland France,” and that this goal was unmanageably broad.[[12]](#footnote-12) Nevertheless, in these final documents, the authors provide a scaffold for just such a growing dialogue. *Colony* calls attention to a wealth of printed resources currently housed in separate physical institutions, and it succeeds brilliantly in making them accessible to scholars of varying interests and engagement. One might easily see how another pamphlet series might include [texts](https://books.google.com.do/books?hl=es&lr=&id=MuwCAAAAYAAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP5&dq=antonio+sanchez+valverde&ots=IJ3ojl_BON&sig=XjnWlnKBs41Sg6_m1unUAFpiaKs#v=onepage&q&f=false) from Saint-Domingue’s immediate cattle-trading neighbor, for example, Santo Domingo. Another challenge might be how resources from this “rich print culture” could be gathered alongside other more fragmentary text sources, oral histories, and sound studies.[[13]](#footnote-13) *Colony* boasts a Board of Advisors who could bring context to a wide variety of sources and also to bring [ongoing](http://socialtext.dukejournals.org/content/33/4_125.toc) vibrant debates about the archive itself to new audiences. These discussions might grow closer to the lived experience of enslaved men, women, and children, who made up the majority of Saint-Domingue as the colony confronted crises of the 1780s. Readers will quickly have a sense of magnitude and value of this project, and I look forward to following the site as it grows.

1. [The Project](http://colonyincrisis.lib.umd.edu/about/) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [Révolution](http://colonyincrisis.lib.umd.edu/the-team/revealing-la-revolution-team/), [HHB](http://haitianhistory.tumblr.com/post/136472549793/qa-with-a-colony-in-crisis). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [Cocherel II](http://colonyincrisis.lib.umd.edu/1789/11/10/m-de-cocherels-reflections-deputy-of-saint-domingue-on-the-report-from-the-comite-des-six/), emphasis added. The [Comte de Reynaud](http://colonyincrisis.lib.umd.edu/1789/08/31/motion-from-m-le-comte-de-reynaud-deputy-of-saint-domingue-at-the-august-31-session/) suggests an “eve…of famine.” The table of contents also echoes this theme, in its phrasing “the grain shortages in Saint-Domingue…threatened the planters with famine and malnutrition.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. His refutation is not in the [English translation](http://colonyincrisis.lib.umd.edu/1790/02/12/charges-of-fraud-the-obstinate-rebuttal-of-a-banished-intendant-concerning-the-grain-shortage-and-criminal-negligence/) but offered in the full Mémoire ([Mémoire](http://archive.org/stream/memoireetobserva00barb#page/34/mode/2up) 35). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Joseph Horan, “The Colonial Famine Plot: Slavery, Free Trade, and Empire in the French Atlantic, 1763-1791.” *IRSH* 55(2010), 103-121. [Gouy d’Arsy](colonyincrisis.lib.umd.edu/1789/09/09/summary-given-by-m-le-marquis-de-gouy-darsy) and [Reynaud](http://colonyincrisis.lib.umd.edu/1789/08/31/motion-from-m-le-comte-de-reynaud-deputy-of-saint-domingue-at-the-august-31-session/) invoke the diet of enslaved people in their petitions. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. [Cocherel and Raynaud.](http://colonyincrisis.lib.umd.edu/1789/09/13/response-from-the-deputies-of-production-and-commerce-of-france/) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. [Gouy d’Arsy.](http://colonyincrisis.lib.umd.edu/1789/09/09/summary-given-by-m-le-marquis-de-gouy-darsy/) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. [Cocherel II.](http://colonyincrisis.lib.umd.edu/1789/11/10/m-de-cocherels-reflections-deputy-of-saint-domingue-on-the-report-from-the-comite-des-six/) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. [Réplique](http://colonyincrisis.lib.umd.edu/1789/11/11/supplement-to-the-counter-argument-from-the-deputies-of-french-manufacturers-and-commerce-to-the-deputies-of-saint-domingue/). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. [State of Slaves](http://colonyincrisis.lib.umd.edu/1789/03/17/on-the-state-of-slaves/). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. [Judgment Sep](http://colonyincrisis.lib.umd.edu/1786/09/10/judgment-from-the-state-council-of-the-king-september-10-1786/).; [Judgment Aug.](http://colonyincrisis.lib.umd.edu/1784/08/30/judgment-from-the-state-council-of-the-king-concerning-foreign-commerce-in-the-french-isles-of-america-from-august-30-1784/) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. [Introduction 1.0](http://colonyincrisis.lib.umd.edu/2014/09/12/issue-1-0-introduction/). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. [About](http://colonyincrisis.lib.umd.edu/about/). [Haiti Lab](http://www.fhi.duke.edu/labs/haiti-lab/online-projects) gathers an important group of these projects. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)