

Unravelling Dreams

One of the greatest hopes and expectations that accompanied American colonialism – from its earliest incarnation – was that Atlantic settlers would be able to locate new sources of raw silk with which to satiate the boundless desire for luxurious fabrics in European markets. However, in spite of the great upheavals and achievements of Atlantic plantation, this ambition would never be fulfilled. By taking the commercial failure of silk seriously and examining numerous experiments across New Spain, New France, British North America, and the early United States, Ben Marsh reveals new insights into aspiration, labour, environment, and economy in these societies. Each devised its own dreams and plans of cultivation, framed by the particularities of cultures and landscapes. Writ large, these dreams would unravel one by one: the attempts to introduce silkworms across the Atlantic world ultimately constituted a step too far, marking out the limits of Europeans' seemingly unbounded power.

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Silk and the Atlantic World, 1500–1840

Ben Marsh

University of Kent



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For Lils, who is my glorious silk, and for Alfie,
Thomas, Ella, and Tess, who are my industrious,
marvellous worms.

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