

Secret history or the horrors of st. domingo analysis



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Analysis of Leonora Sansay's Secret History; or, The Horrors of St. Domingo

Leonora Sansay's *Secret History; or, The Horrors of St. Domingo* provides a personal historical narrative surrounding the Haitian Revolution. A manuscript in this manner can offer historians a voice to elements of the Revolution that would otherwise be lacking or silent when studying other writings of the period. The manifestos of the revolutionaries, writings of the dominant class and government/military documents often provide the primary materials for research and historical text; however, it is the personal narrative that illuminates certain moods and philosophies that can be overlooked or when emphasising the dates and names surrounding an event.

Sansay's narrative takes the structure of an epistolary novel, a novel containing a series of letters, written by an American, Mary, to her personal friend Aaron Burr, who at that time was the vice president of the United States. Mary traveled to Saint Domingue in 1802 with her sister's French husband, St. Louis, in hopes of salvaging an estate lost during the early years of the Haitian Revolution. As a "secret history," the novel has its foundation in the dawdling relationship between, Leonora Sansay, and Aaron Burr. Like the protagonist in the novel, Mary, Sansay was a close friend of Aaron Burr; and like Mary's fictional sister, Clara, Sansay was married to a French officer from Saint Domingue, Louis Sansay. Demonstrating that, the novel is generously based on Leonora Sansay's experience in Saint Domingue during the final years of the revolution, 1802-03.

On the first reading, Sansay's novel seems to give scarce attention to the devastating events of the Haitian revolution. The politics of race and colonial

power, and the often horrific scenes of warfare that took place during the very years of the novel's account are behind the scenes. Indeed, given Sansay's weakness for descriptive accounts of, for instance, the "innumerable lustres of chrysal and wreaths of natural flowers ornamented the ceiling; and rose and orange trees, in full blossom" (Sansay, 74) transported aboard a French naval ship in the harbour of Saint Domingue's Le Cap François to form the backdrop of the Admiral's ball, it would be easy to dismiss the novel and its characters as exemplary of an aristocratic temperament. But it is this temperament of the French colonials that makes the document so interesting and important.

Michael J. Drexler's introduction to Sansay's novel touches on how *Secret History...* has been viewed in the past, and how these views changed with the scholar Joan Dayan. Dayan's text *Haiti, History and the Gods*, was the first serious scholarly use of Sansay's writings, "[f]or Dayan, the novel is both a social history of French decadence and a glimpse of trans-cultural, or trans-racial, mimicry, fantasy, and desire" (Sansay, 26). What this means is, the novel would seem to focus on the excesses of a French colonial regime that is wilfully removed from the life and death brutalities of the colonial slave system that brought about the revolt occurring outside the doors of its gilded fantasy world of extravagance and indulgence. The question that arises, with the knowledge of the how the book has been overlooked in the past by other historians, is how would Sansay's work be of use to a young historian?

Having a fundamental understanding of the concerns, causes and conclusion of the revolution in Haiti, assisted in a greater understanding of the novel. In

Secret History... the politics of French colonial warfare are displayed within <https://assignbuster.com/secret-history-or-the-horrors-of-st-domingo-analysis/>

the hidden, private desires that flow through the characters. The secret history conjectures a structural relation between the public and the private: each genre privileges a different pole as the primary location of meaning, but both foreground the necessary conflict and reliance of one set of meanings upon the other. This understanding of the characters' relations to each other and their surroundings sets a mirror upon the country's complex interactions. Metaphorically, then, love is colonial warfare.

However, the love plot assumes more essentially violent dimensions when St. Louis imprisons Clara in their house threatening to kill her if she attempts to leave. When the armed forces of General Jean-Jacques Dessalines draw near Le Cap, Rochambeau takes advantage of the occasion to invite Clara to safety aboard a French vessel; an offer she declines out of fear of incurring her husband's wrath. The more horrifying truth for Clara, than the soon-to-be-realized threat of the massacre of all the white residents of Le Cap by Dessalines' black revolutionary forces, is the menace of being murdered at the hands of her white husband. Yet colonial warfare ultimately offers Clara a surprising escape route from her husband: as Le Cap falls under siege, Mary writes, " All the women are suffered to depart, but no man can procure a passport" (Sansay, 105). Mary and Clara are able flee Saint Domingue and break away from from St. Louis by traveling to Cuba and later Jamaica in the company of other women displaced by the revolution and scattered across a colonial Caribbean landscape. The cruelty of patriarchy in the novel is clearly interrelated to that of colonialism and race politics, a pairing underscored by the formation of a quasi-utopic community of husbandless Creole women at the close of the novel.

This novel does possess a certain amount of fictional material, just as any fictional historical narrative will, but there is not a wealth of biographical information available about Leonora Sansay. Michael Drexler's introduction to *Secret History...* provides a useful and comprehensive account of Sansay's career. The narrative itself provides quasi-autobiography of Sansay, which discerning historians will find useful. On top of this, Sansay does grant her audience with a believable and accurate backdrop. The Haitian Revolution began in 1791 and ended with the establishment of the first free black republic in the west in 1804. During which time, French and Spanish troops, in a dizzying number of shifting alliances and oppositions, fought white Creole populations, free persons of color, and slave factions, vying for control of the country. By 1800, the black leader, Toussaint Louverture secured control of the island as a whole, but in 1801, the French General Leclerc, who was dispatched to Saint Domingue by Napoleon to reassert French control, captured Toussaint and sent him to France. In Sansay's novel, Mary and her sister arrive in Le Cap Francais while Leclerc is in command; thus basing her novel in a sound and accurate setting, proving valuable for scholars.

At the outset of our examination of *Secret History...* we discussed how a personal narrative can provide a unique voice to any historical event. The opening sentence of Sansay's epistolary novel outlines an antagonism between the life of the physical body and that of the Haitian social body:

We arrived safely [in Saint Domingue] ... after a passage of forty days, during which I suffered horribly from sea-sickness, heat and confinement; but the society of my fellow-passengers was so agreeable that I often forgot the inconvenience to which I was exposed (Sansay, 61).

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The reader can note the difference between the first half of the sentence, which describes the travails of a sea voyage of biblical length and duress, and the second half, which casually dismisses the pains of the flesh in favour of the pleasures of sociability. An inappropriateness of empirical registers marks the opening of the novel, and while this incongruity asserts itself as slightly jarring initially, it becomes increasingly pronounced as the novel unfolds. Indeed, the contrast embedded within the opening sentence augments the intentional exaggeration throughout the novel such, that within a few short pages we find scenes of bayoneted bodies intermingled with blushing glances exchanged at balls in the colonial palaces of Saint Domingue. However exaggerated the text may seem it still opens a precious gem of information that cannot be overlooked or undervalued.