Saint-Domingue ‘Remembered’: Marcus Rainsford and Leonora Sansay’s Lessons for Atlantic World Governance

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By January 1804, Saint-Domingue—the ‘pearl of the Antilles’—had been lost to colonial France and the independence of the newly-named ‘Haiti’ had been declared. This paper argues that where the majority of contemporary observers framed the Haitian Revolution in discussions of slavery, others emphasised the perceived failures of the French as evidence that the New World represented a geo-political space in which traditional forms of governance demanded re-evaluation. This paper focuses on the work of two writers who witnessed the Revolution first-hand and who argue that the biggest mistake France made was appointing leaders who were ill suited to the unique demands of the New World. For these two authors, the perceived mishandling of the Revolution by the French drastically called into question what constituted effective and legitimate governance in the Americas and served to provide pertinent lessons for leadership in Britain’s colonies and the early American republic.

The repercussions of the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) were felt throughout the Atlantic World. The only successful slave revolution in history particularly caused panic and fear among Haiti’s neighbouring colonies, as well as the slave-holding states of the southern United States. Long after Jean-Jacques Dessalines finally drove Napoleon’s troops from colonial Saint-Domingue in 1804 and declared independence (renaming the island Haiti in the process), memories of the Revolution continued to reverberate in British and American discourses. On both sides of the Atlantic the Revolution continued to play a central role in political and public discussions of slavery and black capability. Anti-slavery supporters saw the uprising as ‘proof’ of the barbarity of slavery and of the desire among slaves to be emancipated by whatever means necessary. Pro-slavery proponents, on the other hand, focused on the alleged atrocities of the black revolutionaries as evidence of the ‘savage’ nature inherent in blacks and as proof, therefore, of the need to maintain the institution of slavery.1

This article focuses on two texts that were produced in the aftermath of the Revolution but which sought to place alternative socio-political discussions at the heart of their narratives: Marcus Rainsford’s An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti (1805) and Leonora Sansay’s Secret History; or, The Horrors of St. Domingo

Little is known about Rainsford other than that he was a British military officer who served in the Caribbean at the end of the eighteenth century. Although Rainsford was only in Saint-Domingue for a matter of weeks towards the end of 1799, he went on to publish two depictions of the later years of the Revolution: A Memoir of Transactions that Took Place in Saint-Domingue (1802) and his Historical Account. Both of these texts (but in particular the Historical Account) were the subject of much attention in both Britain and America at the time of their publication, and they quickly became possibly the most well-known first-hand accounts of the later years of the Revolution. Details of Sansay’s life are similarly vague but it seems that from the beginning of 1802 until 1803 she lived in Saint-Domingue with her husband, Louis, who was a French colonist. Her Secret History is presented as a series of letters written during Sansay’s time on the island from the fictional ‘Mary’ to Sansay’s real-life friend (and, some have claimed, lover) Aaron Burr—the former vice-president of the United States. Though Sansay’s text functions primarily as a novel, recently uncovered correspondence between Sansay and Burr—written from Saint-Domingue—shows that the scenes depicted are informed by, and reflective of, Sansay’s own experiences on the island at such a crucial and destructive time of the Revolution. Therefore, although artistic licence was undoubtedly employed in sections of the novel, the text nonetheless gives a unique insight into the latter part of the Revolution.

As both authors witnessed events in Saint Domingue at a critical point in France’s loss to the revolutionaries, they are often used as valuable historiographical sources in scholarly work on the Haitian Revolution. Further to this, recent scholarly work on Secret History has called for the novel to be read in a framework of Atlantic colonialism. For example, Elizabeth Maddock Dillon has highlighted how Sansay demonstrates the oppressive and destructive nature of colonial slavery, while other scholars have exposed a fear of black sovereignty and political power that permeates the novel. Although in-depth literary analysis of Rainsford’s work remains rare, his own concerns over the damaging impact of colonial slavery have also been outlined. However, Rainsford and Sansay’s texts are rarely read alongside each other and when they are the striking similarities they share in their political commentary tend to be overlooked.

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3 Although little evidence has been uncovered to confirm the two embarked on an affair, the intimacy of these letters and other correspondence between the two at least confirms a very close friendship: J. Dayan, Haiti, History and the Gods, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998, pp. 165-70.; M. J. Drexler, ‘Introduction’, in Michael J. Drexler (ed.), Secret History; or, the Horrors of St. Domingo and Laura; Canada, Broadview Editions, 2008b, pp. 10-37. See also Drexler’s introduction for an overview of Sansay’s life.
5 Youngquist and Pierrot, ‘Introduction’.
6 Michelle Burnham’s comparative reading is a rare exception that focuses on how the bodies of women are used in both texts: see M. Burnham, ‘Female Bodies and Capitalist Drive: Leonora Sansay’s Secret History in Transoceanic Context’, Legacy: A Journal of American Women Writers, vol. 28, no. 2, 2011.
This paper contends that the way in which both texts function as a critique of how France handled this ‘crisis’ in its most treasured of colonies demands greater consideration. In a move away from most texts about the Revolution produced at the time in Britain and America, both Rainsford and Sansay largely relegate discussions of slavery and abolition to the margins of their narratives. Instead, both authors use the Revolution to highlight the unique geo-political space of the New World as a whole, and to emphasise the necessity of employing leaders capable of adapting to its potentially volatile socio-political climate. By analysing these critiques in more detail, it is possible to see how both authors use their memories of the Revolution to mirror more domestic political anxieties. Sansay was witnessing the still-young American republic’s attempts to assert a stable foothold in the volatile space of Atlantic World politics. At the time her novel was published, debates still abounded as to what style of government would best serve the interests of the American people and the future prosperity of the fledgling republic. On the other hand, Rainsford’s text is clearly concerned for the future of Britain’s Caribbean colonies, particularly with the abolition of Britain’s slave trade becoming a distinct possibility.

The conduct of British governors in the ‘lawless frontier’ of the British Caribbean was a particularly pertinent issue by 1805. Most significantly, Thomas Picton—the former governor of Trinidad—had been formally accused of torture and the unlawful killing of slaves and free citizens without due process. As these charges became more publicly known, Picton was subjected to attacks in numerous newspapers and pamphlets in Britain—although he still found significant pockets of support, even from within British political circles. Rainsford’s text is unique in that instead of denouncing Picton directly—a move that could have been interpreted as incendiary and therefore damaging for the career of a naval figure such as Rainsford—his *Historical Account* instead more subtly draws parallels between the charges levelled at Picton and the actions of the French generals in charge during the Revolution. In doing so, Rainsford presented to the British public an example of the catastrophic consequences of colonial misrule at a time when the role of colonial governors—and the parameters within which they should operate—was a topic of fervent discussion.

In both texts, central to this critique are the scathing assessments of the two generals ordered by Napoleon in 1802 to reclaim Saint Domingue—Charles Leclerc and his successor, Donatien-Marie-Joseph de Vimeur, vicomte de Rochambeau. Initially, the figures of both Leclerc and Rochambeau were well received in Britain and America as popular opinion generally desired an end to the Revolution—and, importantly, one which involved white European victory. However, this support

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10 James Epstein provides a detailed analysis of the accusations levelled at Picton and the criticism he received back in Britain. See J. Epstein, *Scandal of Colonial Rule: Power and Subversion in the British Atlantic During the Age of Revolution* Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012.
soon eroded as both Leclerc and Rochambeau became renowned for their violent attempts to subjugate the black revolutionaries and to reinstate French control on the island. British writers in particular used accounts of their brutality as part of increasingly vehement anti-French rhetoric and support for the French generals deteriorated rapidly after it emerged that Leclerc had deceived and imprisoned the leader of the Revolution, the ex-slave Toussaint Louverture. Toussaint’s abilities in sustaining the Revolution had drawn admirers from both Britain and America. Therefore, reports that Leclerc had not only tricked Toussaint, but had also sent him to die in a remote prison cell in France, were met with a wave of criticism, particularly in Britain. Toussaint’s death quickly became mythologised and served to underpin the notion of French barbarity and dishonour in war at a time of increasing hostility towards France in both Britain and America.

Although Leclerc and Rochambeau’s alleged barbarity is outlined in the accounts of Rainsford and Sansay, exactly how the generals failed to counter the Revolution is a more central concern for both writers. Rainsford and Sansay each make their belief clear that at the time of the arrival of Leclerc and then Rochambeau the Revolution was far from a foregone conclusion. On the contrary, both authors suggest that the Revolution could still have been suppressed and stabilised but that France had elected successive governors ill-suited to the unique demands and conditions of the colonial New World. Crucially, these leaders are depicted as more damaging than the black revolutionaries to Saint-Dominguan society and the future of the colony as a whole.

**Leclerc and Rochambeau – The Wrong Kind of Governor**

Charles Leclerc landed on the shores of Saint-Domingue at the beginning of 1802 with over 60,000 men and a fleet the size of which surely struck fear into the hearts of the black insurgents. Leclerc was instructed by Napoleon—his brother-in-law—to bring down the “ungrateful rebellious Africans” and restore French control throughout the colony. Central to Rainsford’s critique of Leclerc are the reports of atrocities committed under the general’s rule. Perhaps most disturbingly, Rainsford recalls how captured revolutionaries were taken out to sea and killed, or simply drowned alive in numbers so great that the tide eventually brought the corpses back to shore. In the same passage, Rainsford describes the use of bloodhounds by the French troops to hunt down the black revolutionaries—something which only served

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to ‘aid and fill up the measure of their enormities.’\textsuperscript{14} Philippe Girard has provided evidence that bloodhounds were, in fact, not introduced to the Revolution until after Leclerc’s death at the end of 1802. Whether Rainsford was aware of this is unknown, but he most likely chose to include the story anyway, due to its infamy in British newspaper accounts of Leclerc at this time.\textsuperscript{15} Either way, the inclusion of such a claim is central to Rainsford’s suggestion that Saint-Domingue had become a site of horrific atrocities committed by both sides and that the French general had not only allowed such acts of barbarity to happen, but that his inability to stall the progress of the black revolutionaries had driven his troops to such desperate measures.

Following Leclerc’s death from yellow fever in late 1802, responsibility for securing France’s re-capture of Saint-Domingue fell to Rochambeau, ‘an aristocrat who bore one of the most illustrious names in the Americas’.\textsuperscript{16} In a continuation of the types of representations of Leclerc in Britain and America, memories of the brutal regime of Rochambeau and his ruthless extermination of large numbers of the island’s black population would be seized upon by a number of writers and newspapers at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Girard has questioned whether Rochambeau’s legacy as a ‘sadistic butcher’ is fully deserved, but he concedes that the ‘shocking’ manner of his cruelty is what gives him a ‘unique place in the rich annals of human cruelty’.\textsuperscript{17} Rainsford seizes on these stories in his own denunciation of the French general. In Rainsford’s account, the use of bloodhounds under Rochambeau’s rule was even more brutal than under Leclerc, as the French allegedly allowed captured blacks to be eaten alive by the dogs.\textsuperscript{18} While Rainsford certainly offers no excuse for such an act, he suggests that the perilous state of the colony and the lack of stable and effective leadership inevitably led the troops to such measures, concluding that ‘[s]uch is the deterioration of the human mind, under a pressure of such circumstances.’\textsuperscript{19} In this sense, as with Leclerc, Rochambeau’s inability to successfully drive back the black revolutionaries ultimately drove his own troops to such inhumanity through sheer desperation.

These denunciations of the behaviour of the French generals should not be dismissed simply as evidence of Rainsford’s alleged ‘francophobia’.\textsuperscript{20} While this cannot be discounted, neither should the fact that the question of what constituted acceptable governance in the colonies had been brought to the attention of the British public by the scandalous accusations of one of Britain’s own colonial governors. In 1803 Thomas Picton faced charges of murder—a case which was immediately brought to the King’s Bench and which lasted for four years. Picton was accused of decapitating, killing and burning Trinidadian slaves he suspected of practising forms

\textsuperscript{14} M. Rainsford, \textit{An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti: Comprehending a View of the Principal Transactions in the Revolution of Saint Domingo; with Its Ancient and Modern State}, Ivy-Lane, Paternoster-Row, James Cundee, 1805, pp. 325-28.
\textsuperscript{16} P. Girard, \textit{The Slaves Who Defeated Napoleon}, p. 225.
\textsuperscript{17} For detailed examples of the kinds of cruelties Rochambeau was accused of at this time see P. Girard, \textit{The Slaves Who Defeated Napoleon}, pp. 234-236.
\textsuperscript{18} Rainsford’s claim is supported by archival evidence in Girard, \textit{Napoleonica. La Revue}, pp. 82-85.
\textsuperscript{19} Rainsford, \textit{Historical Account}, p. 339.
\textsuperscript{20} This is an accusation often levelled at Rainsford. See for example P. Girard, \textit{Napoleonica. La Revue}, p. 96.
of black magic. For British observers, possibly more serious were the accusations that he had condemned a British soldier, accused of rape, to death without trial. As governor, Picton was said to be operating in a geo-political space in which he was unbounded by measures of accountability.²¹ Although Rainsford does not reference Picton directly, the lack of parameters in which Leclerc and Rochambeau operated offers a striking parallel to Picton’s governing of Trinidad. If, as Epstein suggests, Picton’s case formed part of ‘a wider conflict over the future of British colonial rule in the Caribbean’ then Rainsford directly contributes to this discourse by highlighting similar actions of colonial misrule in Saint-Domingue—actions with disastrous and horrific results. The remembering of Leclerc and Rochambeau serves to not only denounce the inhumanity of French leadership, but more pertinently it reminds its British readers of the potentially-catastrophic consequences of allowing colonial governors to act with such unrestricted cruelty—something which Rainsford emphasises only served to fan the flames of black revolutionary spirit.

In addition to the alleged barbarities committed by the French generals, Rainsford stresses the deficiencies in morality and character of both leaders—flaws that had particularly catastrophic consequences in the volatile New World. In particular, Leclerc is remembered as ‘so weak a governor’ that it was inevitable he would be unable to suppress the black troops.²² However, more importantly, this weakness was exacerbated by his ego and vanity. Leclerc was apparently ‘impatient to open his splendid career’ and his first military involvement on the island was rushed in order to impress his friends who were ‘sufficiently ripe and numerous for his reception’.²³ In Leclerc, Rainsford saw a colonial governor who ‘considered only his own aggrandizement’ and whose actions were served to satisfy personal ambitions as opposed to acting in the best interests of the colony and its inhabitants.²⁴ Rainsford claims that as a result Leclerc failed to establish a stable colonial government and the ‘insubordinate state’ that emerged in its absence ‘assumed a complexion more sanguinary and terrible than can be conceived among a civilised people’.²⁵ The impact of Leclerc’s self-serving form of leadership was a pertinent lesson for Britain’s colonies, particularly in light of accusations that Picton had been operating in Trinidad with similar reckless abandon. Picton was said to have filled Trinidadian seats of power with his closest allies and looked to constantly improve his economic situation in the colony.²⁶ Therefore, the example of Leclerc is held up in Rainsford’s text as a warning about appointing governors who are interested primarily in self-improvement and attainment—something which is often pursued at the expense of sufficient care for the colony and which can enable revolutions to not only begin, but thrive.

Rainsford’s criticisms of the colony’s failed leaders were clearly echoed by Sansay. Leclerc’s leadership and flawed character was depicted with similar disdain in a series of letters Sansay wrote to Aaron Burr, some years before the publication of

²¹ Epstein, American Historical Review, pp. 716-17.
²² Rainsford, Historical Account, p. 315.
²³ Rainsford, p. 268.
²⁴ Rainsford, p. 312.
²⁵ Rainsford, p. 326.
her novel.27 In one such letter dated 6 May 1803, Sansay unleashed a brief but vicious assessment of Leclerc’s time in the colony. In it she claimed that despite the arrest of Toussaint ‘we are still far from that tranquillity so much desired.’ She asserted that the Revolution would have been suitably suppressed from this point on had the island been under the control of a more competent governor. But ‘General le Clerc’, she wrote:

was without energy – tormented by jealousy for his wife, deceived by his officers, impos’d on by the black chiefs with whom he was always in conference... he only thought of saving himself by evacuating the place- this he was prevented doing...28

It is clear, therefore, that Sansay believed that France could have prevailed against the revolutionaries, especially after the capture of Toussaint. However, she suggests that the decision to put in charge of the expedition a weak general prone to jealousy and deception, and lacking in wisdom, was fatal to French attempts to quash the rebellion.

These ideas are furthered in the novel itself as Sansay stresses the damaging consequences of a colonial leader who is drawn in by the personal economic potential of the New World. She highlights how Leclerc’s penchant for the personal accrual of wealth, despite the condition of the colony, had disastrous consequences, even for his own army:

[Leclerc] has shocked every body by having ordered a superb service of plate, made of the money intended to pay the army, while the poor soldiers, badly cloathed (sic), and still more badly fed, are asking alms in the street, and absolutely dying of want.

Similar to Rainsford’s commentary, Sansay’s criticism of Leclerc centres on his inability or, at least unwillingness, to consider what was in the best interests of the inhabitants of the colony. In this sense, Leclerc is again portrayed as a direct contributor to the suffering of the officers and colonists he should have been helping. As Sansay’s protagonist asks sarcastically: ‘why should such trifling considerations as the preservation of soldiers, prevent a general in chief from eating out of silver dishes?’29

Despite her clear disdain for Leclerc, Sansay reserved her most scathing criticism for Rochambeau. Sansay’s protagonist, Mary, is immediately sceptical that Rochambeau’s management of the colony will be as self-serving as Leclerc’s. The fact that Rochambeau declares a ‘grand ball’ upon his arrival is proof enough for Mary

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27 These letters were originally documented in C. Burdett, Margaret Moncrieffe; the First Love of Aaron Burr, New York, Derby & Jackson, 1860, pp. 428-37. More recently, Michael Drexler has brought them to light and highlighted their importance as one of the few sources available for biographical details of Sansay’s life: Drexler, ‘Appendix A’, Secret History.


29 L. Sansay, Secret History; or the Horrors of St. Domingo. In a Series of Letters, Written by a Lady at Cape Francois to Colonel Burr, Late Vice-President of the United States, Principally During the Command of General Rochambeau, Philadelphia, Bradford & Inskeep, 1808, p. 10.

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that he ‘bears pleasure as well as conquest in his train’. Instead of bringing the political guidance and military acumen so hoped for and needed by the island’s colonists, the colony’s inhabitants ‘are in danger...of being satiated with pleasure’. Sansay thus portrays Rochambeau as the kind of pleasure-seeking and self-centred governor that the New World colonies attract but who is ultimately doomed to failure. This view of Rochambeau was clearly a prominent one in the colony at the time. In another letter to Burr, Sansay detailed a confrontation between the general and the husband of a woman Rochambeau was allegedly pursuing. Sansay apparently witnessed the affronted husband who:

vented his wrath in a long speech, representing how abominable it was for a person who should be the father of the colony, and the protection of it’s [sic] inhabitants, to seek to trouble the repose and destroy the peace of the family’s [sic].

This scene is reflected in the novel as Sansay clearly argues that colonial governors—and political leaders as a whole—should exert a sense of paternalism over the population but that Rochambeau had ultimately failed as the ‘father of the colony’. It is in these passages that what constituted the ‘horrors’ of Saint-Domingue is called drastically into question. In addition to the threat posed by the black revolutionaries, the island’s colonists find ‘in the army sent to defend them, oppressors who appear to seek their destruction’ and as a result:

the Creoles, who had remained on the island during the reign of Toussaint, regret the change, and say that they were less vexed by the negroes than by those who have come to protect them.

Sansay emphasises the increasingly despotic nature of Rochambeau’s rule and its impact on the island’s population as ‘[e]veryone trembles for his own safety, and silent horror reigns throughout the place’. In the novel, the French general’s tyranny is indiscriminate and ruthless, and numerous acts of embezzlement and extortion by Rochambeau and his men towards the colony’s merchants are outlined. For Sansay, more than the violence of the Revolution, these are the real horrors of Saint-Domingue. In allowing such tyrannical forms of government to persist, the damaging effect on the island’s population is clear to see as a ‘settled gloom pervades the place and everyone trembles lest he should be the next victim of a monster from whose power there is no retreat’. Sansay’s portrayal of the damaging impact of such despotic and self-serving forms of rule in the Caribbean certainly suggests a genuine concern for other colonies who may be subjected to the machinations of similar governors. However, Sansay’s
writing should also be read within a framework of discourses that attacked American Federalists for their reliance on traditional political hierarchies—forms of governance that were based on European models of political power. Her critique of the political and military failures in Saint-Domingue highlights more generally that European approaches to governance in the New World as a whole—including the early American republic—were ill suited and could have disastrous consequences. Further than this, this criticism came at a time when the Republican attack on monocracy in America had advanced considerably and their abhorrence of specific abuses of political power had become increasingly more vocal. Therefore, Sansay’s memories of Leclerc and Rochambeau served to remind American readers of the need for a system of government that disallowed excessive power from being vested in individuals and which ensured that its leaders had well-defined parameters within which to operate.

Who is Fit to Govern this New World?

In addition to their scathing assessments of the French generals, both Rainsford and Sansay offer alternative examples of leaders who they suggest are more suited to the unique geo-political space of the New World. In her text, Sansay outlines one particular example of colonial governance in Saint-Domingue that may have been the alternative that the colony needed. Sansay offers brief but telling praise for ‘general Closelle’—almost certainly a misspelling of Bertrand Clausel who, according to Sansay, was briefly placed in charge at Cap-Français while Rochambeau was engaged in affairs in Port-au-Prince. Clausel was a marshal of France who had distinguished himself in the French revolutionary wars and in Italy before arriving in Saint-Domingue some time in 1802.

In the novel, Clausel, unlike his counterpart, ‘gives no balls, no concerts’ and he appears to be so concerned with restoring some moral fibre to the Cape that ‘he has had the church fitted up, and the fete dieu has been celebrated with great order, magnificence and solemnity’. While this allusion to Clausel is short, Sansay is keen to stress his duty of care to the colony: ‘...he has put everything on a new footing; the fortifications are repairing, and block-houses are erecting all round the town’. Clausel is also, rather poignantly, ‘not a favourite with the ladies’ and therefore ‘no threat to the men of the island’. In a break away from Rochambeau’s licentiousness and its damaging effect on colonial society, Clausel provides a more perceptive and dignified response to the burgeoning crisis. The paternal nature of Clausel’s actions are not ignored by the general population and Sansay highlights the unifying and rejuvenating impact he has had on the Cape’s colonists: ‘The measures of general Closelle [sic] inspire them with confidence; and they think that if he was commander in chief, all would go well’. The suggestion is clear—that had France appointed a leader capable of displaying moderate and thoughtful governance, Saint-Domingue could have survived the Revolution. The more general lesson for Sansay, and for early

37 Wood, Empire of Liberty, p. 276.
America, is the importance of employing political leaders who have the interests of the public at heart, and not their own self-gain.

In a similar vein, Rainsford includes a brief, but telling, footnote in which he draws a ‘noble contrast’ between the weakness and deception of Leclerc and the ‘gallantry and benevolence’ of George Walpole, the British general largely credited with suppressing the Maroon insurrection in Jamaica in 1795. In this section of the text, Rainsford describes a proclamation Leclerc allegedly issued to the ‘citizens’ of the Cape—a proclamation designed to deceive the black revolutionaries into believing that France had granted ‘liberty to all’. Rainsford situates the ‘abject baseness’ of Leclerc’s deception alongside claims that during the Maroon insurrection Walpole refused an act proposed by the British government because it might have seemed to ‘inveigle’ the mulatto revolutionaries. More honourably than this, Rainsford points out, Walpole instigated ‘regular treaties’ with the leaders of the maroon insurrection. Furthermore, Walpole apparently forewent any recognition of achievement from Britain for his service to Jamaica ‘because he did not conceive his engagements with them perfectly fulfilled’— a show of humility that could not have been further removed from Leclerc’s penchant for fame and public honour.

Of course, it is impossible to ignore the simple fact that Rainsford situates a noble British general directly opposite the alleged tyranny of a French military officer and that this therefore serves partly as a celebration of British identity at a time of increasing hostilities between the British and the French. However, it is important to note that this depiction of effective conduct in the colonies also came at a time when the abolition of the slave trade was becoming a distinct possibility in Britain— something which would have served to intensify the need for stable and thoughtful governance within the colonies to oversee this change successfully. Thus, this comparison allows Rainsford to underline the importance of decisive yet moderate leaders such as Walpole in the British colonies, especially at such a potentially volatile time.

In a discussion such as this, regarding how two Atlantic writers looked to the Haitian Revolution for guidance on how to govern in the New World, it is imperative to consider how both writers engaged with the figure of Toussaint Louverture—the ex-slave turned leader of the Revolution, and the self-appointed governor of Saint-Domingue at the time of the Leclerc expedition. What is particularly striking is how in their approaches to Toussaint, Sansay and Rainsford differed remarkably. To begin with, Toussaint and the other black leaders of the Revolution are conspicuous in their absence from Sansay’s novel. Toussaint is mentioned a total of three times in Sansay’s novel, and these references are brief and contradictory. And when Toussaint is mentioned, Sansay deliberately obfuscates the popular narrative of the celebrated leader of the Revolution. Sansay claims that before Toussaint was captured, ‘he had his treasure buried in the woods’ and that he ordered the black troops who buried this treasure to be shot in order to protect his

40 Rainsford, *Historical Account*, p. 310.
secret. Despite these passing allusions to the famed leader, Toussaint is decidedly absent from the rest of Sansay’s text. Therefore, given the extent of Toussaint’s fame within the island at the time that Sansay was there—and given that the leader’s fame only continued in America in the years after this—what can be said for the omission of the Revolution’s infamous leader from her novel?

To be sure—as has been highlighted elsewhere—Secret History was written with a distinct sense of negrophobia. However, perhaps more significantly, by reducing Toussaint to a mere footnote in her observations of the Revolution, Sansay effectively removes any notion of black agency from its history and helps to frame the success of the black revolutionaries as an ‘unthinkable’ event. In addition, Gretchen Woertendyke has argued that Sansay’s choice of genre—a ‘secret history’—was made to allow herself the flexibility to both reveal and conceal information at her convenience. In this case, although her text was published four years after the declaration of Haiti’s independence—a moment when the eyes of the Atlantic World viewed with curiosity and anxiety its first black republic—this is never discussed or even mentioned in her ‘history’. Sansay’s novel ends before the colony completely succumbs to black control. In doing so, Sansay leaves Saint-Domingue and the Revolution suspended in a particular moment in history—a moment in which an independent Haitian state was not yet a reality. By denying Haiti’s independence space in her narrative, she effectively denies recognition of the Haitian state. Although no explanation is offered for this, this ‘silencing’ of the ultimate success of the Revolution came at a time when anxiety in America was heightened not only over concerns that Haiti’s revolutionary spirit would spread to its own slave states, but also over how an independent Haiti would affect America’s commercial interests in the Caribbean. Therefore, Sansay’s erasure of Haitian agency demonstrates a clear desire to see the Haitian state—and the threat it represented—fade into insignificance or to disappear from the Atlantic stage altogether.

Rainsford adopted a markedly different approach to black agency in the success of the Revolution. His respect for the leader of the Revolution is clearly apparent and this portrayal ultimately serves to underline his criticism of the French generals as he outlines the positive impact of Toussaint’s more moderate and supposedly more enlightened mode of governing. But such a portrayal also presents his reader with an exemplary form of colonial governance at a time when the

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42 Sansay, Secret History, p. 5.
44 Michel-Rolph Trouillot famously concluded that the Revolution—and particularly its success—was an ‘unthinkable’ event for Western observers at the time and that it was thus ‘silenced’ in Western discourses. See M. R. Trouillot, Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History, Boston, Beacon Press, 1995.
conduct of Britain’s own governors in the British West Indies was being drastically called into question. Therefore, in Rainsford’s text the figure of Toussaint provides a model from which all New World governors could learn—even Britain’s own colonial leaders.

Central to this depiction of Toussaint’s successful governance is the harsh, but fair, nature of his system for justice on the island—something Rainsford allegedly witnessed first-hand. Rainsford claims that Toussaint saved him from the death penalty after he was accused of being a spy by other leaders of the Revolution. Youngquist and Pierrot point out that this story gives Rainsford’s history ‘a romantic aura’ because, after all, ‘[w]ho in England owed Toussaint his life?’ However, more than this, Toussaint’s intervention is the ultimate example of just governance in contrast to the severity of Leclerc, Rochambeau, and even Picton. Rainsford stresses that in Saint-Domingue ‘no punishment ever took place without the anxious endeavours of the General-in-Chief to avoid it’. When Rainsford recalls a conversation between Toussaint and a stranger he meets, Toussaint seems to be speaking directly to colonial governors everywhere when he states that ‘“it is not sufficient to be just, we must also be merciful, recollecting how much need we all have for mercy”’. Although Toussaint, ‘possessed for a considerable period…unlimited power’, he ‘has never been charged with its abuse; but on the contrary, has preserved one line of conduct, founded…on the most honourable basis, leaning only to actions of magnanimity [sic] and goodness’—a striking contrast to the conduct of the failed French leaders and the increasingly defamed British governor.

In this way, Rainsford outlines the type of moderate and humane leadership necessary for New World colonies to prosper. However, his depiction of Saint-Domingue under Toussaint goes even further than this as he suggests that Toussaint’s system of governing contained aspects of equality and reform from which Europe, and even Britain, could learn. An early indication of this is the ‘perfect system of equality’ he saw ‘for the first time’ in Saint-Domingue as described in his 1802 Memoirs. This is presented in more detail as he outlines a dinner he apparently attended at a hotel where military personnel of all ranks ‘sat at the table indiscriminately’. Most significantly of all, the famed Toussaint ‘did not take the head of the table, from the idea…that no man should be invested with superiority but in the field’. Three years later, in his Historical Account Rainsford would stress this idea of social inclusion and equality even further, describing Toussaint as ‘one of those characters who invite the principle of an elective monarchy, but which are too rarely found to advise its universal adoption’. In addition to this, Toussaint ‘found little difficulty in the formation of a temporary constitution, of which justice and equality…should be the basis’. Although this could allude patriotically to British notions of liberty, Rainsford stresses that—unlike in Britain—Toussaint’s notion of equality was in fact based on ‘right only, not property’.

47 Rainsford, Historical Account, pp. 229-37.
49 Rainsford, Historical Account, pp. 239-57.
52 Rainsford, p. 253.
For Rainsford, Toussaint’s Saint-Domingue represented a kind of social utopia in which leaders were elected democratically and in which property was not the basis of social standing—it was a social and political ‘clean slate’ that was a world away from the regressive politics and ideals of the Old World, including the rigid hierarchical political structures in place in Britain and her colonies at this time. It is important to point out that Rainsford was certainly not advocating a similar revolution in the British Caribbean, and nor was he suggesting that black governors were the way forward for Britain’s own colonies. As Youngquist and Pierrot have highlighted, despite his admiration for Toussaint and for the black military he led, Rainsford ‘in no way advocated their freedom’. However, at the same time he was clearly in awe of Toussaint’s rejection of Old World values and he paints a vivid picture of a New World society thriving once it emancipated itself not only from slavery, but also from the repression of European systems of ‘democratic’ governance and the social and political hierarchies that come with it. By portraying the island as prospering under Toussaint, Rainsford was able to assert that this type of governance was not only fair, but also conducive to the social and economic welfare of New World societies.

Conclusion

As with his portrayal of Leclerc and Rochambeau, Rainsford’s depiction of Toussaint ultimately brings to the foreground the question of who is best suited to New World governance—a question that was a central point of concern for both Rainsford and Sansay. In both texts, Leclerc and Rochambeau’s actions are depicted as self-serving and pay no regard to the needs of the population of the colony at a time when Saint-Domingue was in most need of brave, humane and thoughtful leadership. Crucially, the lack of such paternalistic protection is portrayed as even more fatal to the colony than the black revolutionaries themselves. Leclerc and Rochambeau’s apparent inability to grasp the unique socio-political conditions of the island, and their refusal to exercise more moderation in their policies, are portrayed by both authors as key reasons for the capitulation of the colony. For Rainsford, Walpole and Toussaint provide illuminating alternatives to the French governors as both are revered for their ability to manage and care for the colonies they served. Sansay likewise looks to the more moderate and liberal approach to governance that Bertrand Clausel allegedly adopted as an example of the stabilising influence of intelligent, adaptable and perceptive political leadership.

By outlining the respective successes and failures of Saint-Domingue’s various governors at such a critical juncture of the Revolution, both writers in turn stress the importance of not dismissing Saint-Domingue as an exceptional case. Rather, the story of the Revolution is portrayed as one that should be heeded by Britain and her colonies, and the early American republic. Both Rainsford and Sansay outline the significance of putting in charge political leaders who display the sufficient competence and moral fibre to be able to navigate the unique demands of a geo-political space that is a melting pot of ethnicities and emerging political identities. While Rainsford’s concerns lie with the future of Britain’s Caribbean

colonies and Sansay’s with the security and prosperity of the early American republic, both authors clearly remember the Revolution—and France’s inability to suppress it—as proof of the necessity of the right leaders and the correct policies being in place to ensure that the populations of the British West Indies and America would never be subjected to the ‘horrors’ of Saint-Domingue.
Written by Leonora Sansay and published in 1808, Secret History; or, the Horrors of St. Domingo is an epistolary novel set in the French colony of Saint Domingue following the slave revolution that erupted there in 1791. Saint Domingue was a spectacularly profitable French sugar colony that occupied the western portion of the island and that was given its indigenous name, Haiti, following its independence from France in 1804. The eastern portion of the island--now the Dominican Republic--was in Sansay's time the Spanish colony whose name, Santo Domingo, was then used also to designate the...Â Sansay, Leonora--Criticism and interpretation. Novelists--Criticism and Interpretation. Novelists--Works.