

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Interesting Beings and Racial Difference in Fictions of the Haitian Revolution

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This article examines two novels about the Haitian Revolution, namely Leonora Sansay's epistolary novel *Secret History, or the Horrors of St. Domingo* (1808) and an extended rewriting of this novel entitled *Zelica, the Creole* (1820), which has been attributed to Sansay. While *Secret History* narrates the events in Haiti through the lens of the American coquette Clara and her prudish sister Mary, *Zelica* transforms that sororal relationship into a crossracial friendship between Clara and the mixed-race character Zelica. In *Secret History*, Clara escapes both Saint Domingue and her abusive husband. In *Zelica*, she is killed by Zelica's father, a philanthropist who believes in emancipation through amalgamation. The aim of the article is not to provide definitive answers to the question of Zelica's authorship but to examine the motivational claims underlying the rewriting. It argues that the foregrounding of a mixed-race character reflects the increasing fixation on race-mixing in nineteenth century culture. The death of Clara at the hands of the philanthropist De La Riviere is read as an implicit creole critique of gradual abolitionism.

**Keywords:** Leonora Sansay; Haitian Revolution; interracial literature

In *Our Aesthetic Categories*, Sianne Ngai interprets the aesthetic of the interesting in terms of the double logic of standardization and individuation in modernity. Ngai shows how the interesting developed as a new aesthetic category during the romantic age, when it came to be associated with emergent genres such as melodrama and the novel, which defied the traditional aesthetic standards of high drama or comedy and captured the peculiar dynamics of modern life. What is distinctive about the interesting as opposed to other aesthetic categories, according to Ngai, is its "affective uncertainty": it is associated with ambivalence, irony, and distance, or a sense of not knowing how to evaluate an artistic production (135). This would explain why, in its more recent articulations, the interesting is closely linked to the everyday and the ordinary, or, the *merely* interesting. In Ngai's formulation, the interesting presents itself as a low affect mode of aesthetic appreciation that has become increasingly loaded with experiences of typicality and ordinariness in an age transformed by mechanization and new technologies of reproduction.

In this essay, I return to the period when the interesting was no less ambivalent but still engaged strong emotions. Ngai notes how what she calls the "affective temperature" of the word dropped significantly in the course of the nineteenth century, when it increasingly served to convey the blandness of industrialism and mass culture (141). This essay argues that, up until well into the nineteenth century, the affective temperature of interesting was high and possibly even increased, especially in sentimental fictions centering on questions of racial difference in the aftermath of the Haitian Revolution. These fictions raised the question as to what happens if people of color or of mixed-race descent come to be regarded, or regard themselves, as interesting. Ngai suggests that, if the aesthetic function of the interesting is to oscillate between the poles of difference and typicality, it has increasingly come to emphasize the latter pole to the detriment of the former as technologies of reproduction transformed aesthetic standards. I suggest that we can observe the opposite movement in romances of the Haitian Revolution, which associated interesting with difference, and more particularly racial difference. In these romances, interesting signals a strong affective investment rather than the kind of lukewarm emotion that Ngai identifies as distinctively modern. As a corrective to Ngai's developmental narrative of interesting, which I find convincing in other respects, I would argue that there is something distinctively modern about the association between the interesting and racialized (as well as sexualized) difference. At the same time, I believe that the affective ambiguity that defines the interesting in Ngai's account may prove useful in interpreting Haitian race fictions, which, because they seldom betray a straightforward political agenda, have often confounded critics.

Part of this confusion, I believe, can be explained in terms of the semantic development of words such as interesting. In his classic study *The Passions and the Interests*, Albert O. Hirschman showed how the word interest, as well as the plural interests, long had a much more inclusive and positive meaning than is the case today. In the course of the

seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, interest emerged as a third category alongside reason and the emotions that could serve to temper or cancel out the excesses associated with the latter two categories. Interest thus functioned as a “guidepost for action” that served to organize the social order by countering the violent whims of the ruling classes (33). In this sense, the word pointed well beyond the current understanding of (self-)interest as the pursuit of material gain. As Hirschman shows, it had a curative dimension insofar as it embodied “calm passions” that could temper the violent and inconstant passions of the elite. As Hirschman acknowledges, this positive definition of interest now “strikes us as a strange aberration for an age when the slave trade was at its peak and when trade in general was still a hazardous, adventurous, and often violent business” (62). While Hirschman does not pursue the connection with slavery in his study, he stresses that the idea of interest as relatively innocent and harmless should be understood in terms of how societies before or in early capitalism made sense of social differences. While the aristocracy revelled in passionate pursuits, common people were believed to have no time for such things and thus “merely” followed their interests. The assumption was that, if only the rulers did the same thing, society would benefit from such interested behavior. Hirschman’s account is useful for my present purpose because it helps to offset readings of Haitian race fictions which understand racial conflict in light of current political agendas as a struggle against the conjoined forces of capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism. As Hirschman shows, however, interest was long seen as a civilizing factor that could curb the despotic impulses of the ruling powers. Attending to the uses of interest and interesting in early nineteenth-century race fictions of the Haitian Revolution allows us to bring out this association between interest and moral temperation.

I focus on interest and interesting not exclusively as abstract aesthetic or political categories but as an epithet for characters in literature. While the word interesting is an early eighteenth-century coinage, its application to people, rather than objects or situations, only came into general usage during the tumultuous age of revolutions. In 1787, Jean-François Féraud’s *Dictionnaire critique de la langue française* still characterized the idea that people could themselves be interesting as “a happy neologism” (486). Initially, the epithet was applied primarily to women in an “interesting” condition. This is how Smollett uses it in *Roderick Random*, when the roguish protagonist, after his peregrinations in the Caribbean and elsewhere, observes that his Narcissa’s “interesting situation” will “crown (his) felicity” (II, 299). Towards century’s end, the qualifier interesting could describe anyone exciting strong emotions, mostly of sympathy or compassion. Such emotions, however, were highly ambivalent and multidirectional. Interest could translate as sympathy for people in a wretched or pitiful condition, for instance the lower classes who were supposedly completely caught up in the daily pursuit of their interests. But, just as well, this interested existence could be a reason for withholding the appellation interesting. In his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Adam Smith argued that only people living in “polite” society could freely express their emotions “on occasions that are at all interesting” (317). In an age of commercial expansion, the epithet interesting as applied to people was thus an instrument for qualifying populations and differentiating between social classes.

In colonial contexts, the use of interesting was possibly even more complex, as it intersected with race as an emergent category of political action. Moreau de Saint-Méry, a creole member of the Constituent Assembly from Saint Domingue who found refuge in Philadelphia, believed that what had transformed the motley community of uncultivated buccaneers and filibusters in the western part of Hispaniola into farmers and virtuous husbandmen was the arrival of “interesting beings” from France (I, 8). These female orphans, Moreau suggests, not only had a softening influence on the crude manners of the warmongering colonists but also ensured that what was to become Saint Domingue eventually developed into “a true fatherland.”<sup>1</sup> Beyond natural reproduction, interesting here points to fraught moral questions regarding legitimate forms of creole community building. Moreau believed that the “interesting beings” from France could channel the energies of the colonists in Saint Domingue towards the construction of a viable creole society. Moreau’s use of the word interesting thus recalls its association with the calm passions, as outlined by Hirschman, but it here also has a racial inflection. Clearly, it never occurred to Moreau to extend the qualifier interesting to the female slaves imported from Africa. It is of course no coincidence that the emotional energies invested in the survival of planter society, as expressed for instance in sentimental fiction and romances, would crystalize around the status of these women and their offspring.

At what point was the epithet interesting extended to (former) slaves? Olaudah Equiano’s autobiography, published in the same year as Moreau’s natural history of Saint Domingue, was possibly the first book of its kind to be marketed as an *Interesting Narrative* (Carretta 293–4). Equiano’s aim was not just to spark curiosity about his remarkable life story but also to promote “the interest of humanity” by gaining the reader’s affections (Equiano 20). Equiano thus used interest in the old, inclusive sense described by Hirschman. If, moreover, for Adam Smith, proper public display of emotions was what made “polished” people interesting compared to “barbarian” ones,

<sup>1</sup> The original reads: Bernard d’Ogeron “fit venir de France des êtres intéressants, de timides orphelines pour soumettre ces êtres orgueilleux, accoutumés à la révolte, et pour les changer en époux sensibles et en père de famille vertueux. C’est de cette manière que Saint-Domingue eut une population qui lui devint propre, et qu’on commença à le considerer comme une véritable patrie.” Ogeron “brought from France interesting beings, timid orphans to submit those proud beings, accustomed to revolt, and to turn them into sensible husbands and virtuous fathers. It is in this way that Saint Domingue developed a population of its own and came to be considered a true fatherland” (my translation).

Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* served to show that an African could command the same passionate eloquence as his European counterparts. To describe one's own story as interesting, in this context, was to impact on governing regimes of power by instilling strong emotions in one's favor. It should therefore not surprise that some people would take offence at this way of marketing life stories. In 1823, French readers were outraged by Claire de Duras's *Ourika*, blaming the author for having rendered interesting ("rendu intéressant") a black woman by making her the moral center of the novel (Hermann 21). In the American context, Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) was advertised as an "interesting narrative" by former slave George W. Lowther, by which he attested to both its veracity and its appeal to the moral sensibilities of the reader (158). Such emotionally charged formulations clearly illustrate the high affective temperature of the word interesting at this stage as well as its connection to the black liberation struggle.

However, abolitionists and political activists were by no means the only ones to extend the label interesting to slaves. To the Jamaican planter William Beckford, for instance, the sight of his slaves toiling on his sugar plantation presented "a scene of lively interest" (II, 42). For his fiercely proslavery account Jamaica, Beckford drew on the picturesque aesthetic popular at the time, as theorized by, among others, Uvedale Price. In his *Essays on the Picturesque* (1810), Price had argued that the picturesque is an aesthetic distinct from either beauty or sublimity characterized by roughness, irregularity, and sudden variation. While beauty and sublimity evoked feelings of respectively harmony and fear or awe, the picturesque was associated with curiosity and the interesting. Price's account already reveals the emotional depletion of interesting in modernity as described by Ngai, its redefinition as *uninteresting* in response to the forces of modernization, or what in Price's time was called "levelling" (both in a political sense and as a feature of the landscape). However, we should also consider how this affective depletion went hand in glove with an emotional investment in racial differences. In the third volume of his *Essays*, Price asserted that the "highest order of created beings" could never be picturesque because they "raise no ideas but those of beauty and sublimity" (III, 68). In people, Price reserved the designation picturesque for beggars, gypsies, and foresters (Price calls them "merely" picturesque) or tragic heroes like Belisarius or Marius (who mix picturesque qualities with decayed grandeur). Price regarded the interesting properties of people as inversely proportional to their level of development or civilization. This view percolated into contemporary romances and travel narratives. Bayard Taylor, for instance, claimed in his *Northern Travel* that the Christianization of the Lapps had made them more "enlightened" but less "interesting" (187). If, therefore, the function of interesting was to regulate the passions and to guide public action, it did not always point in the direction of greater social harmony; just as much, interesting inflamed the emotions by hardening racial differences in a time of increasing mobility and change.

In what follows, I explore this affective uncertainty inhabiting interesting as an marker of racial differences in two early American sentimental novels about the Haitian Revolution, namely the epistolary novel *Secret History, or the Horrors of St. Domingo*, published in Philadelphia in 1808, and a rewriting of this novel entitled *Zelica, the Creole*, which appeared a decade later in London. Although both texts have been attributed to Leonora Sansay, an American author who lived through the French invasion of Saint Domingue, the authorship of the latter text in particular remains uncertain, which has considerably slowed down scholarship about it. The point of this essay is not to give definitive solutions to the attribution problems surrounding the rewriting but to examine the motivational claims underlying it. While *Secret History* narrates the events in Saint Domingue through the lens of an American coquette Clara and her prudish sister Mary, *Zelica* transfers that sororal dynamic onto the crossracial bond between Clara and a mixed-raced creole named Zelica, both of whom are fashioned as icons of virtue but whose fates are dramatically opposed: while Zelica eventually finds refuge from the horrors of Saint Domingue in the United States, her soulmate Clara dies a tragic death at the hands of Zelica's father, a white philanthropist who believes in the gradual uplift of the black population through intermarriage with whites.

By analyzing how *Secret History* was transformed into *Zelica*, this essay draws attention to a submerged episode in the transnational genealogy of sentimental race fictions. Insofar as it foregrounds a mixed-race character at the heart of the narrative, *Zelica* prefigures the American tradition of interracial literature that emerged in conjunction with the abolitionist movement. But the novel also unsettles that tradition by eliding a clear-cut antislavery agenda. Arguably, the appeal of *Secret History* as an example of antislavery proto-feminism has at the same time made it more difficult to appreciate its sequel *Zelica*. Through an attentive analysis of both texts, I show how the theme of miscegenation entered the American tradition indirectly by way of morally ambivalent narratives of the Haitian Revolution. The rewriting thus presents us with an opportunity to consider the limitations of the valuation framework through which we generally approach sentimental race fictions, which is propelled by the perennial question whether or not such texts give oppressed groups a voice by making them the object of sentimental identification.<sup>2</sup> This essay aims to redirect overdrawn questions of agency by considering what made sentimental race narratives interesting to the contemporary reader. As a crucial bridge concept between eighteenth-century sensibility, with its public courtship rituals, and the nineteenth-century cult of domesticity, the interesting constitutes a privileged vantage point from which to study the gradual unfolding of the modern semantics of sentimentality.

<sup>2</sup> Since the 1980s, scholarly perspectives have oscillated between these two positions. For a succinct overview, see Howard.

## I.

Written by “a Lady at Cape François” and published by Bradford and Inskeep in Philadelphia, *Secret History* tells the story of the amorous adventures of Clara, an American coquette caught in an unhappy marriage with a jealous creole planter named St. Louis at the time of the failed French invasion of Saint Domingue.<sup>3</sup> It follows Clara’s psychological development in a series of letters written for the most part by Clara’s virtuous sister Mary to her “friend and protector” Aaron Burr. The novel ends with Clara escaping both the horrors of the race war in Saint Domingue and those of an oppressive marriage. The novel is thus a secret history in a double sense. On the one hand, it is modeled on the life of Leonora Sansay, who reluctantly followed her husband Louis Sansay to Saint Domingue upon Napoleon’s invasion of the island. She reported about her experiences to Aaron Burr, then Jefferson’s Vice President, with whom she possibly had a love affair (Isenberg 240).<sup>4</sup> Published in the year after Burr’s treason trial, *Secret History* no doubt appealed to the public’s curiosity about the fallen founder’s private escapades at a key moment in American history. On the other hand, Sansay’s novel narrates horrific events that the imperial powers for a long time actively sought to repress, and that thus arguably could only be addressed obliquely in the form of ambivalent sentimental fictions.

Composed by an “American” but published in London by William Fearman in 1820, *Zelica* constitutes a puzzling rewriting of *Secret History*, comprising no less than three volumes, with significant alterations and additions to the original story. Strikingly, *Zelica* is no longer framed as a series of letters by Mary to Burr, both of whom disappear from the narration. Instead, the narrative centers on the friendship between Clara, who is transformed from a Charlotte Temple into a quasi-angelic figure, and the titular character Zelica, the mixed-race daughter of the white philanthropist De la Riviere, who wants to marry her off against her will to the black leader Henry Christophe. The most dramatic change in the plot, however, is that Clara no longer escapes unscathed but rather becomes the victim of a passionate drama. In the climactic scene of the novel, Clara and Zelica make their way to the shore where they run into De la Riviere and Glaude, a black follower of Christophe devoured by his love for Clara. Mistakenly assuming that De la Riviere has aided the women, Glaude stabs the white idealist through the heart, upon which the latter, in a final effort to retaliate, accidentally kills Clara. Upon seeing both her father and her best friend dead, Zelica plunges into the waves. She is rescued by a British vessel, reunited with her lover Lastour, and taken to the United States. The loyal Madelaine stays behind in Saint Domingue to watch over the grave of the “fair and unfortunate” Clara (III, 309).

When Philip Laplansky unearthed *Zelica* at the Library Company of Philadelphia in the early 1990s, he attributed it to Sansay primarily on the basis of its thematic resemblance to *Secret History*. At the same time, Laplansky acknowledged that its genesis is shrouded in uncertainty: “We do not know where or when [Sansay] transformed *Secret History* into *Zelica*” (Laplansky 34). In his 2007 edition of *Secret History*, Michael Drexler expresses reservations about Sansay’s authorship of *Zelica*, pointing to the drastic alteration of the plot, and more particularly “the disposition of Clara” (Drexler 36). Why, indeed, should the author want to rewrite her own work in this way, refashioning the libertine protagonist into a virtuous exemplar only to kill her off at the end? And what should we make of the fact that the novel appeared in England rather than the United States? Are we to assume that Sansay’s *Secret History* was pirated in the happy days before international copyright protection?<sup>5</sup> In a letter of 1812 to Burr, Sansay declares her intention to start an artificial flower business in view of the fact that her novel *Laura*, equally published by Bradford and Inskeep in 1809, had been “so unproductive of emolument” (Drexler 232). Does this mean that, by that time, she had definitively given up on literature? Or, did she have unpublished manuscripts in her drawer that surface at a later stage? While I cannot answer these questions, there are some indications that Sansay herself was at least partly involved in the rewriting.

<sup>3</sup> The invasion of Saint Domingue started in February 1802, when Napoleon sent out a large force under the command of his brother-in-law General Leclerc. Many planters, who had fled Saint Domingue following the start of the slave revolt in 1791, returned in Leclerc’s wake to reclaim their possessions. The campaign was initially successful, and Toussaint Louverture was soon arrested after being denounced by the other black leaders Dessalines and Henry Christophe. The odds changed in summer 1802, when the French army was decimated by disease and intensified guerilla fighting following the restoration of slavery. After Leclerc’s death from yellow fever, General Rochambeau assumed command over the French troops and pursued a counterproductive race war against the black population. Eventually, Napoleon recalled the troops in May 1803 after resumption of war with Great Britain. For a succinct overview of the war of independence, see Geggus and Dubois.

<sup>4</sup> The biographical background of *Secret History* and Sansay’s involvement with Burr is discussed in detail by Dayan, who argues that “Clara is no doubt Leonora” (Dayan 168). In his 2007 edition of the novel, Michael Drexler agrees that Sansay adopted Clara as her “alter-ego” (Drexler, “Introduction” 29).

<sup>5</sup> William Fearman, the publisher of *Zelica*, was no stranger to controversies of this kind. In 1819, he announced a new series of Walter Scott’s *Tales from my Landlord*, which provoked an angry response from Scott’s agent John Ballantyne. Ballantyne warned the public about the spurious nature of the new series in an open letter to the *Morning Chronicle*. The letter, along with Fearman’s response, was reprinted in the November 1819 issue of *Blackwood’s Magazine*. In this connection, it also bears remarking that a stanza from Walter Scott’s *Marmion* figures as the epigraph to chapter IV of the first volume of *Zelica* (I, 96).



The colophon to *Zelica* mentions two other works “by the same author (...) transmitted to the Publisher from America,” namely *The Scarlet Handkerchief* (1823) and *The Stranger in Mexico* (which has not been recovered).<sup>6</sup> One element that connects the extant novels is that they draw on similar intertexts. Pope’s *Eloisa to Abelard*, for instance, figures in both *Laura* and *Zelica*, and lines from James Thomson’s *The Seasons* are quoted in both *Secret History* and *The Scarlet Handkerchief*. To be sure, these are staple references in a lot of early nineteenth-century American fiction, but few authors were equally versed in both the English and French traditions.<sup>7</sup> Madame de Staël’s theory of the passions is referenced in *Secret History*, but she also pops up in *The Scarlet Handkerchief*, which cites her condemnation of the burning of the American capital by the British as “a diabolical act” (I, 30). Some thematic cues equally suggest a family resemblance between the novels. Drexler speculates that a passage in *Secret History* where Mary is courted by an Irish sailor in a Jamaican boarding house reflects Sansay’s bias towards the Irish – “in every Irishman,” Mary states, “I fancy I behold a brother and a friend” (*Secret History* 134) –, given her apparent involvement in Burr’s attempt to recruit Irish laborers for his Western expedition (31, n.1).<sup>8</sup> In this respect, it is telling that *The Scarlet Handkerchief* features “a good-natured simple looking young Irishwoman” (I, 64) who acts as a go-between for the female protagonist Sophia and her lover, a British soldier, during the War of 1812.

Whatever we make of these connections in view of the authorship of *Zelica*, they do point to a significant pattern that has so far been neglected in the scholarship about Leonora Sansay. The scene in the Jamaican boarding house stands out because, in it, the otherwise prudish Clara, who maintains racist ideas about the Spaniards, submits to the gallantries of the Irishman, who strikes her as “interesting beyond expression” (134). Elsewhere, Clara establishes a friendship with the governor of Bayam, an Irish Spaniard, who in her view combines “Irish vivacity” with “Spanish gravity” (149). These scenes resonate with a widespread assumption at the time that the Irish were an interesting people, who not unlike the Caribbean slaves elicited feelings of sympathy. In Macaulay’s *History of England* (1849), for instance, one reads that the Irish are distinguished by qualities that “tend to make men interesting rather than prosperous” (I, 66).<sup>9</sup> In what follows, I analyze both novels through the lens of the semantic framework of interesting sketched out above. I suggest that reconstructing the semantic trajectory of interesting allows us to both nuance governing readings of *Secret History* as an expression of creole female bonding and arrive at an understanding of the sociocultural incentives underlying its rewriting in *Zelica*.

## II.

In *Secret History*, Clara’s escape from Saint Domingue in the company of a group of creole women eventually triggers her elopement from her increasingly abusive husband St. Louis. On a formal level, this peripeteia results in a sudden change in the directionality and nature of the epistolary exchange. After Clara runs away from her husband and Mary establishes herself in Jamaica awaiting news about her sister, they correspond with each other without Burr’s mediation. In the three letters she writes to Mary (out of thirty-two), Clara explains her reasons for leaving St. Louis but also comments on the chastening influence of poverty-ridden but hospitable Cuba, which she compares favorably to the decadent immorality of Saint Domingue. Contrary to her sister who believes the Cubans to be a “degenerate race” (120), Clara attributes the indolence and ignorance of the people to their “sorry government” (149). Giving up all libertinage, she finds solace in a visit to the shrine to the Virgin Mary in Cobre.

This resolution of the narrative has impelled several scholars to read *Secret History* as an early expression of creole resistance against patriarchy, colonialism and capitalism.<sup>10</sup> My own view is that we miss the point of *Secret History* if

<sup>6</sup> Fearman went bankrupt in 1822, which may explain why *The Scarlet Handkerchief* was eventually published by A. K. Newman.

<sup>7</sup> In one of her letters to Burr, Sansay declares her intention to publish the story of Clara as “a tolerable pamphlet in french and english” (Drexler, “Introduction” 30).

<sup>8</sup> According to Drexler, Sansay acted as a courier for Burr during his travels throughout the country in 1806, supposedly in view of his scheme to create a Western empire. Burr was tried for treason and acquitted in 1807, after which he left for Europe.

<sup>9</sup> For Macaulay, the Irish were “an ardent and impetuous race, easily moved to tears or to laughter, to fury or to love” (55). Contrary to other peoples from Northern Europe, and particularly the intellectual Scots, the Irish possessed “the susceptibility, the vivacity, the natural turn for acting and rhetoric, which are indigenous on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea” (55). While this Latin disposition explained why “the thick darkness of the middle ages” still shrouded Ireland upon the English conquest, the “genius” of the people showed in its superior ballads and poetry.

<sup>10</sup> Drexler states that Sansay “found a utopian potential in Caribbean migration spurred by the disruptions of a massive slave revolt” (“Displacement”). Along similar lines, Elizabeth Dillon argues that the novel’s end evokes “the formation of a quasi-utopic community of unhusbanded creole women” (80). Sean Goudie believes that, once in Cuba, “Clara begins to demonstrate (...) her inter-American creole commitments towards social justice” (213). Gretchen Woertendyke claims that the resolution of the plot amounts to a “feminist utopia,” adding that Sansay’s “ideal of individual freedom is only possible in early America,” or a society governed by “republican values” rather than “Old World imperialism” (265). Melissa Adams-Campbell, while calling attention to the ambivalence in Sansay’s acceptance of bourgeois marriage norms, agrees in principle that the novel’s ending points towards “a homosocial female

we ignore what Lauren Berlant calls the “juxtapolitical” character of sentimental fictions, or their potential to absorb contradictory values.<sup>11</sup> There is no denying that *Secret History* conveys a wry intelligence that is uncommon in most early fictions of the Haitian Revolution. Mary’s remark in Barracoa that “there was not a pair of shoes to be found in the place” (106) contrasts strongly with an earlier scene where the coquettish Madame Le Clerc, Napoleon’s sister, flirts with a French general by continually letting her slipper fall from her foot and having him put it back on (64). When Clara musters the courage to leave the “hated roof” of her husband’s house, she takes off her shoes in what can be read as a symbolic act of divestment (139). Likewise, the bed of roses on which the Marian shrine in Cobre rests re-describes an emblem of passionate love into one hinting at “supernatural agency” (142). In Saint Domingue roses signify availability rather than love of God. Clara is likened to Flora, the Goddess of flowers (89). At one point, she takes a rose from her bosom and offers it to General Rochambeau as a gesture of availability (80). In similar ways, the scene in Cobre offsets Mary’s own moral limitations as when she daydreams about walking “on carpets of rose leaves and frenchipone” and being “fanned to sleep by silent slaves” (73). Such ironic juxtapositions may justify the recent interest in Sansay as an early exponent of feminism and abolitionism.

Yet, readings that make female resistance to patriarchy, capitalism, and colonialism the sole measure of *Secret History*’s relevance are not without problems. First, there is a danger of oversimplifying the historical context to which the novel directly and indirectly alludes. It is hard to justify readings of Clara’s journey to Cuba and later Jamaica as liberating, given that this was the trajectory most French settlers from Saint Domingue followed. These islands eventually succeeded Saint Domingue as the world’s primary producers of sugar. Several critics linger on the fact that Cobre was not only a place of pilgrimage centered on the Marian cult but also a maroon colony, which would thus somehow link Clara’s struggle for independence to that of the slaves in Saint Domingue.<sup>12</sup> As Maria Elena Díaz has documented, however, Cobre enjoyed official sanction from the Spanish crown, which had confiscated the copper mines of Santiago del Prado in the late seventeenth century (Díaz). This created a class of royal slaves who were eventually given their freedom, and whose descendants successfully litigated for their interests against successive colonial governors by invoking the authority of the king. It is significant, in this respect, that Clara seeks the company of the governor of Bayam and hardly mentions the mulattos of Cobre except to stress their indolence (142). Claiming Sansay as a creole American author may therefore obscure rather than illuminate the messy and volatile nature of racial politics in the Caribbean, which have never divided evenly along the opposed poles of (European) colonialism and monarchy on the one hand and (American) republicanism on the other hand.

Another problem with readings of *Secret History* as an instance of cross-racial bonding between suppressed minorities in the Caribbean is that they run the risk of anachronistically imposing modern conceptions of intimacy onto a period when interest and the passions stood in a different relation to each other. *Secret History* appeared at a time when love relations were still very much governed by the conventions of gallantry. These elaborate rituals of courtliness start losing their appeal when they cease to be the exclusive property of the privileged classes, at which point a renewal of the cult of friendship holds out the promise of a disinterested form of intimacy outside the institution of marriage.<sup>13</sup> It bears remarking that Clara’s flirtations all take place in a limited social circle of elite creoles and upstart officers from Napoleon’s army. Passions are still coded negatively, very much in line with Hirschman’s account, insofar as they may unleash uncontrollable violence without proper moral guidance. To be sure, female friendship hints at an alternative mode of intimacy that transcends both restrictive marriage morals and gratuitous libertinage, both of which present themselves as oppressive forms of intimacy. But these relations hardly transgress the divisions of race and caste structuring Caribbean slave societies.

What, ultimately, drives forward Mary’s ironic but preconceived observations about creole society, as well as Mary’s more resigned perspective, is who or what counts as interesting. The creole ladies, Mary writes to Burr, “have an air

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utopia” (143). A counter-perspective is offered by Tessie Liu who asserts that Sansay’s analogizing of marriage and slavery does not amount to a critique of slavery but rather underwrites white priority. Pointing to the absence of convincing mixed-race characters in the novel, Liu posits that *Secret History* “furthers a strongly negrophobic agenda” (392).

<sup>11</sup> Berlant defines the juxtapolitical as “an aesthetic and spiritual scene that generates *relief from the political*” (10). Berlant’s critical project over the last quarter century has centered on creating a genealogy of public intimacy in the American context, from the liberal sentimentalism of women’s culture in the 1830s to a generalized absorption of affective scenarios by mainstream society in the neoliberal age and, most recently, the transnational permutations of neoliberal fantasies in a globalized world. This article builds on Berlant’s insights but extends them to texts pre-dating her genealogical project, highlighting the transnational progeny of American melodrama.

<sup>12</sup> Drexler identifies the rebel slaves in Cobre as “cobrero maroons” (*Secret History* 139, n.1). Dillon, following Drexler, argues that a slave revolt in Cobre resulted in the formation of “maroon communities” around the town (93). Adams-Campbell refers to Cobre as a “maroon colony” (133).

<sup>13</sup> Niklas Luhmann argues that gallantry served the reintegration of love in society at a time when intimate relations became increasingly individualized. Its public nature ensured that love could still be mobilized for moral or civilizing ends. In my view, the word interesting serves a similar function. It has connectivity, both in the direction of intimacy and that of sociality (97).

of voluptuous languor which renders them extremely interesting" (2). At a ball organized by the French military to divert the creoles, she observes about Clara: "Never had I beheld her so interesting" (75). The epithet is extended to the wealthy mulatto women who compete with the creole ladies for the men's affection, breathing "nothing but affection and love" (96). About a woman in Cuba Mary says that her "manners are interesting, but she speaks no language except her own, of which not one of us understood a word" (106). It is significant that Clara, although she learns Spanish to converse with the "interesting" Don Alonzo (138), finally resists the Cuban's "dangerous intercourse" (150). But Clara's resolve to opt out of the game of gallantry leads her to seek solace in spiritual love rather than embracing a more fulfilling form of romantic love based on mutuality. At no point is the circle of interest extended to the rebellious slaves. They are only interesting in the modern sense of low affective aesthetic detachment.

Ultimately, therefore, *Secret History* is more revealing for the ways in which it thematizes the bankruptcy of eighteenth-century modes of sensibility than as an early expression of creole feminism. In a telling scene, Mary escorts Clara on a walk to a local fort, where they are overtaken by Rochambeau and a suite of soldiers in oriental uniform who appear as "a horde of Arabs" (101). This eminently public scene of courtship brings out the farcicality of the General's attempts to impress Clara. Eventually Mary steps in to prevent further harm at the moment when St. Louis is about to discover Rochambeau's designs on his wife. The scene at the fort is revealing because it brings out the political dimension of the courtship rituals in the novel, or what Colin Dayan in a brilliant characterization has called its "surfeit of coquetry" (173). The general's interest in Clara is impossible to separate from his desire to control the island. His romantic quest highlights how his actions are guided less by interests than by his uncontrollable passions. But the scene is also significant for the ways in which it sets up analogies between Rochambeau and the black rebels. His costume is that of Napoleon's Mamluk corps and thus suggests a connection with oriental despotism. Mamluk was also a category in the elaborate racial taxonomies of Saint Domingue, designating a person who is one-sixth black. Rochambeau is thus presented as a slave and this comes to the fore in his pursuit of Clara, whom he characterizes as an "enchantress" who uses "all the powers of magic to enslave me" (101).

Clara's tragedy is that she (unwillingly) engenders violent passions, a fate that she significantly shares with the mixed-race women of Saint Domingue. By becoming interesting to the general, Clara is in danger of losing the purity that her name evokes. By awakening Rochambeau's uncontrollable sexual lust, moreover, she risks crossing the tenuous line separating the races in creole society, the line that distinguishes polite society from supposed barbarism and the complete absence of sensibility and taste. It is only when she relinquishes the game of coquetry altogether and seeks solace in religion that Clara finally manages to control or curb the energies that she unleashes in powerful men. It is this complex interplay between the interests and the passions that in my view constitutes the central moral conflict of *Secret History*. Reading the ending of the novel as the realization of a female creole utopia, with the two sisters turning their back on the decadent affluence of Saint Domingue and seeking cross-racial alliances in poverty-ridden Cuba, fails to do justice to Sansay's declared intent in the preface to the book to "interest and please" the reader (60). Such a statement only makes sense if we consider the curative potential of interest as an alternative to, rather than an extension of, the excesses of despotic rule and the slave system.

### III.

*Zelica* was published in the year of Henry Christophe's death, which ended a long period of civil war in which Haiti was divided into Christophe's black kingdom in the North and a Mulatto republic headed by Alexandre Pétion in the South. The new leader Jean-Pierre Boyer reunified the country and would lead it out of its diplomatic isolation. While the United States stayed on the sideline, France recognized Haiti in 1825 in exchange for heavy indemnities. A number of novels responded to the renewed interest in the former French colony, the most prominent example being Victor Hugo's *Bug-Jargal* (the first edition of which appeared in 1820). Léon-François Hoffmann argues that black and particularly mixed-race characters become increasingly present in post-1815 French novels, in which antislavery sentiments often vie uncomfortably with colonial nostalgia at the time of the Bourbon restoration (Hoffmann 229 a.f.). In the American context, interracial literature portraying mixed-race characters as protagonists emerged only in the course of the 1830s, when the abolitionist movement caught momentum.<sup>14</sup> This makes *Zelica* a valuable pivotal text, as it both feeds on the French public interest in Haiti after Waterloo and anticipates the flowering of interracial literature in the United States.

In American interracial fiction before the Civil War, mixed-race characters generally fill a moral function to militate against slavery by presenting the white reader with the option of sympathetic identification.<sup>15</sup> Often, they project a happy resolution in Europe (Sollors 339). This is the case in Lydia Maria Child's "The Quadroons" (1842), for instance, which is often credited with introducing the trope of the tragic Mulatto in American literature. In Child's story, the mixed-race characters Rosalie and Xarifa die because of the irreconcilability of their love for a white man and the racist norms underpinning patriarchal society. While *Zelica* shares some of the stereotypical features of these characters

<sup>14</sup> The character of Cora Munro in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans* is sometimes approached as an early attestation of a mixed-race in American literature, but she does not figure as the main protagonist in the novel.

<sup>15</sup> The changing functions of mixed-race characters in American literature before and after the Civil War and how this relates to divergent racial regimes in the North and the South is examined in some detail by Barbara Ladd (1994).

(emotionality, oriental beauty, suicidal tendencies), her predicament does not derive from lack of access to what Jean Fagan Yellin calls “the patriarchal definition of true womanhood” (72). Zelica is not interesting because she is at once courted and rejected by a white man (the rather flat character of Lastour at no point betrays her) but because she is horrified at the prospect of being forced into a union with Christophe by her father, who labors under an idealistic vision of race amelioration.<sup>16</sup> In contemporary French literature about Saint Domingue, mixed-race characters often figure in opposition to idealized portraits of the *bon nègre*. *Bug-Jargal*, for instance, portrays the mulatto characters as treacherous in opposition to the loyal slave Pierrot. Zelica does not display the moral flaws of Hugo’s mixed-race characters, but she does not conform to the American abolitionist literature either, which may be one reason why American critics so far have found little use for the novel.<sup>17</sup>

The key to understanding *Zelica* is the friendship between the two protagonists, or what Carroll Smith-Rosenberg in one of the few sustained readings of the novel refers to as its “erotic epicenter” (267). A lesbian relationship between the two women is strongly suggested when De La Riviere expresses the futile hope that Zelica’s “ardent” love for Clara may in time awaken “a passion more ardent” for Christophe (II, 213). How should we read this passage, which overwrites the final words of *Secret History* where Mary expresses the hope that she may inspire Burr with “those feelings for my sister which glow so warmly in my own” (154)? Given Christophe’s apparently limitless confidence in the Americans as allies in the struggle against Napoleon, De La Riviere’s words could be understood as a gloss on the Anglo-American involvement in Saint Domingue after the Toussaint-Maitland agreement of 1798.<sup>18</sup> Whatever we make of the political context, however, it is clear that the cross-racial friendship between Clara and Zelica presents us with a noteworthy female alternative to the love relationships between white and colored men that are so central to the American sentimental tradition, or what Leslie Fiedler dubs “a literature of horror for boys” (29).

Throughout the novel, both Clara and Zelica excite the passions of the characters around them. To Belmont, Clara presents “a picture so interesting” that he “almost regretted the resolution he had formed, never to pay his court to a married woman” (II, 51). A couple of pages on, he extends the same courtesy to Zelica, who strikes him as so “irresistibly interesting” that he “regretted not having been exposed to the dangers of combat with Glaude to have enjoyed the pleasure of hearing her voice bid the combat cease” (II, 58). The parallels between Zelica and Clara come out most clearly in the episode of the admiral’s ball in Book II, which modulates the scene in *Secret History* mentioned above. In *Zelica*, it is Lastour who submits to Clara’s “enchancing powers” during the waltz, which remind him of his lover Zelica: “there was in her manner a combination of French vivacity and creole naïveté that brought to his memory the image of his interesting creole” (II, 112). The waltz thus invests the otherwise prudent Clara with the “enchancing powers” normally reserved for colored creole women. Like Zelica, as well as the slave Madelaine, Clara here appears as an “enchantress” who has the power to bewitch men.<sup>19</sup> If we consider C.L.R. James’s assertion that voodoo constituted the “medium” of the 1791 slave insurrection (86), the thematic connections between Clara and Zelica can thus translate into a vision of creole empowerment.

Such a reading crumbles, however, when we consider the effect Clara’s waltzing has on the bystanders, including not just Rochambeau and St. Louis, but also Glaude and Zelica, both of whom attend the ball disguised as slaves. For

<sup>16</sup> Connections can be observed between *Zelica* and early French sentimental novels about Haiti, such as *Zorada, ou la Créole*, written by Emilie Jouannet (possibly a pseudonym) and published in Paris in 1801, which tells the story of the mixed-raced girl Zorada, daughter of a wealthy planter and one of his slaves. Zorada falls in love with the French soldier James, who however refuses to marry her because she is not white. Upon the outbreak of revolution, she chooses the side of the republicans and is deported to France, where she is reunited with James, only to learn that he is already married and she dies of grief. That Zelica and Lastour go to America rather than France is an interesting plot divergence, which raises questions about the changing legal status of mixed-race marriages on both sides of the Atlantic. For sure, a return to France would have been impossible after the reimposition of the Code Noir in 1802, which in its late eighteenth-century versions forbade mixed-race people access to the hexagon.

<sup>17</sup> Emily Clark’s history of interracial literature makes reference to Sansay’s *Secret History*, but pays no attention to *Zelica*, in spite of the fact that this novel centers on a quadroon character. Marlene Daut, however, analyzes the novel in admirable detail in *Tropics of Haiti*. Daut claims that the novel is “the first intentionally fictional attempt to portray a woman of ‘mixed race’ as dignified, virtuous, and benevolent in order to critique the violence of the Haitian Revolution” (278).

<sup>18</sup> The agreement was based on secret negotiations between Toussaint, the British commander-in-chief Maitland, and Edward Stevens representing the Adams administration. The British agreed to evacuate Saint Domingue in exchange for Toussaint’s promise not to interfere with British or American territories and to allow for British and American shipping in designated ports of Saint Domingue (Williams 251, Matthewson 82).

<sup>19</sup> Zelica is described as an “enchantress whose slightest motion enslaves” (I, 55; see also II, 139). Madelaine is referred to as both an “enchantress” and a “witch” (III, 282). Dayan notes the explicit correlation between the “delirium” of voodoo and the European dances of white creole ladies in the work of colonial writer Moreau de Saint-Méry (Dayan 178). The slave Madelaine figures briefly in *Secret History* as St. Louis’ “vigilant guard” (139) who is charged with the task of keeping Clara from running away from her husband. Her transformation into Clara’s protector as well as her explicit association with voodoo in *Zelica* offer fascinating cues for making sense of the rewriting.



Rochambeau and Glaude, the dance unleashes even more violent passions, confirming their commitment to a total race war. St. Louis, who up until then has shown himself to be an incorrigible libertine, suddenly perceives in his wife “a new subject of interest” (92). Zelica, who mistakenly believes that Clara has fallen for Lastour, feels as if her friend has planted “a dagger in the heart of her to whom she was deeply indebted” (II, 95). This, of course, is an inverted foreshadowing of the novel’s end, where Zelica’s father accidentally kills the virtuous Clara. The fact that the novel makes a mixed-race character its main protagonist therefore does not necessarily entail an emancipatory or abolitionist agenda. The disruptive powers of the mixed-race mediator figure can be channeled in two directions, which, arguably, is precisely what makes her interesting. After she realizes how her waltzing mesmerizes the people around her, Clara abstains from dancing at later balls. Clara’s awakened sensibility thus has a marked racial dimension, which will eventually prove lethal.

The scene at the fort is expanded along similar lines. Here too, Clara is subjected to Rochambeau’s advances and surrounded by his soldiers, although here, in a significant twist, she is rescued by Belmont, a French soldier of creole descent. But before the dust settles on this incident, Clara is snatched away by a group of black “ravishers” who want to turn her over to Glaude (III, 74). This time, it is Zelica who comes to the rescue. Displaying the same remarkable agility as the blacks and using her influence over them as De la Riviere’s daughter, she manages to convince them to let go of their trophy. The novel thus sets up explicit parallels between the French army and the black rebels, or Rochambeau and Glaude, both of whom are depicted as fatally flawed in their passionate pursuit of Clara. Like its precursor text, *Zelica* thus warns against the dangers inherent in the unrestrained exertion of the passions. The most salient difference between the two texts lies in the fact that the rewriting renders interesting a character of mixed descent in a way that the original does not. Arguably, this foregrounding of racial mixing as a theme in race fictions is accompanied by a hardening of racial distinctions. This comes out in the scene at the fort, which in *Zelica* literalizes what in *Secret History* remains largely implicit. If in the rewriting the black rebels acquire more agency, they also appear more tragically locked into their unalterable racial identity.

This raises the question why Clara is killed at the end of the novel, and why Zelica, in spite of her connection to both the slaves and the French, is unable to prevent it. One way of making sense of the ending of *Zelica* is to read it in light of what Doris Garraway refers to as the colonial family romance, revolving around the paradoxical conjunction of incest and miscegenation in the Caribbean imaginary. As a colonial fantasy about the white patriarch’s desire for his mixed-race daughter, it constitutes “a legitimating allegory of elite male sexual power” that indirectly serves to reassert white society’s rules of kinship through the libidinal transgression of these rules at the level of the patriarch’s mixed-race shadow family (265).<sup>20</sup> The circuitous connection between incest and miscegenation is central to the plot of *Zelica*. To be sure, the philanthropist De la Riviere, contrary to the archetypal white patriarch, does not so much desire his mixed-race daughter as her sexual union with his black disciple Christophe. In *Zelica*, the oppressive systems of white supremacy, patriarchy, economic self-interest, and colonialism do not neatly overlap but rather work against each other in sometimes unexpected ways. To be sure, the novel challenges the principle of white male priority through the cross-racial relation between Clara and Zelica, but these affects are not channeled towards the cause of the black rebels in any straightforward fashion.

At the same time, however, the novel retains key ingredients of the colonial family romance. It is of some importance that De la Riviere regards Christophe as a son and is prepared to ruin his daughter’s happiness to further the cause of the blacks. Although he eventually realizes that Zelica will never agree to the match, he nevertheless clings to it out of fear that without Zelica’s softening influence Christophe will develop “the disposition to cruelty that now slumbered in his heart” (III, 288–9). De la Riviere’s tragedy can thus be explained in terms of a mistaken dream of emancipation through gradual – but never complete – amalgamation, which figures as the flip image of the white patriarch’s whitening of his shadow family by sleeping with his daughters. The incestuous dimension of the dream of race amelioration is underscored in the scene where Clara witnesses a secret meeting between Zelica and a black man whom Clara takes to be Christophe (I, 171, 184). This scene can be said to mirror the one at the ball, although here it is Clara who assumes the role of the shocked bystander. When she later confronts Zelica about the meeting, Clara expresses her surprise that Zelica should secretly entertain a relationship with her nemesis: “Your air, your manner with him was such as you would not have used with Christophe; it was that of affectionate entreaty – yet he was of the color you abhor” (III, 200). In her response to Clara, Zelica explains that the black man was in fact her father, who by feigning his own death and donning blackface had been trying to stay out of the hands of the rebel factions opposed to his policy of gradual amalgamation. It is not necessary to infer an actual incestuous relationship between Zelica and her father from this melodrama to argue that the passage evokes the libidinal logic of the colonial family romance in which the white patriarch acts as a rival of his mixed-race daughter’s lover. De la Riviere’s feigned death can thus be said to foreshadow his actual death at the hands of Glaude who, as Christophe’s second-in-command, externalizes the colonial taboo on incest.

<sup>20</sup> Garraway sees the colonial family romance as a variation of the Oedipus complex whereby the incest taboo does not come from the white father but from his colored offspring, which rebels against the former’s sexual transgressions. While the possibility of a violent revolt is thus by no means negated but figures centrally in such narratives, the one thing they remain entirely silent about is the possibility of a cross-racial sexual union between a black or mixed-race man and a white woman. “This erasure of white womanhood from the final analysis of racial mixture,” as Garraway states, “points to the true taboo of colonial métissage” (266).

Significantly, the incest theme is also reflected in the historical roots of the personage of Zelica. Michael Drexler believes that the character was drawn from a mixed-race woman named Zuline in *Secret History* (132 n.1), although he does not pursue the question as to why this peripheral character should have assumed such prominence in the retelling.<sup>21</sup> There is however another source of inspiration in the form of Lord Byron's *The Bride of Abydos* (1813), the first stanza of which serves as the epigraph to *Zelica's* opening chapter.<sup>22</sup> Byron's poem, derived from a Quranic legend, tells the story of the forbidden love between Zuleika, daughter of the Turkish Pasha Giaffir, and her half-brother and Selim. After Selim discovers that his true father is actually Giaffir's brother Abdallah, whom the former has killed out of power hunger, Selim meets in secret with Zuleika in a grotto and swears revenge. The revolt is nipped in the bud, however, and Giaffir's men intercept Selim on the beach outside the grotto, where he is slain by Giaffir himself. Zuleika, "last of Giaffir's race" (Byron 55), consequently dies of grief and Giaffir is left to mourn his daughter and the end of his empire. As this synopsis illustrates, the close of *Zelica* was partly patterned on the apotheosis of Byron's poem, which highlights how Caribbean melodramas of race were grafted onto oriental fantasies.

*The Bride of Abydos* provides us with a possible interpretive cue to make sense of *Zelica*. While the themes of (assumed) incest, slavery, love and revenge are clearly retained, the fates of the main characters Zuleika and Zelica appear to be radically opposed. In a sense, Zelica resembles Selim more than she does Zuleika, given her connection to the stigma of slavery. What, in my view, links *Zelica* to Byron's precursor text is the theme of a despotic regime's tragic obsession with the continuation of the legitimate family. Zuleika frustrates Giaffir's designs by courting her supposed half-brother belonging to the Pasha's shadow family (Selim is the son of one of the Pasha's slaves). Zelica's mode of resistance goes in the opposite direction, as she refuses to act as the medium of De la Riviere's dream of race improvement. In both narratives, however, the patriarchal lineage is eventually discontinued. *Zelica* can from this perspective be read as a commentary on the failure of a model of creole reproduction predicated on the whitening of the population in Saint Domingue by mediation of interesting beings like Zelica. But the novel advances no clear alternative to this model. Contrary to Zuleika, Zelica does not die of grief but rather makes her escape to America with her white lover Lastour. This love relation, however, remains significantly undeveloped. In other words, it does not generate any interest in the reader, who can only guess whether the mixed-race couple will find peace in the United States, which looms on the horizon as that "happy tranquil country" (III, 286).

The central drama of the novel is not the love relation between Zelica and Lastour but Clara's tragic death. Throughout the novel, Clara is represented as not only the embodiment of virtue – which makes her a remarkably flat character in comparison to the Clara of *Secret History* – but also inviolable given the special status enjoyed by American citizens in Saint Domingue. But this is also why Clara appears so interesting to Glaude, who believes that making her his queen will allow him to mobilize the blacks in their struggle for freedom and thus "obtain the happiness that he figured to himself she only could impart" (I, 115–6). Early on in the novel, Clara asks: "Wat interest could Glaude feel?" (I, 146). Once she realizes that she is the object of interest of a "half-civilized negro, who had sufficient cause to pursue, with unmitigated hatred, all those whose color she bore," she realizes she is "marked for destruction" (I, 148). I suggest that Clara has to die because she, as the embodiment of virtuous white womanhood, signals a blind spot in the colonial calculus of color, which channeled white men's desire towards interesting creatures like Zelica, but which collapsed once white women came to be imagined as interesting to black men. Interest is here all but a calm passion that steers society towards greater harmony and instead functions as a marker of racial difference. The ambiguous ending of the novel thus closes off the circle of amorous interest even while holding out the possibility of extending it to nonwhite characters.

#### IV.

In this essay, I have attempted to open up the archive of American sentimental race fictions by analyzing how the rediscovered epistolary novel *Secret History* by Leonora Sansay was rewritten as *Zelica, the Creole*. Among other things, the analysis of these syncretic texts, which have never been compared in a sustained way, shows that the theme of interracialism entered American literature before women writers in the antebellum North availed themselves of the trope of the tragic Mulatto/a to promote the abolitionist cause. By presenting us with a full-fledged mixed-race character as the main protagonist of a story about the Haitian Revolution, *Zelica* anticipates American interracial literature but also challenges us to reconsider the reading protocols by which we conventionally approach it. I have argued that the novel troubles an interpretive framework in which interesting has lost its affective intensity and its connection with the political objective of preserving social order by controlling the unruly passions. Because of this, we easily misread the political agenda of the novel. Zelica, who because of the stigma of her mixed descent is "devoted to" the horrors of Saint Domingue (III, 286), does not readily conform to nineteenth-century standards of sentimentality and domesticity. As I have argued, it is this affective ambiguity that made such characters interesting to nineteenth-century readers. To recover the cultural relevance of this reading framework, we need to shake off the modern understanding of interest as a privatized pursuit for material gain with no other political or moral significance than that it allows for exploitation

<sup>21</sup> It is significant that, Zuline in *Secret History* is up against a "ruthless mulatto" rather than her own white father (25).

<sup>22</sup> The author of *Zelica* does not reproduce Byron's quote word-for-word, but rather subtly localizes it, substituting "orange and citron" for "citron and olive" as "the fairest of fruit" in the evoked landscape.

and oppression. Perhaps the most valuable lesson we can learn from otherwise rather derivative romances such as *Zelica* is that they draw renewed attention to the profoundly political nature of our economic and affective investments as well as their function in the articulation of racial and other differences.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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