

THIS CHAPTER COMPARES GEOGRAPHICALLY distinct discourses of seduction in two novels, *Secret History; or, The Horrors of St. Domingo* (1808) and *Laura* (1809), by American author Leonora Sansay. I argue that Sansay’s critiques of two dominant US fictional paradigms of her moment, stories of coquettes and fallen women, are conditioned by the geographically specific gender norms and sexual practices of each novel’s setting. Where Sansay’s Haitian Revolution novel compares Caribbean and early national US domesticities as a means of rejecting the meaning and morality of the US seduction plot, Sansay’s Philadelphia-based novel more discreetly revises that plot. Across both novels, Sansay observes the ill effects of women’s economic dependence, offering women’s friendships as a salve to romantic disillusionment.

*Relocating Victims of Seduction*

The 2007 reprinting of Leonora Sansay’s *Secret History* testifies to an increasing critical interest in early prose fiction’s generic complexities; it also marks a wider scope for the study of early American literature. Welcoming Sansay into the canon means extending our discussions of difference beyond the geographical borders of the US and contextualizing her work within a larger revolutionary Atlantic world. While recent criticism has debated the appropriate generic label for Sansay’s extraordinarily slippery text as well as its place within the archive of materials on the Haitian Revolution, there has been relatively little work contextualizing Sansay’s comparative assessments of women’s sociality in Saint-Domingue. Based on her firsthand experience of what will come to be known as the Haitian Revolution, Sansay’s epistolary novel cata-

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logues the numerous types of inhabitants living in what was the most profitable New World colony precisely as it was falling to pieces. In the midst of this contentious geopolitical crisis, Sansay’s two US narrators, sisters Mary and Clara, rather unaccountably document the flirtations, petty jealousies, and sexual relationships experienced by a wide swath of women in Saint-Domingue.

While this attention to romance may strike some readers as a distraction from the real business of describing “the horrors” of economic, political, and racial turmoil in early nineteenth-century Saint-Domingue, Mary’s and Clara’s focus on women’s sexual lives is, I would argue, precisely what makes this text worth studying. Mary’s and Clara’s seemingly out-of-place observations on the complexities of sexual exchange in revolutionary-era Saint-Domingue provide the context for a larger comparative critique of marriage customs and the real limitations women faced both inside and outside of wedlock. As the sisters query the differences between Caribbean and US women’s romantic expectations and their lived realities, they deploy this new understanding of gender’s geographies to revise their own nontraditional, transnational stories. Capitalizing on her Caribbean setting, Sansay revolutionizes US readers’ expectations about the shapes of women’s stories and how those stories, in turn, shape women’s lives.

Critics frequently comment on the bifurcation of Sansay’s semiautobiographical account of her travels in Saint-Domingue across two narrators—the romantic, coquettish Clara (whose story more closely follows Sansay’s own biographical experiences) and her more practical and cautious single sister, Mary. Distributing her critique of marriage across these two narrative perspectives enables Sansay to achieve the maximum effect on her readers as she moves between a microcosmic study of Clara’s abusive marriage and a macrocosmic protoethnographic perspective of Caribbean women’s sociality in Mary’s letters. These dual narrative perspectives effectively combine to demonstrate the restrictions and dangers nineteenth-century married women face; the existing and alternative possibilities to marriage such as mulatto women’s ménagère relationships, described later; and, finally, the utopian vision of homosocial domestic arrangements enabled by these alternatives and the social upheaval of the revolution. More broadly, the novel’s comparisons of women’s differences usefully disrupt simplistic narratives of nineteenth-century gender roles (i.e., the republican mother, the cult of true womanhood) by demonstrating various women’s complex negotiations with multiple, competing, and geographically specific romantic ideologies. It is little wonder that such insights produce an excitingly new and difficult-to-label piece of fiction.
Published in 1808 after Leonora Sansay abandoned her French husband in Saint-Domingue to return to the United States, after the formerly enslaved peoples of Saint-Domingue won their freedom and renamed their country Haiti, and after Aaron Burr—to whom Sansay dedicates her book—had been tried and acquitted for treason, Sansay’s text capitalizes on sensational descriptions of racial violence and on Burr’s scandalous character. Written as a series of letters from Mary to Aaron Burr, with a brief interlude as Mary’s sister Clara explains how and why she leaves her husband, *Secret History* documents an important transition period in the revolution. Napoleon—eager to secure “the pearl of the Antilles” for the French Empire—sends Madame and General Leclerc (his sister and brother-in-law) to stamp out the slave revolt and restore order to the colony. With the arrest of the insurgent leader, Toussaint-Louverture, it seems likely that the French will succeed. However, the insurgents execute several stunning political and tactical moves, ultimately winning their freedom and declaring the newly renamed “Haiti” an independent nation. It remains the world’s only successful slave revolt. In a brilliant juxtaposition of macro- and microrevolutions, *Secret History* parallels “the horrors” of political upheaval and racial warfare with the horrors of domestic abuse. In Saint-Domingue, Mary and Clara witness a remarkable number of revolutionary acts—formerly enslaved peoples of both sexes struggling to maintain their newly won freedom; women of color boycotting unreasonable sumptuary restrictions; and even former plantation mistresses working to support themselves—before Clara undertakes her own revolution against her abusive husband.

Attention to Clara’s disastrous marriage holds together the rather rambling plot of *Secret History*. Mary writes to Burr: “My sister . . . repents every day having so precipitately chosen a husband: it is impossible for two creatures to be more different, and I foresee that she will be wretched.” A few pages later, Mary confirms that Clara’s “aversion to her husband is unqualified and unconquerable. He is vain, illiterate, talkative. A silent fool may be borne, but from a loquacious one there is no relief. . . . She finds no sympathy in the bosom of her husband. She is alone and she is wretched.” Here Mary employs the rhetoric of companionate marriage—the most prominent romantic ideology circulating in the early national United States—to assess Clara’s situation. Unlike arranged marriage, where upper-class parents match their children in order to consolidate wealth or establish alliances across families, companionate marriage is a union of the heart where partners choose one another on the basis of mutual affection. In revolutionary and early national US discourse, wom-
en’s sexual fidelity and happiness become a “barometer,” in John Adams’s phrase, of the virtue of the nation and of women’s overall progress. As in the British marriage-rites genre discussed in chapter 1, early national US marriage-rites texts frequently ask women to compare their own happy marriage customs with the misery of women in the seraglio, the Indian hut, or the African wilds. In contrast to the supposed drudgery expected of “savage” wives, the sensual usage of polygamous brides, or prearranged marriages where women have little or no say, the US woman’s ability to choose her own spouse supposedly ensures her a loving and emotionally bonded marriage. This freely chosen union of hearts was thought to result in women’s more progressive treatment and, by extension, an increase in the nation’s overall civility. Companionate marriage was, in the rhetoric of the period, a boon for women and the nation. As demonstrated in chapter 1, such comparisons attempt to prove that companionate marriage is the best domestic arrangement for women.

But this is not the case in Secret History. To return to the novel, in Mary’s estimation, the problem with Clara’s husband, St. Louis, is not simply that he is foolish and vain, but that he is unsympathetic. Again and again Mary describes him as unequal to his wife; St. Louis cannot appreciate her. Mary notes that he is “jealous as a Turk” and describes the marriage as unwisely recommended by Clara’s guardian in order to secure her an income: “the fortune of her husband was his only advantage.” Without regard for compatibility, Clara’s marriage is based on money. Mary continues, “Though to me he has been invariably kind yet my heart is torn with regret at the torments which his irascible temper inflict on his wife. They force her to seek relief in the paths of pleasure, whilst destined . . . [for] domestic felicity.” Faced with the impossibility of a companionate marriage, Clara turns to another popular US romantic narrative to script her life’s story: she styles herself a coquette.

In the popular didactic literature of the early nineteenth century, the coquette is usually a single young woman, a female rebel who fails to subscribe to the protocols of monogamous heterosexual marriage. The coquette is invariably punished for her rebellion, often falling prey to a libertine seducer and dying in shame, scorned by society at the end of the tale. Sansay’s use of the coquette/seduction plot is, structurally, a strange turn in an already strange text. Traditionally, the unmarried coquette must either tame her flirtatious behavior in preparation for a happy marriage or die for her refusal to submit; in Secret History, an incompatible marriage leads an otherwise good wife to become a coquette. Like many coquettes, Clara’s mistake is that she imagines she is autonomous; that is, she assumes
that she is an independent agent with the power to act for herself (as most men could do). As a married woman, though, Clara has no right to circulate herself. Her body is taken off the market, so to speak, when she marries the French planter, St. Louis. Given the fact that the French were stereotypically known for pragmatic marriages and extramarital relationships, Clara’s mistake is especially ironic: “The French appear to understand less than any other people the delights arising from an union of the hearts. They seek only the gratification of their sensual appetites. They gather the flowers but taste not the fruits of love.” Clara might coquettishly imagine that with a French husband she could also maintain a lover, but St. Louis is that unfortunate breed, a jealous French husband. He tenaciously maintains his right to control Clara’s body.

The most famous early American literary example of the coquette is Hannah Foster’s *The Coquette* (1797), inspired by the true story of Elizabeth Whitman, a Connecticut woman who fails to secure a suitable marriage proposal only to be seduced and eventually die in childbirth. Previous scholarship on *The Coquette* typically reads the dilemma of the heroine, Eliza Wharton, as an allegory for the dangers of democracy; more recently, in *The Gender of Freedom*, Elizabeth Dillon has argued against such allegorical readings, claiming that the novel explores competing US views on sociality. Eliza maintains a position of “open sociality”—where social contact works as a generative force for shaping feminine subjectivity—but her friends and community understand women’s sociality as “closed”—a means for displaying a preexisting feminine subjectivity with the end goal of organizing private individuals into proper heterosexual couples. Dillon’s models of open and closed sociality help to explain why the trope of the coquette (a position of open sociality) might appeal to a woman such as Clara, invested as she is in expanding the possibilities for circulating in public, even in a violent, war-torn public. Already married, Clara’s traditional window for autonomy—courtship—is now closed. The only way she can imagine to reopen it is to inhabit the coquette’s narrative. But this role seems a poor choice for an intelligent and ambitious woman; everyone knows that the coquette inevitably dies as a result of her refusal to follow the norm.

Clara, however, is not in Connecticut, where Elizabeth Whitman/Eliza Wharton was seduced, or in Philadelphia, where Sansay was the mistress of Aaron Burr prior to her marriage. Caribbean sexual mores have the ability to transform the coquette’s narrative function and meaning via the seduction plot. For instance, Clara’s sister observes, “In this country that unfortunate class of beings, so numerous in my own—victims of
seduction, devoted to public contempt and universal scorn, is unknown.” Indeed, free mulatto women are “destined from their birth to a life of pleasure” and to that destiny “no infamy is attached.” Of French Creole women, Mary notes, “Here a false step is rarely made by an unmarried lady, and a married lady, who does not make one, is as rare.” French Creole women generally find pleasure outside of marriage: “Every girl sighs to be married to escape the restraint with which she is held whilst single, and to enjoy the unbounded liberty she so often sees abused by her mother.” Taking a lover is, according to Mary, standard procedure here. With no choice over her spouse, a woman is likely to find affection any way she may: “A husband is necessary to give [a wife] a place in society; but is considered of so little importance to her happiness, that in the choice of one her inclination is very seldom consulted.”

One can imagine that in the context of Saint-Domingue, the coquette’s typical ending—infamy and death—might seem less likely. Clara’s decision to become a coquette appears less disastrous in a French Caribbean setting, where the morality of the seduction plot would seem completely alien. However, it is not only the logic of the seduction narrative that Mary finds inoperable here; she also notes that the adultery plot seems quite distinct here. Unlike the insistence on US women’s strict adherence to marital monogamy, upper-class French Creole women practice a form of discreet adultery that was widely known and socially sanctioned as long as it remained covert. While it might seem obvious, Mary effectively demonstrates via comparison that experiences of and discourses about seduction vary by geography. As her characters observe and analyze Caribbean customs and manners, Sansay uses this enlarged scope of acceptable sexual practices to rewrite popular US romantic narratives such as that of the coquette’s inevitable “fall.” In short, in the narrative formula of the typical US seduction plot, Clara’s coquettish behavior demands punishment; however, in colonial Saint-Domingue, it is far from extraordinary.

Although Clara flirts with the newly appointed General Rochambeau out of boredom (Rochambeau replaces General Leclerc after his sudden death), she loves him no more than she loves her husband. Hoping for distraction, she finds only more trouble. Rochambeau’s attentions prove more dangerous than her initial situation. Clara realizes the seriousness of her mistake when the general sends St. Louis to fight on the front, denying him much-needed reinforcements. Thinking Clara has used this time to conduct an affair, St. Louis returns home without permission and imprisons Clara. Mary writes, “St. Louis is unworthy of her: he thinks it would be possible to force her to love him:—how much more would a
generous confidence influence a heart like hers! . . . But I believe Clara is not the first wife that has been locked up at St. Domingo.” If Clara’s body is a valuable commodity legally owned by St. Louis and highly desired by Rochambeau, St. Louis decisively takes her out of circulation. As his legal property, Clara has no right to challenge him, no recourse from his claims to control her.

Of course, in Saint-Domingue Clara is not the first person to lose her liberty without cause. Sansay’s brilliant juxtaposition of “the horrors” of a tyrannical husband alongside “the horrors” of slave revolt brings to light two separate but related forms of domination. Both wives and enslaved peoples are property, equally subject to the whims and suspicions of domineering white males. As the violence of the revolution increases and formerly enslaved peoples gain strength, St. Louis desperately strives to maintain control over his property. Secret History quietly suggests that when men abuse their power—over enslaved peoples and over wives—revolution is the inevitable result.

The political situation in Saint-Domingue produces opposite effects on St. Louis and Clara. As a property owner and slaveholder, the slave insurgency makes St. Louis more tyrannical, while it inspires Clara to escape and start a new life. Clara hears many examples of women resisting exploitative power structures; all around her, emboldened enslaved and mixed-race persons, including many women, bravely risk their lives for their own freedom and the freedom of others. For instance, Mary relates the story of an unnamed insurgent chief and his wife who, after being captured, were about to be executed: “As they walked to the place of execution the chief seemed deeply impressed with the horror of his approaching fate; but his wife went cheerfully along, endeavoured to console him and reproached his want of courage. When they arrived on the field in which their grave was already dug, she refused to have her eyes bound; and turning to the soldiers who were to execute their sentence, said ‘Be expeditious, and don’t make me linger.’ She received their fire without shrinking, and expired without uttering a groan.”

Loosely based on the true story of Sanite Belair’s death, this account illustrates how some women not only participated in the events of the revolution, but even outranked men in their performance of bravery as well. As in Aphra Behn’s well-known depictions of the fictional Oroonoko, Belair “expired without uttering a groan,” the most recognizable of stoic, masculine behaviors. Mary notably describes this couple as “black” and refuses them specific names. Mary’s story of Zuline, another example of female bravery, offers a more traditional model of sympathetic feminin-
ity in a light-skinned mulatto woman living with an American man.\textsuperscript{14} Attuned to the needs of white men, the beautiful Zuline begs a mulatto soldier to spare the life of a Frenchman (probably a planter): “She sunk at his feet, and pressed his hands which were reeking with blood. Dear brother, she said, spare for my sake this unfortunate man. He never injured you. . . . She was beautiful; she wept, and beauty in tears has seldom been resisted. Yet this unrelenting savage did resist. . . . The mulatto, enraged, asked if the Frenchman was anything to her? Nothing, she replied; I never saw him before; but to save the life of an innocent person how trifling would appear the sacrifice I offer.”\textsuperscript{15} These two examples show brave women acting to secure freedom for themselves and others. Color difference and gender performance obviously shape Mary’s perception of these women. She freely admits her “admiration” for the recognizably feminine and light-skinned Zuline, while calling the bold black insurgent a “fury in female form.”\textsuperscript{16} This difference is consistent with contemporary stereotypes representing mixed-race individuals as more civilized because they are more white.\textsuperscript{17} The nameless chief’s wife and Zuline actively participate in the affairs of the revolution; they draw upon tremendous inner resources, resisting others’ attempts to define or limit their involvement in the fight for freedom. While she values their efforts differently, Mary clearly admires the mental and emotional fortitude these women exert in the face of danger.

In addition to heroic stories of black and mixed-race women’s participation in the revolution, Clara’s decision to end her unhappy marriage might also be influenced by the surprising examples of strength she finds in French Creole women who flee Saint-Domingue after Rochambeau surrenders the island to Dessalines. Unattended by male relatives, who remain behind to fight for their property, French Creole women quickly discover their previously untapped survival skills. Mary observes how mass dislocation makes French Creole women stronger:

The cheerfulness with which they bear misfortune, and the industry they employ to procure themselves a subsistence, cannot be sufficiently admired. I know ladies who from their infancy were surrounded by slaves, anticipating their slightest wishes, now working from the dawn of day till midnight to support themselves and their families. . . .

Though I liked not entirely their manner, whilst surrounded by the festivity and splendor of the Cape, I now confess that they excite my warmest admiration.\textsuperscript{18}

Struggling to survive, French Creole women have less time for splendor and excess; like good domestic women, they must now \textit{cheerfully} bear
misfortune. Although Mary and Clara are also caught up in this mass exodus of women, they continue to see themselves as outsiders, US citizens who may yet return home. Mary adds, “In the same circumstances I fear I should be inferior to them both [in cheerfulness and fortitude].” Clara, however, responds differently. All around her women are surviving on their own. When her marriage becomes unbearable, she follows the example of the many brave women, black and white, remaking their lives right beside her.

In a moment of crisis Clara flees her husband. We read her story retrospectively from her own pen. Significantly, this change in narration transforms Clara from an object of male desire and sisterly curiosity to a writer with the power to relate her own story. Unlike the distant, ethnographic tone of Mary’s letters, Clara writes with an intensity and intimacy that surprises readers accustomed to Mary’s travelogue style. In explaining how and why she left St. Louis, Clara testifies to her experience as a victim of abuse, yet she assertively writes her way out of that role. “The night before I left him,” Clara writes to her sister,

he came home in a transport of fury, dragged me from my bed, said it was his intention to destroy me, and swore that he would render me horrible by rubbing aqua-fortis [nitric acid] in my face. This last menace deprived me of the power of utterance. . . . The only thought I dwelt on was, how to escape from this monster, and, at break of day, I was still sitting, as if rendered motionless by his threats. From this stupor I was roused by his caresses, or rather by his brutal approaches, for he always finds my person provoking, and often, whilst pouring on my head abuse which would seem dictated by the most violent hatred, he has sought in my arms gratification which should be solicited with affection and granted to love alone.

Clara vividly describes the shock and stupor she felt as a victim of physical and sexual assault. She was speechless and motionless. She could not fight; her only thought was to run away.

When Clara leaves St. Louis, she takes the road to Cobre, the site of a large slave revolt in Cuba. The cobreros, a maroon colony that formed after the revolt, lived in the surrounding mountains and welcomed runaway enslaved peoples from throughout the Caribbean. Clara’s description of her flight is reinforced by her choice to relocate via Cobre, a site of black resistance and struggle. Like the maroons who surely found the way to Cobre through a dense network of social relations, Clara draws upon her social connections to secure herself an asylum: “I knew that, as soon as I was missed, the town would be diligently searched for me,
but of the retreat I had chosen St. Louis could have no idea, for he was totally unacquainted with the residence of Madame V——. To this lady I had rendered some essential services [in Saint-Domingue], which gave me a claim on her friendship. She . . . lives in the greatest retirement. I had heard of her by accident, and thought it the surest retreat I could find.” Clara’s choice illustrates a community of French Creole women, US and Caribbean, banding together after the disruptions of the revolution. For Clara’s flight is just one more dislocation, one more close escape, in the many stories gathered here of resourceful women reorganizing their lives. Though she freely chooses it, Clara’s single status is not unusual in the chaos of the revolution. Intense bonds of sympathy forged through mutual loss and suffering unite French Creole women across the American hemisphere.

Clara relates her close friendships with other women as part of the various traumas they all have survived. Subsequent to leaving her husband, she makes two new women friends: Madame V—— and Madame St. Clair. Madame V—— is a friend from Saint-Domingue who also relocates to Cuba. She accepts Clara without any explanation of her sudden appearance:

Seizing my hand, she led me to her chamber, where, pressed in her arms, I felt that I had found a friend, and the tears that flowed on her bosom were proofs of my gratefulness.

I began to explain my situation. “I know it all!” she cried, “you have escaped your husband. My predictions are verified, though a little later than I expected.” There was no necessity for giving her a reason for having left my husband. She had always been at a loss to find one for my staying with him so long.

Where Mary suspects Clara’s motives and unsympathetically accuses her of behaving with want of propriety, Clara’s friend understands the situation without words. There is a caring tenderness expressed as Madame V—— provides Clara with new clothes, a place to rest, and food. Clara describes a new kind of Caribbean domesticity, a single women’s sympathetic collective.

This reciprocal care and responsibility harkens a new status for Clara and the Creole women remaking their lives outside of Saint-Domingue; they can be dependent on one another while remaining independent, thinking beings. This domestic sphere does not require gender subordination, but rather mutual sympathy and respect. After a few days with Madame V——, Clara finds that a popular festival will make her hide-
out less secluded. The women then decide to visit Madame St. Clair in another remote part of Cuba. These women immediately become so intimate that “Madame St. Clair, seduced by the description I have made of our peaceful country . . . intends going with me to Philadelphia.” Here, America figures as a space for forging hemispheric Creole alliances that transcend national borders. It holds the promise of a quasi-feminist utopia, free from the legal claims men hold over women’s bodies. Moreover, Clara “seduces” another women with her utopian vision; this seduction does not end in ruin, however. Instead, both women find hope in relocating together; their alternative domesticity is not divorced from politics, but bred in and of it.

This ending surprises readers with its reversal of the traditional courtship plot structure. Where such texts typically begin with a homosocial community of single women pursuing acceptable marriage partners and end with several happily married heterosexual couples, Secret History revises this structure by beginning with an unhappily married heterosexual couple, transforming the wife into a coquette, and ending with an international homosocial community of single women. To return to Elizabeth Dillon’s models of sociality, by the end of the novel, Clara successfully engages in a form of open sociality. Circulating in a new international community of sympathetic Creole women, Clara finds the opportunity for self-development that Foster’s Eliza Wharton desires, but cannot obtain. Clara also escapes the narrative conclusion of the seduction plot that seemed to loom over her coquettish behavior. In fact, the seduction plot is entirely rejected. There is no death, no social isolation, no punishment by painful, fatal childbirth here. Instead, Clara authors a remarkable new story for herself.

Oddly, the geopolitics of colonial and racial violence make this utopian hemispheric alliance possible. Nearly every woman has survived the loss of a male loved one or the disruption of a marriage. Clara’s own Creole identity connects her with other Caribbean Creole women, even as she plans to return to the United States. Her story is a “revolution” from the dominant US narrative conventions of her time, radically revising the narrative formulas of both early national US courtship and seduction plots. Clara does not find another husband, take a lover, or die from a broken heart or shame. Rather, she uses her network of international women friends to rebuild her life and create a new international family. This Creole rejection of the seduction narrative provides a powerful counterdiscourse to the hegemony of domestic morality in British and American fiction of the same period.
Caribbean Domesticities

Thus far I have argued that Clara draws on the strong examples of black and white Caribbean women fighting and surviving the horrific social conditions of the revolution as she decisively breaks free from her abusive marriage and forms her own utopian community of transnational women friends. However, these are only a few instances of the geographically distinct sexual and social relations that inspire Sansay to break with the narrative conventions that might trap Clara in a seduction plot. I now turn from the microcosmic framing of Clara’s individual romantic revolution to consider how Mary’s travelogue-style comparative analyses of Caribbean social and sexual mores provide a macrocosmic frame for the novel’s revolutionary rejection of the seduction plot.

A number of scholars have demonstrated how the Caribbean served as a foil for more wholesome forms of British and US morality. In myriad period depictions, black, white, and biracial women in the Caribbean colonies are described as oversexed, irrationally violent, and morally depraved. To speak, then, of Caribbean domesticity would seem oxymoronic. However, Sansay identifies a surprising source for Caribbean domesticity: the class of free mixed-race mulatto women living in Saint-Domingue. Described as the most “fervent priestesses of the American Venus,” as well as the most constant and tender companions, renowned for their expert household management, free mulatto women were the preferred sexual and domestic partners of white men in Saint-Domingue. In a letter to Aaron Burr, Mary champions mulatto women “housekeepers” (also known as ménagères) for their sexual fidelity and economic acumen, observing, “The mulatto women are the hated but successful rivals of the Creole ladies. Many of them are extremely beautiful; and, being destined from their birth to a life of pleasure, they are taught to heighten the power of their charms by all the aids of art. . . . To the destiny of the women of colour no infamy is attached.” In this brief description, Mary reveals a wealth of contemporary assumptions about the differences between mixed-race mulatto women and their rivals, French Creole women born in the Caribbean. Although neither of these groups of women is enslaved, neither is truly free. Both compete for powerful white men’s affections as well as the prestige, wealth, and consumer goods that such relationships bring.

What Mary describes here and throughout her letters is that even as mulatto and French Creole women compete with one another, the romantic relationships that they form with white men are quite distinct.
Whereas French Creole women marry for long-term legal and economic security, transmitting property through their legitimately produced heirs, Mary notes that mulatto women pursue a different “destiny.” Rather remarkably, Mary’s comparisons establish nonmarital sexual relations and alternative domesticities as acceptable social realities for at least some women living in colonial Saint-Domingue. Of course, as one credits Mary’s comparative observations for their perceptive analyses of local gender norms, one must also acknowledge that Mary’s unsympathetic observations on her sister’s abusive marriage and her overt racism render her a less than objective narrator. Still, by championing mulatto women’s sexual fidelity and economic resourcefulness, Mary identifies an overlooked source of domesticity in the turbulent social reality of the Haitian Revolution. From Mary’s admittedly questionable perspective, mulatto women’s domestic partnerships offer some unique advantages over the system of coverture governing US married women’s lives.29

In this section I focus on Mary’s extended observations on the differences between French Creole and free mulatto women’s sexual relationships with white men, as well as the island’s system of plaçage, another alternative to legal marriage, as additional sources of inspiration for the novel’s pathbreaking conclusion: the utopian women’s community Clara envisions. I juxtapose Mary’s representations of local Caribbean women with similar commentary by contemporary male writers such as Michel-René Hilliard d’Auberteuil and M. L. E. Moreau de Saint-Méry to make visible how Mary’s comparisons of local heterosexual practices lead toward a quasi-feminist social imaginary at the novel’s end. Compared to French metropolitan male observers who, by and large, demonize mulatto women, Mary marvels at mixed-race women’s wider range of social, sexual, and economic freedoms.

Not French, but influenced by French manners; not Afro-Caribbean, but marked by the local dialect; not Oriental, but managing to be imperious and voluptuous at the same time, Mary describes French Creoles as a blend of various national characteristics: “The Creole ladies have an air of voluptuous languor which renders them extremely interesting . . . they have acquired from the habit of commanding their slaves, an air of dignity which adds to their charms. Almost too indolent to pronounce their words they speak with a drawling accent that is very agreeable. . . . Those who, having been educated in France, unite the French vivacity to the Creole sweetness, are the most irresistible creatures that the imagination can conceive.”30 In addition to an ambiguously identified “Creole sweetness,” an abiding feature of contemporary descriptions of French
Creole women is their idle and pampered lifestyle. Speaking somewhat ironically of the heyday of slavery Mary writes:

I wish [the negroes] were reduced to order that I might see the so much vaunted habitations where I should repose beneath the shade of orange groves; walk on carpets of rose leaves and frenchipone; be fanned to sleep by silent slaves, or have my feet tickled into extacy [sic] by the soft hand of the female attendant.

Such were the pleasures of the Creole ladies whose time was divided between the bath, the table, the toilette and the lover . . .

But the moment of enjoying these pleasures is, I fear, far distant. The negroes have felt during ten years the blessing of liberty, for a blessing it certainly is, however acquired, and they will not be easily deprived of it.31

Although Mary acknowledges enslaved peoples’ legitimate desire for liberty, neither she nor her sister actively supports emancipation. They are part of the planter class, even if by marriage. In this passage, Mary explicitly imagines herself as a Creole lady, “tickled into extacy,” not an enslaved female obliged to fulfill the mistress’s every demand. As a US woman from Pennsylvania,32 Mary is both attracted to and appalled by slave-owning Creole women’s indulgence. She may fantasize about the former luxuries of plantation mistresses, but Mary is neither the mistress nor the servant. Her remarks register the distance between her and these two ranks of Caribbean women. Still, Mary does recognize that such pleasures are only possible through slavery. Once enslaved peoples rebel, “the moment of enjoying these pleasures is . . . far distant.”

In contrast to idle and pampered French Creole ladies, mulatto women—“the hated but successful rivals of the Creole ladies”—are “destined from their birth to a life of pleasure.”33 Mary uses the categories “mulatto” and “women of colour” interchangeably, but she is primarily interested in a group of women who frequently act as mistresses and housekeepers, or ménagères, to single and married white men. Many mulatto women traded their sexual capital (their beauty, allure, and reputation for sexual prowess) for the material goods, monetary payments, and increase in status associated with such employment. C. L. R. James notes, “In 1789, of 7,000 mulatto women, 5,000 were either prostitutes or the ‘kept mistresses’ of white men.”34 However, contemporary travel writers and historians insist that free women of color were not prostitutes; these relationships are more stable and more sentimentally domestic than one might expect.35 Although white men might also hire enslaved women to be ménagères, preference was often given to free mixed-race women who
sometimes possessed considerable personal wealth or property, becoming genuine economic assets to their employers. Uncovering the complex rhetorical strategies that French Creole planters used to describe these relationships, Doris Garraway observes that “as early as 1734, official correspondence noted the frequency with which newly arrived French settlers sought their fortunes not on the sugar plantation but in marriage with free women of color possessing considerable savings.”

Later in the eighteenth century, these marriages were stigmatized as “mésalliances” and punished through social exclusion and acts of discrimination. Thus, extralegal marriages known as plaçage (discussed more fully later) and other contract arrangements for sexual and domestic unions became increasingly popular and were often still referred to as “marriage” without facing the legal punishments for breaking mésalliance laws. For instance, eighteenth-century travel writer, politician, and scientist Girod de Chantrans explains, “Not only do domiciled whites consider it necessary to their pleasures and advantageous for their interests to have a woman of this species at the head of their household, it is even a common practice of etiquette and good taste among them.”

Not only did ménagères usually receive salaries for their domestic work, but, more important, they also helped their employers establish necessary social and business contacts, recommended merchants or service providers, and directed household spending. As Garraway notes, the free mulatto was both the sign and symbol of white male sexual hegemony, and also one of the colony’s most controversial figures: she “stands as a privileged icon of colonial libertinage, embodying the very nexus of concupiscence, luxury, and consumption that came to signify the Antilles in the French colonial imagination.”

Male authors such as Girod de Chantrans and Hilliard d’Auberteuil justify crossing the legally established racial barrier by describing white women, Creole, French, or otherwise, as rapidly losing their attractiveness in the damaging tropical climate and lacking in the supposed sexual prowess that made mulatto women desirable sexual partners. Period accounts of free mulatto women grant them a kind of corrupting agency, actively displacing the responsibility for white men’s miscegenation onto supposedly calculating, voluptuous mixed-race women.

Although French marriage laws ensured lawfully wedded wives long-term economic maintenance—a security ménagères lacked—in practice, ménagères had considerable authority in the supervision of the household and in personal relationships with their employers. As Mary notes, in Saint-Domingue, “no infamy is attached” to such women. In Mary’s
representations, *ménagères* use their relationships with white men to increase their social and economic power in the larger community, thereby revising standard assumptions about domesticity and women’s separate sphere. While Mary’s perspective does not attend to the lack of options free mulatto women had for exercising agency, nor does it critique the ways that this supposed form of agency reduces mulatto women to sexualized bodies, it does recognize that free mulatto women’s particular relationships with white men afford them a different status than white US, Creole, or even metropolitan French women could claim. While mulatto women might be “fallen women,” they are clearly not “victims of seduction.” Far from being “universally scorned,” as Mary notes that fallen women in the United States were, here, free mulatto women are powerful social and sexual actors, the “hated but successful rivals of the Creole ladies.”

If, in the Caribbean, it was especially obvious that women’s bodies were fundamentally commodities purchased for their physical and reproductive capabilities, then mulatto women, in Mary’s account, capitalize on the commodity potential of their bodies in ways that white US and Creole women could not. From Mary’s historically limited point of view, mulatto women maintain a surprising level of social and economic power and personal autonomy. As contracted labor, unmarried *ménagères* may leave or find other employment if the situation proves unsatisfactory. Unlike Clara and other married women who find themselves divested of control over their desirable bodies, *ménagères* maintain limited control over their bodies by retaining the right to exchange those bodies on the free market. Moreover, *ménagères* turn their pay into increased opportunities for social and economic power in the larger community by lending money at interest or renting properties for additional income.

Obviously there are ethical concerns and serious limitations to arguments that make a woman’s “agency” equivalent to her ability to trade her body for payment, especially in a patriarchal and fundamentally racist slave-based economy. I am not making such a claim here. Nor am I defending capitalist systems that render women and their bodies commodities. More simply, I want to draw attention to the relative positions of various groups of women in this specific historic period and geographic locale. Comparatively, free unmarried mulatto women in Saint-Domingue express more control over their lives when acting outside of the legal marriage system. While their power originates in the domestic sphere via sexual relationships with and household management for white men, it is not limited to the domestic sphere. Separated from the function of
producing legal heirs and, consequently, from interconnected discourses of domesticity, reproduction, and the nation, ménagères forge distinct domesticities in Saint-Domingue. More broadly, Mary’s sustained comparisons of mulatto women’s domesticities suggest how these alternatives become a powerful force in the novel’s revision of US coquettes and fallen women.

Mary is not alone in characterizing mulatto ménagères as powerful players in their local communities and economies. As Garraway argues, the mulatto woman was the locus of a contradictory set of rhetorical assertions and representations in prerevolutionary Saint-Domingue: she was “a racially hybrid marker of sexual excess, material extravagance, and domestic virtue.” The ménagère was typically part of a relatively stable and committed domestic partnership; however, male observers often describe women of color as the most outrageous of libertines. In the heady realm of Caribbean fantasy and desire, mulatto women—themselves the products of interracial sexual union—become symbolically equated with the interracial desire denoted in their biracial origins.

Eighteenth-century white male travel writers, former plantation owners, and historians frequently offer up assessments of mulatto women more properly located in fiction. For example, Hilliard d’Auberteuil, the French colonial lawyer and author of Considérations sur l’état présent de la colonie française de Saint-Domingue, writes, “The mulâtrasses are in general much less docile than mulatto men because they have arrogated to themselves an empire over most of the whites, founded on libertinage. They are well made, their movements are guided by voluptuousness; the affectation of their attire does not sit badly with them.” Plantation owner and historian Moreau de Saint-Méry offers a more pointed analysis of mulatto women’s sexual power: “The sole occupation of the numerous class of women who are the fruit of the mixture of whites with slave women is to avenge themselves, with weapons of pleasure, for being condemned to abasement.” In both of these accounts, mulatto women’s sexuality is a form of “empire” over white men. In the seductive hands of the mulatto temptress, sexuality is a weapon for gaining ascendency in the racial hierarchy. On the surface at least, white men grant women of color a limited kind of sovereignty; but as several critics note, these statements shuffle the responsibility for white male sexuality onto the shoulders of free mulatto women.

For Garraway, historical sources that “document” the sexual proclivities and/or the faithful loyalty of mulatto women continue to make available the projections of white male sexual hegemony at work in Saint-
Domingue prior to the revolution. Similarly, Mary’s perception of mulatto women’s social and sexual power is the product of her narrow ideological preconceptions and interpretations. It is not the goal of this chapter to critique the limitations of Mary’s observations—obviously mulatto women had limited power and means for wielding that power—rather, my aim is to trace the way that Mary’s position as a white US woman affords her a different perspective on mulatto women’s sexual power. To be clear, I do not claim that Mary (or Sansay) accurately represents mulatto women in revolutionary Saint-Domingue. Instead, I argue that the differences in her attitude toward mulatto women’s sexual, social, and economic power—as she perceives it—are worth further reflection.

While Hilliard d’Auberteuil and Moreau de Saint-Méry charge mulatto women with a sexual empire over white men, Julien Raimond, an educated mulatto man from Saint-Domingue, describes a distinct free and wealthy class of mixed-race “people of color,” which developed from affectionate interracial sexual relations. In “Observations on the Origin and Progression of the White Colonists’ Prejudice against Men of Color” (1791), written to persuade the French National Assembly to grant political rights to free colored people, Raimond observes: “Though they [white men] called them [mulatto mistresses] housekeepers, they made them into wives. As soon as these women had children with their masters, they became free, as did their children, who were always raised like free children. . . . There was no dishonor in knowing them, spending time with them, living with them, forming relationships with their daughters.” Racial prejudice begins, according to Raimond, when white women arrive and find themselves in competition with ménagères and wealthy women of color: “Many Europeans crossed the sea, including large numbers of poor women who came to seek their fortunes. Mothers brought their daughters to marry them to rich colonists. They were frequently disappointed. Since these immigrant women brought no resources, many of the young men who came to the colony to get rich preferred to marry girls of color, whose dowries included land and slaves they could use profitably. Such preferences began to inspire jealousy in white women.”

In sharp contrast to white male travel writers’ demonizing accounts of mulatto women’s sexuality, Raimond historicizes white colonial men’s participation in the creation of a free mulatto class and those planters’ preferences for economically advantageous matches over racial solidarity through marriage with white women.

Like Raimond, Mary notes that French Creole women were a prime source of racial hostilities, frequently complaining of their husbands’
bankrolling mulatto women’s luxurious consumption habits. White Creole women witnessed mulatto women’s power most visibly in the expensive material goods such as lace, linen, silk, gold, and even real estate that they acquired from white lovers. In exchange for their valuable domestic and sexual services, women of color gained coveted trade goods and the social éclat that accompanied them. In her vivid account of mulatto women’s sexual, social, and economic power, Mary describes how Creole women became so jealous of women of color and “their influence over the men . . . that they complained to the council” about family fortunes lavished on mixed-race mistresses. Mary observes that Creole women rallied to pass sumptuary laws to shame their rivals: “No woman of colour was to wear silk . . . nor to appear in public without a handkerchief on her head.” But women of color understood their power; in the face of new sumptuary laws, they boycotted by “shut[ting] themselves up in their houses, and appear[ing] no more in public.” Refusing to be victims of economic exchange, women of color withdrew themselves and their considerable wealth from public circulation. The results were immediate: “The merchants soon felt the bad effects of this determination, and represented so forcibly the injury the decree did to commerce, that it was reversed, and the olive beauties triumphed.”

Of course, mulatto women’s boycotting tactics were not particularly new. European women frequently organized riots when the cost of bread exceeded peasant families’ ability to purchase this staple. But whereas European women rioted when basic staples were inaccessible, the sumptuary-law boycotts in Saint-Domingue were not about being out-priced. Rather, these boycotts demonstrate mulatto women’s social and economic powers over and against supposedly elite white Creole women. These boycotts proved that mulatto women could exercise limited independence from race-based economic constraints by withdrawing their bodies (and their extensive capital) from circulating in the market. In this case, a retreat to the domestic sphere serves to increase mulatto women’s social power—a power remarked by white men and imitated by white women.

The madras headscarf, which was meant to be a symbol of mulatto women’s humiliation and second-class status, becomes instead a sign of regional pride and female sensuality. Interestingly, madras cloth was manufactured in the East Indies and used to trade for slaves on the West African coast, where it functioned as a highly symbolic material sign of wealth and became a kind of currency in and of itself. That mulatto women chose madras as the cloth used to cover their heads in obedience to sumptuary laws should, then, be interpreted as the highest form of irony,
even an outright statement of rebellion. These women are no one’s slaves; instead, they swathe themselves in the wealth-generating materials of the slave trade. As Elizabeth Dillon argues, the madras scarf becomes synonymous with the generative force of Creole culture itself.\textsuperscript{50} It demonstrates that the colonies were far from passive consumers of metropolitan culture, but that they could and did generate their own distinct cultures and fashions. Indeed, white women as high-ranking as Napoleon’s sister imitated sultry Caribbean women of color as they donned the stylish madras headscarf. Baron de Wimpffen writes that mulatto women “are the envy and despair of the white ladies, who aspire to imitate them, and who do not see that it is impossible for strong and glaring colours, calculated to animate the monotonous and vivid hue of the mulatto, to harmonize with the alabaster and the rose of Europe!”\textsuperscript{51} While I agree with Dillon’s reading that the scene demonstrates the generative possibilities of Creole culture, I argue that white women’s appropriation of the madras headscarf also serves to illustrate another less documented fantasy: a desire for the kind of sexual dominance and power reportedly possessed by local free mulatto women. Although jealous French Creole women initially sought to prevent their rivals from displaying their luxury consumer goods, they—and their metropolitan French counterparts—finally came to imitate their successful rivals’ style and demeanor. French Creole women’s imitation of mulatto fashion further illustrates the power that Mary perceives mixed-race women had, not just over their white male partners, but over white women as well.

While Dillon reads the madras headscarf as “the first signal of a counter-discourse of creolism in the novel,” this chapter argues that Mary’s persistent comparisons of the Caribbean’s competing domestic and romantic ideologies denaturalizes all such belief systems as cultural constructions. Mary’s macrocosmic perspective on the differing levels of romantic and social agency across the various classes of women in Saint-Domingue combats essentialized notions of gender and sexuality that were increasingly popular in the nineteenth-century United States. In this way, Mary’s attentive comparisons of the differentiated romantic and social customs in Saint-Domingue make visible the local Creole culture Dillon identifies. As I have tried to show, those comparisons are grounded in her own difference as a US outsider. Mary’s expectations for love are trained to a different romantic script; as a US woman, she maintains the companionate-marriage ideal. Rather than reacting to mulatto women with jealousy or imitation, Mary contrasts mixed-race women’s quite public sexual and economic power to the distinctly private emotional fulfillment touted in US
discourses of companionate marriage. Mixed-race women’s domestic partnerships model an alternative to the limitations of the companionate-marriage ideal, where women are encouraged to find their sole satisfaction in wedlock. Mary’s analysis of mulatto women demonstrates that these women could contract for their own exchange value and be emotional companions and successful household managers; indeed, women of color did all this without the legal restrictions placed on married US women and their property.

Sansay’s novel of the Haitian Revolution exceeds the traditional confines of US women’s stories by reworking the courtship and seduction plots and refiguring their coquettes and fallen woman. Yet, her narrator, Mary, maintains bourgeois values such as romantic faithfulness and domestic loyalty even as she criticizes the legal and social restrictions of institutionalized marriage. For instance, in contrast to her critique of coquettish French Creole women who cannot wait to find extramarital lovers, Mary finds much to praise about women of color: “There is a friendliness and simplicity in their manners. . . . [They] breathe nothing but affection and love.”52 One can imagine many Creole women disagreeing with Mary’s assessment; she does seem to be projecting her own domestic expectations onto mulatto women. Indeed, she makes her domestic ideals explicit when she argues that suitably matched partners produce satisfying long-term attachments: “In such a situation [where partners are suitably matched] the heart is always occupied, and always full. For those who live [this way] their home is the world; their feelings, their powers, their talents are employed. They go into society as a ramble; it affords transient amusement, but becomes not a habit. Their thoughts, their wishes dwell at home, and they are good because they are happy.”53 Unlike Clara’s attempt at open sociality, where her community helps to generate her subjectivity, Mary’s ideal companionate couple finds fulfillment through a form of closed sociality—they are already complete and need nothing outside of this partnership. Mary’s concern, though, is with attachments, affections, and domestic yearnings; she speaks of equally matched men and women, not husbands and wives. From Mary’s point of view, marriage makes US women legal dependents, subject to the tyrannical whims of their husbands. She witnesses this firsthand in her sister’s unhappy marriage. However, in her view, mulatto women suffer no such legal or social restrictions in their committed domestic partnerships.

As Tess Chakkalakal argues, the “fiction” of slave marriages in the United States—marriages that have no legal standing, but that carry all the weight of marriage in terms of commitment and affection—may actu-
ally have helped early feminists and social reformers to imagine an alternative to legal marriage. According to Chakkalakal, “as a marital relation that had little to do with either property or power, the slave-marriage came to embody the principles of an ideal marriage, a union of souls that transcended the earthly concerns upon which legal marriage was based.”54 Although obviously the position of the ménagère, a (usually) paid employee of a white planter, is not the same as a bond of affection between two enslaved persons, we might usefully think about the way that alternative models such as ménagères or US slave marriages helped women writers and social reformers to imagine and to tell stories about other forms of domesticity.

In contrast to the ménagère, who works for a white male employer, there are numerous other traditions of consensual domestic arrangements between black men and women in Saint-Domingue. One such arrangement is plâçage: a consensual, committed relationship without the official forms of church and state. The term comes from the colonial word place (domain), where to place oneself means to establish both a household and agricultural cultivation. There is a sense of rootedness in these relationships, of claiming a place with another. The anthropologist Serge-Henri Vieux describes plâçage as the predominant form of conjugal union in Haiti; it is not a common-law marriage, nor is it concubinage.55 Rather, it demands elaborate rituals. Also, a man might have more than one placée. Because of historical and economic factors such as the expense of a marriage license and the historical legacies of colonization and slavery, most of the rural peasant population in Haiti still chooses plâçage over marriage.56 According to Joan Dayan, many peasant women living in Haiti today prefer plâçage to marriage “since they believe plasaj preserves women’s independence” as marriage does not.57 Although the male partner owns the land, the female placée maintains her own small agricultural fields, sells her agricultural and domestic goods at the local market, and keeps the profits. In sharp contrast to Western familial structures that render women’s bodies men’s property and legally divest women of their economic contributions (where their earnings accrue to a male head of household), economist Sidney Mintz notes that a Haitian peasant woman’s earnings accrue “to the woman herself, rather than to some other member of her group, as an individual or as an executor of group wealth.”58 Mintz argues that Haitian peasant society “acknowledges an equal economic status for women in local, culturally-prescribed terms.”59 Practiced both before and after the revolution, plâçage is one of many forms of domestic union offering women a more expansive sense of
individual agency than has heretofore been recognized. Peasant couples practicing *placage* and plantation owners hiring *ménagères* are far from the domestic world envisioned in nineteenth-century British and US fiction, yet clearly these alternative domestic models have the potential to denaturalize familiar Anglo-American romantic scripts. Although *Secret History* clearly overlooks the coercion and lack of opportunities that pushed women of color into long-term sexual relationships with white men, Mary and Clara envision positive change for women through the alternative domestic relationships they encounter in Saint-Domingue.

Such partnerships would undoubtedly have interested Sansay, whose sexual relationship with Aaron Burr continued even after her marriage. Although Sansay provides no direct statement comparing her own status (or those of her two protagonists) to that of *ménagères* or of “placed” women, her narrator’s relatively positive assessments of unmarried mulatto women’s domestic loyalty and economic successes invite readers to make biographical comparisons. In his *Memoirs*, Aaron Burr sidesteps Sansay’s marginal position in society, suggesting that she “is too well known by the name of ‘Leonora.’” Michael Drexler interprets this comment more directly: “Sansay was a public woman, a coquette.” Would Sansay recognize herself in popular fictional depictions of the “fallen woman” of the time? Mary writes, in Saint-Domingue, “that unfortunate class of beings, so numerous in my own,—victims of seduction, devoted to public contempt and universal scorn, is unknown.” While early national US fiction is littered with the corpses of women who transgress sexual mores, Sansay must have marveled at the stories she heard of Caribbean women’s lives. Here are no whimpering Charlotte Temples or remorseful Eliza Whartons, but Sanite Belairs, Zulines, Madame V——s, and Madame St. Clairs. At a moment when biology was on the horizon of becoming destiny, when racial and sexual categories were ossifying, when one’s body signaled one’s full or limited human status, Sansay’s novel demands that readers notice how supposedly essentialized identity categories vary across geographic locales and even within defined geopolitical borders. Mary argues that there are no victims of seduction in Saint-Domingue; consequently, we might ask, could a seduction plot be staged in Saint-Domingue? Where else could Sansay set a story that challenged the United States’ most basic standards for acceptable feminine behavior? How else could US readers of sentimental and didactic fiction accept such a story?

If labels such as “fallen woman” are geographically local, their effects on women’s lives and women’s stories are very real. Revolutionary-era
Saint-Domingue allows Sansay to make room for alternative domesticities and alternative women’s plots in US fiction. She concludes *Secret History* with a homosocial female utopia, a “New World” for white women from across the Americas. While not without its limitations—for instance, there is no room for minority women in Clara’s utopian vision—Sansay’s revolutionary text shatters nineteenth-century fictional norms and, in the process, revises what it was possible to say about women’s lives and women’s relationships. Witnessing alternative romantic ideologies and competing domestic arrangements firsthand, Sansay imagined new possibilities, new stories, and new words and worlds for women.

**A Philadelphia Seduction Story**

I have argued that Sansay rejects the seduction plot in her Caribbean-based novel, but what are the implications of this rejection for her Philadelphia-based novel, *Laura* (1809)? Could the nonmarital domestic alternatives Sansay conjures in Saint-Domingue hold in Philadelphia? Sansay’s second novel, *Laura*, seems worlds away from the racial violence and colonial excesses reported in *Secret History*, but it, too, revises the seduction plot in surprising ways.

The story begins by tracing how Laura’s mother, Rosina, runs away from a convent in Lisbon to secretly marry her brother’s friend. Rosina and her new husband, William, move to Philadelphia to avoid public scandal; however, before he informs his family of their marriage, William dies in a transatlantic voyage, leaving Rosina and her unborn child penniless and friendless. Rosina gives birth to a daughter, Laura, and after struggling through years of poverty, she reluctantly remarries. Laura matures under her mother’s loving guidance. Then, at the age of fifteen, Rosina dies, leaving Laura under the supervision of her less tender stepfather. Rather than marry the man her stepfather chooses for her, Laura elopes with her sympathetic and beloved beau, Belfield, an impoverished medical student. Like her mother, Laura chooses love as an escape route. However, Rosina’s experiences school readers to carefully weigh the slim differences between the mother’s marginally “respectable” elopement and the daughter’s similar yet scandalous actions. Comparing the mother’s and daughter’s stories, readers learn that married or unmarried, women are vulnerable when their sexual relationships are not publicly recognized and sanctioned by family or community.

Although Belfield is a worthy and respectable young man, his financial situation renders him dependent on an older brother while he continues
as a student. He finds that he is not in a position to marry, even as he encourages Laura to reject her father’s proposed match and run away with him. In short, Belfield is rash. By deferring their marriage, Belfield sacrifices Laura’s reputation and mars their future happiness together. Young and in love, the couple engages in premarital sex and Laura becomes pregnant. However, unlike more popular fallen heroines such as Charlotte Temple or Eliza Wharton, Laura retains a dignity, even an innocence, despite her premarital sexual activity. This innocence—perhaps we might better call it a deep trust in Belfield’s good intentions—is threatened when Laura finds herself placed in a brothel by Belfield. Hurrying to get Laura out of the house before his family visits, Belfield does not investigate the true nature of the lodgings. As an occupant at a brothel, Laura is subjected to the sexual advances of anyone who might pay the right price and, not surprisingly, this is exactly what happens. Laura flees the house, rejecting the terms of her status as a “fallen woman.” However, she is without resources. An orphan with no living family, Laura turns to the aid of her mother’s former friends. Now she must see herself as she is viewed in the eyes of her community. Her mother’s onetime friend rails: “We know very well where you have been. So instead of marrying the honest husband your father had chosen, you went off with George Belfield; and after all the expense, that was foolishly thrown away on you, turned out no better than you should be. And now Belfield’s tired of you and casts you off and you come to me, as if you thought I should have any thing to do with you! No, no, I shall not injure my character by harbouring such creatures.” After this tirade, Laura silently prepares to leave; she passes the unnamed hostile woman with a “calm look of indignation, and left the inhospitable roof.”

Laura’s withering silent reproach is almost unimaginable from the desperate Charlotte Temple or the humiliated Eliza Wharton. However, Laura tries another of her mother’s friends, the more sympathetic Sophia, and here she finds respite. Laura’s turn toward her mother’s friends for shelter and sympathy echoes Clara’s newly formed community of displaced women in *Secret History*. However, here it is not the ravages of war that disrupt families and render women dependent. The everyday experiences of the death of a spouse, a husband abandoning his wife, or any other number of reasons that women faced poverty suggest that for dependent women, Philadelphia, too, could be a precarious place. Sansay’s previous solution, a close-knit community of women sharing resources and caring for one another, works in Philadelphia as well. Although it might seem less utopian than the female community she envisions in *Secret History*, on her
own return from the Caribbean, Sansay established for herself and others a form of women’s community in Philadelphia, a factory for manufacturing artificial flowers where she employed young girls. As Michael Drexler notes, this venture is “another example of Sansay’s willingness to try out alternative social arrangements.” Laura does not end her days bonding (or commiserating) with her sympathetic friend Sophia, though. Instead, she reconciles with Belfield, who finally realizes the significant sacrifice of reputation Laura endures for his sake and makes arrangements for their marriage.

Before Belfield can make good on his promise of marriage, however, he is fatally wounded in a duel to defend Laura’s honor. He dies on their wedding day, before marrying Laura and legitimating their unborn child. By accepting the challenge to duel (from the same man who threatened Laura in the brothel), Belfield aims to prove in the symbolic logic of dueling that Laura is pure, that she is no “fallen woman.” Belfield believes himself in the right. His intentions to Laura are true; moreover, she has been true to him. In the honor logic of the duel, however, Belfield’s death suggests that private intentions and personal feelings are irrelevant. A publicly recognized marriage is the only way to save Laura’s reputation, and now she will be deprived of this narrow chance for “redemption.”

Dressed for her wedding, Laura arrives at her lover’s deathbed. Although she desperately crawls into Belfield’s funeral bier hoping to die, she survives his loss. Sansay concludes the novel with this stringent, but curious, moral: “To trace Laura through the many vicissitudes that awaited her, would be a task too painful. She became a mother,—She found protection from the gentleman [to] whom Belfield had recommended her. . . . thro’ every stage of her varying existence, happiness remained a stranger to her bosom; and her life was an exemplification of this truth:—that perpetual uneasiness, disquietude, and irreversible misery, are the certain consequences of fatal misconduct in a woman; however gifted, or however reclaimed.” While “perpetual uneasiness, disquietude, and irreversible misery” are certainly not happy endings, this is, nevertheless, a notable divergence from the seduction plot’s inevitable conclusion in death (usually in or after painful childbirth). Most obviously, Laura does not die, and that alone makes her story stand out from previous seduction novels. More than this, though, Belfield takes the full brunt of punishment—death—typically reserved for the fallen woman. In the end, Belfield atones for his “crime” by claiming her as his wife on his deathbed.

Though not without its didactic moralizing, the novel’s conclusion is
New world courtships remarkable for the way that it inverts the seduction plot’s traditional sexual double standard, killing Belfield and giving Laura the typically male part of grieving, repentant survivor. Not only does Laura live, though, she learns; and her learning is not restricted to remorsefully reviewing her previous sexual misconduct. As the narrator observes, despite the “many vicissitudes that awaited her,” “her beauty continued unimpaired; her mind acquired new brilliancy.” In those short lines, Sansay offers her most interesting commentary on the significance of the geographies of seduction. In Philadelphia, Sansay cannot eradicate the seduction plot; the story is too central to US conceptions of gender and sexuality. Yet, by reversing the terms of punishment, Sansay’s novel questions the fairness of unequally punishing women for a sexual misstep that both partners make. Sansay’s conclusion raises the question, why should Laura and others like her die? Although she does not provide her heroine with a happy ending, Sansay significantly revises the terms of the seduction plot in the United States by allowing Laura to survive.

Comparing geographically specific discourses of seduction in two novels by Leonora Sansay demonstrates how the logic and narrative demands of seduction differ across two unique settings in a single author’s fiction. In Secret History, Sansay rejects the morality of the seduction plot, transforming readers’ expectations for the typical coquette and fallen woman stories by providing alternative Caribbean domesticities as counterpoints to familiar US figures. Although Sansay does not jettison the seduction plot in her Philadelphia story, she radically revises the dominant and conventional conclusion, the death of the fallen woman. By killing Belfield, Sansay places the guilt of premarital sex on the male partner, reversing the sexual double standard that demands women pay the price for nonmarital sexual activity. Although Sansay’s Philadelphia-based seduction story is more circumspect in its challenges to the narrative conventions of sex and gender, like Secret History it, too, envisions female-centered community as a necessary support structure for women betrayed by the romantic scripts they are taught to inhabit. Sansay’s comparative Caribbean novel launches the critique of seduction she continues, if more moderately, in the City of Brotherly Love.