Revolution and Exile in the 18th-century French Atlantic: France, USA, and Haiti
Robert D. Clark Honors College Arts & Letters Colloquium

The American and French Revolutions established our modern political ideologies of nationalism, freedom, equality, toleration and human rights. But for those who lived through these revolutions they were not always a matter of noble principles, but often a horrifying ordeal of fear and violence. And writers, artists, and intellectuals in America, France and the Caribbean who experienced the years from the 1775 to 1800 witnessed enormous and frightening changes not only in the political world but in aesthetic and moral life as well. A third Atlantic Revolution established the Republic of Haiti, the first black-majority ruled nation of the modern post-colonial era. This course examines the trans-Atlantic connections between France, the new United States, and the French colony of Saint-Domingue, and looks back at the formative stage of French colonization in Louisiana earlier in the 18th century. Our particular interest is in how exile authors who were accustomed to a life of privilege dealt with the toppling of social hierarchies, and how sexuality and gender became part of moral and political debates that sought to refashion power and propriety. We will read novels, memoirs, and travel narratives by French, American and Caribbean writers. Details of the six parts of the course are described below.

Books available at the University Duck/Book Store:
Leonora Sansay, Secret History, or The Horrors of Santo Domingo and Laura ed. Michael Drexler (Broadview Press, 2007)
Abbé Antoine-François Prévost, Manon Lescaut trans. Angela Scholar (Oxford World’s Classics 2009)


Electronic texts available on Blackboard coursesite:
Guillaume-Thomas Raynal and Denis Diderot, excerpt from Histoire des deux Indes
François-René de Chateaubriand, Atala / René, trans. James Spence Harry with illustrations by Gustave Doré, at gutenberg.org
Durand Echevarria, excerpt from Mirage in the West, A History of the French Image of American Society to 1815 [pdf]
Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville, New Travels to the United States of America, Performed in 1788 [pdf]
J. Hector Saint-John de Crévecoeur, Letters from an American Farmer at Early Americas Digital
Although many of the books ordered are English translations, reading assignments will also be available in the original French for students able to read it.

Assignments and Grades:

- daily class participation, including writing exercises and questions about the readings, which can be brought to class or posted on the blackboard discussion board site. 30 points
- mid-term paper due Oct. 23rd (4-6 pages) about the experience of privilege, politics, and exile, based upon Henriette-Lucy Dillon, Chateaubriand, Crèveœur, or Brissot 15 points
- second paper (4-6 pages) due Nov. 26th on Prévost, Sansay, Dumont, or Atala and the French Caribbean. 15 points
- mid-term exam, which will take 30-40 minutes on Nov. 6th. 10 points.
- Independent project due Dec. 12th This writing project may take a number of forms, such as a web-page, poster, or conventional paper. Many texts for this project are available in Knight library and many more on ECCO (Eighteenth-Century Collections Online). 20 points
- Presentation based on the project (scheduled during the last week of class and the final exam period) 10 points

Learning Objectives:

- Acquire a basic understanding of the history of 18th century Atlantic Revolutions.
- Understand the ongoing consequences of the French and Haitian Revolutions.
- Read and analyze autobiographical texts for implied and repressed political expressions.
- Write clear, focused analytic essays on fiction and non-fiction texts, using secondary sources.

Schedule of Readings:

Part One: America and the American Revolution greatly inspired French liberals and intellectuals during the second half of the 18th century, creating a utopian image of a land of religious toleration, social equality, agrarian simplicity, and republican virtue. The
enlightenment philosopher Denis Diderot ghost-wrote an account of the American Revolution published in a revised edition of the best-selling global history of colonialism by Guillaume-Thomas Raynal. Frenchmen including Chateaubriand, Crévecoeur and Brissot came to America both before and after 1776, not as exiles but as soldiers, journalists, and promoters of colonization schemes.


Oct. 2nd Brissot, preface to New Travels; Durand Echevarria, introduction to translation of Brissot’s Travels, and excerpt from Mirage in the West pp. 175-192

Oct. 7th Crévecoeur Letters intro. and letters 2, 3, Chateaubriand’s Travels pp1-37

Part Two: Henriette-Lucie Dillon, Marquise de la Tour du Pin, is the French Revolutionary exile we will study most closely. We will read the first half of her long memoir, written much later in her life, as well as an excerpt from the autobiography of Thomas Jefferson. Together, these memoirs provide a survey of key events in the French Revolution, express the ambivalence faced by liberal aristocrats in France, and the experience of some French exiles in America.

Oct. 9th Memoirs of Madame de La Tour du Pin chapters 1-6 (pp13-77)
Oct. 14th Memoirs of Madame de La Tour du Pin chapters 7-10 (pp 77-137)
Thomas Jefferson, excerpt from Autobiography
Oct. 16th Memoirs of Madame de La Tour du Pin chapters 11-16 (pp137-226)

Oct. 21st Memoirs of Madame de La Tour du Pin chapters 17-20 (pp227-285)

Part Three: Sansay’s Secret History and the Revolution in Saint-Domingue
Leonora Sansay was a glamorous young American married to a Saint-Domingue planter, as well as a correspondent and likely mistress of U.S. Vice-President Aaron Burr. She published anonymously in 1808 an epistolary novel based on her experience when she and her husband returned to the island in 1802 to try to reclaim his plantation in the wake of the French invasion of the island ordered by Napoleon. The novel examines how sexual behavior reflects political freedoms in a climate of revolution and violence. We will also read part of an anonymous narrative of the Haitian Revolution by a young man who fled to the U.S. To better understand these texts we will survey key events of the Haitian Revolution from 1791 to 1804.

Oct. 28th Sansay, Secret History, introduction and letters 1-13 (pp10-35, 60-100)
Oct. 30th Secret History letters 14-32 (pp100-154) and Elizabeth Dillon article
Nov. 4th My Odyssey; by A Creole of Saint-Domingue Books 1-2
Nov. 6th My Odyssey; by A Creole of Saint-Domingue Books 3-4 and mid-term test
Part Four: Manon Lescaut: the libertine in Louisiana
Prévost was an enormously prolific novelist, editor and translator. As a priest, soldier, libertine, and exile he lived a picaresque life of scandal that resembles Leonora Sansay and Aaron Burr, his hero Des Grieux or Dumont de Montigny. His most read work is his 1731 novel Manon Lescaut, which offers a critique of the manners of aristocracy in the ancien régime, and vividly dramatizes the clash between ideals of honor and class privilege and of romantic love and sexual propriety. It also gives us an image of Louisiana as seen from France in the 1720s.

Nov. 11th Manon Lescaut to the end of Part one (page 82)
Nov. 13th Manon Lescaut Part Two

Part Five: Dumont de Montigny 1719-1727
Dumont was not a revolutionary exile, but his account the venality and patronage of the ancien régime, his status as a colonist in Louisiana, and his testimony to the failures of the French military, are all illustrative of the period. Prof. Sayre has edited and translated Dumont’s 1747 manuscript memoir.

Nov. 18th Memoir of Lieutenant Dumont chapters 2-3
Nov. 20th Memoir of Lieutenant Dumont chapters 4-5

Part Six: Chateaubriand’s Atala and the Revolution at Natchez
We conclude the course by learning about another revolution, little known today, that featured the Natchez people in revolt against French colonizers in colonial Louisiana in 1729. In the writings of Frenchmen including Dumont this Native American resistance movement was a form of revolution, and in novels by Chateaubriand it became an historical allegory for the French Revolution. How did Chateaubriand’s travels in the United States, and his experience of exile both there and in England, influence his narrator René? How does Chateaubriand’s tale of love, Christian devotion, and tragic loss comment upon the colonization of Native American peoples and upon the French Revolution?

Nov. 25th Atala part 1 (and Chateaubriand, Travels in America pp155-174)
Dec. 2nd Atala part 2 and Dumont chapter 6

Dec. 4th Dumont chapters 7, 11 and Prof. Sayre’s article from EAL 37:3

Dec. 10th 12:30 pm, Presentations during final exam period.