The Research of Revising:
The Role of Library Research in the Process of Scholarly Writing

In the spring of 2012, I wrote a paper for Cary Wolfe’s “Biopolitics” class entitled “Gothic Fertility and Population Management in Leonora Sansay’s Secret History (1808).” My goal was to apply theories of biopolitics to an early American novel, one that takes place during the final days of French rule in colonial Saint Domingue. Not only is this novel uniquely transnational—outlining the colonial interests of the U.S., Spain, and France in the West Indies—it represents a hybrid form; Sansay fictionalized her letters to then-lover Aaron Burr while she was abroad with her French husband Louis, creating a semi-autobiographical epistolary novel that integrates travel writing and gothic scenes of race warfare. I attempted to analyze the role of land crab and creole fertility, demography, and ecology in the text to understand how Michel Foucault’s theory of biopolitics—particularly of population management and the milieu—operates within a novel seemingly about territorial colonialism. It sounds simple enough, writing a research paper for a graduate seminar, though far from easy. Three months later, I chose this paper to revise in Helena Michie’s “Third-Year Writing Workshop,” where English graduate students re-work a paper into a publishable article. Little did I know the extent to which thoughtful revising required me to re-enter the world of research to transform my piece.

My first iteration of this paper included close readings of the text alongside theoretical materials from the class. By then, I had formulated a reading which contended that the text has biopolitical elements, particularly in its portrayal of the population through demographic concerns about high fertility rates, and the portrayal of the milieu, or the ecological environment. But by my first writing workshop with my peers, I had realized that I had not answered the
question that distinguishes papers from articles: how does my reading differ from other readings of this text? What is my scholarly intervention? I initially thought that there was only one scholarly essay on this novel to date, the first one written by Elizabeth Maddock Dillon in 2006. But since then, scholars had been taking up Sansay’s novel vigorously and citing one another in the process; just typing Sansay’s name into the Fondren server displayed a host of articles from a wide range of journals—on women’s studies, narrative, French historical studies, and early American studies—some of which had been published even in the last few months. I knew then that Sansay’s novel was a hot topic for transnational American studies, but I had to figure out what made it so.

I read all of these scholarly articles, which made arguments about the novel’s gendered domestic plot (Dillon, Liu, Burnham), its racial politics (Liu, Burnham, Clavin, Dillon), its cosmopolitan form (Woertendyke), its capitalism and trans-oceanic dimensions (Burnham), its portrayal of national boundaries and categories (Armstrong and Tennenhouse), and its multi-layered colonial history (Goudie, Clavin, Woertendyke). Despite their diverse interests, I found that all of these articles assume a geopolitical context in which to locate Sansay’s novel, particularly because the novel is so geopolitical interesting; it portrays an island on the brink of a slave revolution (Haiti), as well as territories still under colonial power (Cuba, Jamaica), European colonial forces, creoles, and visitors from the American “continent.” I realized that my focus on reproductive ecology speaks to this body of scholarly work; What would it mean to read this novel for its ecology rather than its geopolitics?

In order to compellingly engage with this scholarship, I had to do delve into the historical dimensions of Sansay’s novel. This became apparent to me in my second writing workshop, where my colleagues pointed out the historical inaccuracies of the text—the creoles were a small
sliver of the population, so how could they be portrayed as overpopulating the islands? Cuba was still a slave-holding territory at this time, so how could the narrator be nostalgic for slavery while in Cuba? These were questions I inevitably had to attend to, if I wanted my ecological argument to be taken seriously. And since fertility and demography were central to my argument, I went to Dillon’s bibliography because her essay engaged with reproduction the most. Using the Interlibrary Loan System, I churned up some older documents on the history of the Haitian Revolution. I also read Doris Garraway’s book—cited in Dillon’s essay—which provided a historical narrative of creoles and how they were portrayed as overly sexual, overly fertile beings. Garraway and Laurent Dubois’s bibliographies led me deeper into the archive of historical materials, to examine other eighteenth-century accounts of creoles in the West Indies—Edward Long’s extensive *History of Jamaica* (1774), which includes descriptions of the topography and population of the island, as well as French creole writer Mederic Louis Elie Moreau de Saint-Mery’s *A topographical and political description of the Spanish part of Saint Domingo* (1796) which was available in microform (English) and electronic versions (French).

Although these writings only made it into the footnotes of my essays, they still led me into the world of demographic and topographical description of the West Indies, which showed the anxiety about creole reproduction during that time.

I had reviewed the scholarly literature. I had found proof of demographic concerns about creole fertility in colonial writings. My final challenge was to effectively integrate ecological information about the land crab into my essay. I did this by locating an overview of the biology of the land crabs, and reading up on its reproductive-ecological patterns and behavior. When I read about the infinite factors that influence land crab fertility migration—everything from rainfall to road traffic patterns—I knew my ecological reading was on to something. I began to
review histories of ecological thought (Worster) and accounts of island biogeography (Quammen), integrating the ideas of naturalist Alfred Russell Wallace, Charles Darwin, and T.R. Malthus into my argument about species adaptation to ecological circumstances. These ideas help support my argument that ecology changes how we see fertility and space in Sansay’s novel. Furthermore, the ecological literary criticism of Timothy Morton, Matthew A. Taylor, and Simon Estok modeled methodologies for how to use ecology in literary criticism, particularly when the object of study has not been studied through an ecological lens.

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The revising process took me on a research journey that transformed my paper from a biopolitics paper to a new ecocritical reading of the novel, drawing on multiple disciplines, historical voices, and scholarly arguments. I presented a shorter in-progress version of this paper in November 2012 at the Society for Literature, Science, and the Arts Annual Conference and got substantive feedback from literature and science scholars like Laura Otis (Emory) and our very own Judith Roof (Rice). This article is in its final stages of revision for publication and has led me to pursue a dissertation on fertility and demography in nineteenth century American literature.