

Dr. Ashli White [00:00:05]:

Hi. This is Ashley White, and I'm a professor of history at the University of Miami, in Florida. My area of specialization is early North American history with a particular interest in the region's ties to the wider Atlantic world, which is what brought me to, *The History of Haiti and Its Revolution*. The book I'm going to discuss with Patrick today is my 1st book, *Encountering Revolution, Haitian, and the Making of the Early US Republic*.

Patrick Jean-Baptiste [00:00:40]:

My genealogy listeners are going to love this part of the episode because, we are going to do a deep dive on archival sources. So let's fast forward to the back of the book. Your essay on archival sources is just simply fascinating. Let's start with your difficulty at first in locating, Sendomengen refugees who migrated to the US, such as immigration records, passenger lists, etcetera. You write that for that time period in the 17 eighties and 17 nineties that you cover, few caches of refugee papers existed in the United States. That was a little bit surprising to me. How did you overcome those, archival, setbacks, if you will.

Dr. Ashli White [00:01:33]:

You are a historian's dream reader by paying such close attention to, footnotes and sources. But, yes, that's exactly right. Locating individual refugees, was a bit of a challenge in this book, in that in the late 17 eighties and early 17 nineties, the United States did not have, an immigration bureaucracy. If you think about it, the constitution had been recently ratified, and the kind of bureaucracy apparatus around immigration among other, trends wasn't really up and running. And so there weren't detailed immigration records or passenger lists for ships or even passports in this era through which, migrate scholars of migration for subsequent eras often rely to track individuals. So to find, exiles from Saint Domingue in US cities, I looked, at social history records are, that, for all of the cities. So Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Norfolk, Charleston, Savannah, and New Orleans. So I turn to, sources like Wills and Inventories.

Dr. Ashli White [00:03:02]:

These are these are interesting documents in that especially the Wills our our narrative, you get a sense of not only the person making the will, but the networks of people to which that person was tied and the individuals in the household. So while only, white men and sometimes white women were leaving Wills, it gave me an opportunity to see who else was in that household, often enslaved people, children, and others. And these Wills were narrating sometimes too the circumstances around their flight and even talking about, their situation on Saint Domingue before they left during the revolution and came to the United States. Inventories were really useful for getting a sense of the texture of their everyday lives, the things they had in their

household, the material culture, which surrounded them in their dislocation. So I hunted through wills and inventories looking for people who identify themselves as being from, Saint Domingue. I used city directories once I had some names to get a sense of where they lived in individual cities. I turned to orphan court records for children who had lost their parents, and I was unsure where they might have ended up. I turn to court records too to see if, refugees came into disputes with others in the city, then I could find evidence of their presence on the grounds.

Dr. Ashli White [00:04:39]:

So it took a lot of digging, quite frankly, And a lot of different types of records in order to find people, I was determined to make sure that that this, was a book about, people and individuals. And then we got a sense of the of, as I said, the texture of their lives, in the early republic. When white Americans first learned about the slave rebellion in 1791, there was a response of of Horror and also sympathy for the situation of white colonists on the island. But as the slave rebellion went on and it refused to be stopped, You begin to see commentary in, the US press in starting in 1792, Toussaint of questioning why, asking why weren't white colonists able to stop the slave revolution. And calling into question, their military aptitude, Why they weren't able to quash, the in the enslaved population, militarily. They also called into question and those who were immigrating, making a claim that, they needed to stay on the island in order to fix Things on the island, at least from the point of view of white Americans before arriving to the US. So you start to see a bit of an indictment Among white Americans, about the behavior of white colonists, at least Their how they were handling, events as they unfolded in Saint Domingue and sort of questioning then the reason for their Haitian. Were they fleeing? Were they being irresponsible? Were they shirking their duty? Right? Etcetera.

Dr. Ashli White [00:06:50]:

White refugees Pushed back against this. And one of the means to which they did so was to defend Their, military, actions to claim that they were acting As good soldiers, but the foe against which they found themselves, enslaved people in Saint Domingue, They cast them not as soldiers. They cast them as as monsters, as unchained tigers, as assassins. This is I'm quoting some of the language that they deployed, against enslaved people as a way to, one, Demonize them. Right? Playing on racist tropes, in order to invalidate Their their political and military Haitian, but also as a way to exculpate themselves to claim, like, like, in the face of such, as they put it, savagery. How could they possibly respond? Right? And and this is a way of of for white men in particular from the colony to defend their masculinity, to defend White Supremacy. Right? And as a way to court support from white Americans. They were looking for a kind of endorsement.

Dr. Ashli White [00:08:28]:

Right? And And revolution that they were not responsible for the situation in the colony, but they were also wanting financial Support. Financial support in the form of funds that they could probably, they argue, take back with them to the colony in order to fight against, black rebels and also support while they were in the United States. So you get this interesting conversation, around culpability and how masculinity and racism shape that in the US context.

Patrick Jean-Baptiste [00:09:06]:

You write that Paul Gilroy's book, *The Black Atlantic*, an excellent book, by the way, had a particular influence on you. How so? What was it about Gilroy's analysis, that you found so compelling?

Dr. Ashli White [00:09:22]:

Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* is It's an incredibly smart and and creative book. In it, he draws on a whole array of diverse sources to explore what he calls the sort of the pattern of movement, transformation, and relocation that he argues informed Black intellectual currents in the 19th 20th centuries and informed Modernity at Large. And there are aspects of this of this work that are certainly unique to the 19th 20th centuries and and really unique to, populations of African descent. But what I found so compelling is his way of characterizing the Atlantic because he lives among Britain, the Caribbean, Africa. And In the sort of space of the Atlantic, he emphasizes the dynamics of of intermixture, of instability, of mutability that I thought were really suggestive for how we should approach the age of revolutions, in the in the late 18th and early 19th century, in particular because, some scholars see this moment of the late 18th and early 19th Tree is the moment when modernity begins, the modernity that, Gilroy tracks so so eloquently in the late 19th 20th century. So, I took inspiration from his creativity, and his Approach to tracking that dynamism and why I certainly know Paul Gilroy. I try to infuse that as much as possible in my thinking and approach to, the impact of the Haitian revolution on the United States.

Patrick Jean-Baptiste [00:11:22]:

Two things 2 things in your acknowledgments, caught my eyes. The first you wrote was that a Scholar by the name of Jay Ritchie Garrison urge you to thank, quote, *Atlantically*, End of quote. Within the context of the Asian Revolution, how does it help for 1 to think *Atlantica*?

Dr. Ashli White [00:11:51]:

There are many different ways, I think, of thinking *Atlantica* and and doing Atlantic history. But at its heart, I think an Atlantic approach insists that scholars Consider the connections free or coerced that tied the Americas, including the Caribbean, Africa, and Europe together sort of across across and around and and through this oceanic space. And for me, this approach encouraged, me to to think beyond

imperial Boundaries. So instead of thinking of British North America as being British and within the British Empire, It it encouraged me, this Atlantic approach, to to to think outside and cross those boundaries of empire to to look at, in particular. Obviously, ties to the French, and that brought me as somebody interested in, the revolutionary era To thinking about Haiti and its revolution. Right? Clearly, scholars, who are specialists in the area, and Haitians, themselves know the tremendous import of this revolution. But I think The Atlantic approach provided me a gateway, to to consider the revolution, to think about how its, ramifications went beyond Haiti, beyond the Caribbean, beyond Europe, and in in the case of of of my work, deeply affected, the United States.

Patrick Jean-Baptiste [00:13:44]:

Another item you mentioned in the acknowledgments, that I wanted you to to to expand on Is what you call the narrative bridges between history and material culture. What's that all about?

Dr. Ashli White [00:14:00]:

This book had its beginnings as a as a research paper that I wrote when a student at the Winterthur program for early American material culture. Winterthur is a place that trains individuals to analyze and interpret Objects and, the research paper that that essentially became a dissertation and then a book began with my trying to hunt down and, analyze the material world of refugees from Saint Domingue in in Philadelphia. And all of the social history research work that goes into to studying objects, all those wheels and inventories, for example. Very much informed, the approach to that paper, to my dissertation, and beyond. And so there's a kernel of objectness, object method, and sensibilities, in this book, even though it's it's really not a book about about objects. And For historians, they're more used to using texts as the basis of of their evidence. To be sure, a wide variety of texts, from fiction to, what we might think of as more Quantitative, bureaucratic documents. But objects are are a bit of an outlier for historians.

Dr. Ashli White [00:15:33]:

And so and yet they shouldn't be. I find them to be incredibly, revealing about the past, providing us portals, to understanding history in ways that are Unique and sometimes fundamentally different from texts. But but that actually is something that emerges more in my my 2nd book, which It's about called Revolutionary Things, and it's probably a whole different podcast. But in the acknowledgments to this book, I I wanted to draw attention to the fact that, that for me, methodologically, and In terms of the ways I was thinking about narrating history, material culture Proaches were still very much a part of it, and I was extraordinarily grateful to all my professors, at the Winterthur program for such an extraordinary experience.

Patrick Jean-Baptiste [00:16:37]:

You write that Eric Foner was your thesis adviser, the well known American historian. What was that like? And I've always wondered about this. Could it go either way with thesis advisers in terms of how they shape your scholarship After you graduate

Dr. Ashli White [00:16:58]:

It was a tremendous experience to to work with Eric Foner. And you've read his work. So for for all the reasons you might facts. Having such a smart, mind and, extraordinary writer Weighing in on your dissertation as it's developing is is invaluable for for shaping its its content and its form. And I think looking back on that experience, I'm about 20 years, out from my, my PhD. I have come to appreciate, working with him even even more. In part because of the positive intellectual intensity. Right? That moment is is Fantastic.

Dr. Ashli White [00:17:51]:

But also the further one travels in in one's career, You realize just how much time and care it takes to train and and work with, graduate students. And so one has an inkling of that when one is a graduate student, but it I feel like it's only on the other I that one, comes to an understanding of of just how much it takes, to to train graduate students, responsibly. And and so I feel extraordinarily lucky, not only for the the intellectual engagement, But just for this sheer generosity, and in that way, I think he he reflects, the very best of The Profession.

Patrick Jean-Baptiste [00:18:58]:

You wrote that the United States, Because of its commitment to slavery at the time in the late 1700, felt the impact of the Haitian revolution almost Immediately, that, quote, Americans realized early on that the rebellion had important consequences for their own republic. And you also, cited, Jefferson writing hysterically to Madison that, if if if if the Haitian Revolution spread, that the the the black people basically will wipe out the whites, sooner or later, in in the US and that it was high time, for them to do something about it. Can you talk about that, please?

Dr. Ashli White [00:19:47]:

I use that quotation, from Jefferson writing to Monroe in the introduction because it encapsulates a dynamic that I chart throughout the book. 1st, Jefferson expresses an awareness, an acute awareness of what's happening in Saint Domingue, which reminds us of something that maybe for some readers might be counterintuitive that North America and the Caribbean are are deeply tied to one another in the 18th century. In some ways, One could argue that the Caribbean is closer to North America than, say, lands further west from the from the Atlantic Coast on the on the North American continent because the sea operated as a as a highway try taking news of people, and goods throughout or between these 2 sites in the 18th century. And in some ways, that was because it was actually faster, easier to move oversea in the 18th

century than it was to to move over land. So there's In that quotation, you get the sense of just how central the Caribbean was to the world view of people in North America, in this case, Jefferson. But in in the book, I argue that for people from all walks of life, from enslaved to, ruling classes like like Jefferson. The second aspect of the dynamic is Jefferson when he responds. Right? He's talking about, the question of slavery in the United States and what, events in Saint Domingue portend for for the US.

Dr. Ashli White [00:21:37]:

Right? And he has this premonition, this conclusion that, that will mean more in the United States too. And And that obviously, is crucial. And in hindsight, it is incredibly provocative, thinking about the US Civil War and what Haitian with Reconstruction and and all all the way to to the present day. But what I found fascinating about that quotation is It's sort of that last line. And he says, like, war is gonna come, but we should try to avert it. Right? And that, to me, suggests that, North Americans are thinking they are reacting to the Haitian Revolution and thinking about in creating, changing, adapting the new republic, in response Toussaint. So it's it's not just watching from afar, but it encourages and encourages people to acting. Jefferson obviously is acting on particular terms, using it as a way to argue against abolition and citizenship for for black people.

Dr. Ashli White [00:22:50]:

Other people, other individuals, other sectors will have different takeaways from the Haitian Revolution. And and slavery is obviously and abolition are key aspects of this. But as I try to chart in the book, A bunch of different, developments in the early republic. Everything from social and cultural norms to philanthropy to politics to territorial expansion, those are all influenced by the Haitian Revolution. In other words, the reaction to the Haitian Revolution in the United States is just as complex as the Haitian Revolution itself. So this quotation is meant to kind of get readers thinking about that Active engagement from people in the United States with with the Haitian Revolution in the 17 nineties and and early 1800.

Patrick Jean-Baptiste [00:23:50]:

So let's set the stage. It's 17 it's in the 17 eighties. Why was the new French Haitian Assembly So important to the, white and white adjacent population in Saint Domingue who were Socioeconomically divided into different groups with with divergent ambitions. So just kinda lay the groundwork for us and give us a brief A summary of the the the, you know, the, the petite, the petite blondes, and the.

Dr. Ashli White [00:24:24]:

Social tensions among the free population in Saint Domingue had been had been growing for for decades. So that when the Haitian Assembly was formed in in in the late 17 eighties, this became a a catalyst,

sort of added fuel to the fire of of this this discontent. And as you as you rightly point out, there are 3 distinct groups of of free people on Saint Domingue. The wealthiest and the most prominent are the Grand Blanc. They're they're the big planters who counter, the economic and political life of the colony. That said, they wanted even more counter, and and this amplified in the 17 seventies and early 17 eighties. Actually, their experience with the American Revolution and the way the French Open certain ports in Saint Domingue to freer exchange with North America. That gave some of these grand blanc a sense of even more economic potential.

Dr. Ashli White [00:25:38]:

And they've pushed back against the French Mercantilist policy called The Exclusive, which tried to limit with whom, colonists in Saint Domingue traded. And they were lobbying the Metropole for increased autonomy and control over the island. They wanted more Oversight essentially to set economic policy to make it freer and also to consolidate even more their their political control in the colony. So for so for several years, they had been agitating for this. Another key group of free people in the colony were the petitlons. They were Aspirant immigrants who we see a surge coming in in the aftermath of the 7 Years War, so in the in 17 sixties. These are men on the make, white Frenchmen who are looking to the colony in order to approve their economic and political Circumstances. But they they weren't made able to make the inroads that they anticipated either economically or politically.

Dr. Ashli White [00:26:56]:

And they chafed, quite frankly, under the thumb of of the grand blanc. They wanted more of a say in the colonial assembly so that they could set policies that, they felt would be advantageous to their interests. And then you have the gens de couleur, free people of African descent or mixed African and European descent who since Slowly since the early 18th century had been consolidating, economic and social gains. They're particularly prominent in southern the southern part of the colony. But after the 7 years war, You see increased legislation in the colonial government, and this is something which Grain and Petit Boc could agree that sought to erode, the economic and and social and civic gains of, Jean De Callout. And, actually, John Garrigues writes really fantastically sort of charting how this evolved over the decades. And Jean de Colleut, they are unable to put participate politically in the life of the colony. They are smarting from, laws that are increasingly, rolling back Any social gains, Jean de Colleut had carved out for themselves.

Dr. Ashli White [00:28:37]:

And Over the 17 seventies and 17 eighties, they're they're they're smarting from. They're sort of resisting this ever gratoning louverture draconian, racist Regine. And so you have this tense situation among these Three sectors of the white population, all of

whom Own enslaved people. Alright. And when The National Assembly, when I get word about the National Assembly happening back in Paris, All 3 groups see that body as an opportunity to advance their political gains. So Grand Blanc, are looking to that French National Assembly to gain the autonomy that they weren't getting under, under, from the king. Grand Blanc, they too are sort of wrapping themselves in the language of the rights of men and citizen To argue that they need more political participation in Saint Domingue. And Jean Du Colours, well, those men are arguing that as free peep, free man, that the language of the rights of man and citizen belong to them Toussaint.

Dr. Ashli White [00:30:06]:

And their competing interests And as they become more outspoken with the beginning of the the French Revolution, well, that ignites discord On the island, violence on the island among, this free population. And as the enslaved majority Are watching, those tensions and violence unfold, that instability among the master class. That affords enslaved people who had always resisted their enslavement. That affords them a kind of opportunity, a possibility to use, the History Own the masterclass, 2 advantage, essentially, to revolution

Patrick Jean-Baptiste [00:31:03]:

wrote that this book, Encountering Revolution, It's a bridge between 2 opposing ways of studying Atlantic history. We have colonial scholarship Framing things one way versus how the age of revolution studies says, forget that this is what we need to be looking at, methodologically, tell us about this sort of chain slash linear model versus This sort of web interconnectedness, that you fleshed out in your book, what are you getting at here?

Dr. Ashli White [00:31:46]:

Thank you for the the really astute question. I guess when I was doing the research for the dissertation and then became the book, I was I was influenced by the ways that scholars who Had an Atlantic perspective on the 17th 18th centuries, and even the 16th century too, truth be told. That they had this dynamic way of talking about that Atlantic sensibility. It's the way it Crossed imperial lines. There's a good deal of fluidity and transgression. Among What might sometimes be told is kind of these tidy imperial stories of the English Empire, the French Empire, the Spanish Empire, the Dutch Empire. You you get the drill. Age of Revolution scholarship, It it too had a had a dynamism a dynamism to be sure, but it because of the revolutions, it was really Event driven.

Dr. Ashli White [00:32:57]:

My colleague, Sarah Nott at Indiana, she describes it as kind of the hot narrative of the Age of Revolutions that You're tracking is thing one thing goes to the next, and the next, and the next, and the next. It's almost like you're creating this this little change. So The web



like nature, which is what scholars used to describe the Atlantic world and the connections that were being made and snapped, in the 17th 18th centuries. What kind of gave over into this mechanistic, chain, like, of moving from one Revolution to the Enacts, the American, the French, the Haitian, those that spread throughout Haitian America, etcetera. But In this book, and I would say in my work more generally, I'm interested in the ways that the Asia Revolutions operated as a kind of feedback loop. I was looking for something to encapsulate the messiness of Events unfolding, people reaction reacting, trying to interpret kind of the the uncertainty on the ground As I unfolded, which a chain in its very tidiness seems to to to, to miss. And so I was asking for in this book, that we bring that web like sensibility To to the age of revolution, I'm I'm not the 1st to do this and and, lots of other folks are interested in this similar endeavor, but it it struck me as a way to to appropriate the Atlantic Revolution More into that sensibility and also to recognize the ways that the Age of Revolutions We're still so deeply tied to those earlier eras in in some really fascinating and important ways.

Patrick Jean-Baptiste [00:35:01]:

As the as the Haitian revolution got in the way in the 17 nineties, thousands of centimangrins Became refugees and landed in US shores. Talk about the influx of how the influx of of thousands of immigrants Impacted various cities in the United States from, give us a sense of give us a sense of the social, racial, And Ideological Perspectives.

Dr. Ashli White [00:35:28]:

Already in 17 nineties, the new United States had witnessed Waves of different migrants, coming to coming to the new nation. But The arrival of the refugees from from Saint Domingue, they were they were distinctive in in some important ways, as you point out, from racial, social, an an ideological perspective. I think first is the fact that the exiles were multiracial. So you had white colonists, you had, Jean Du Callieux, and you had enslaved people, All of fleeing events on the islands for various reasons. Sometimes, Enslaved people, no doubt, were coerced, but the arrival of this multiracial population from Toussaint Domingue, That set them apart from, say, Metropolitan Frenchmen who were fleeing the French Revolution or migrants from Ireland or Germany or other sites in Europe. So that made them distinctive as They entered cities like New York, Philadelphia, Charleston, and elsewhere in 17 nineties. Second, they were considered Francophone. Right? So they were coming from a French speaking place.

Dr. Ashli White [00:37:00]:

Frenchmen had migrated Previously, but not really in in great numbers. There's a Huguenot migration in the in 17th century. You had an influx at the same time in 17 nineties of Frenchmen from, from the Metropole from France. But there was a way that, the exiles from Saint Domingue brought this infusion of what was interpreted as Frenchness and French Caribbeanness. Though, of course, as part of that, Enslaved people,

brought with them African culture and language too. The 3rd aspect that made them distinctive, is that they were coming from a site of rebellion slash revolution. And this question about what exactly to make Of events in Saint Domingue was something that was unfolding constantly in the 17 nineties and early 1800. Americans were following the unfolding of events very, very closely.

Dr. Ashli White [00:38:19]:

They picked up it on picked up on it in the in the newspapers. It's charted, in the press that proliferated up and down the East Coast. These newspapers were obviously read, but sometimes They were read aloud in coffee houses, which that oral culture helps us think about the expansion of prints beyond the page People who were perhaps not literate, but were hearing the news literally. And then there were sailors, refugees themselves who were telling stories about what was happening in Saint Domingue. And everyone knew By 17/91, August 17, 91, that there was a slave revolution, but the relationship between that slave rebellion and the revolution that was happening in France and how then the colonial aspect of the French Revolution played out in a place like Saint Domingue, but also, as you know, Guadalupe and Martinique. Well, that was up for constant Consideration as regimes in in France changed quickly from jahrandin to Jacobin. Right? And then to the directory. So It was this question about whether what was happening in Saint Domingue was a slave rebellion? Was it a Republican revolution? Was it something else altogether? And the exiles were Part of that debate, and that was particularly salient, in in North America, in the new United States, which Proclaimed itself to be a republic.

Dr. Ashli White [00:40:07]:

Right? So you have, within The very appearance and presence of this population, Americans, black and white, having to to make sense The ideological repercussions of this other political movement happening in the Caribbean and and what it meant for the new United States. What it indicated about its own commitments to Republican ideals like Liberty Equality. And so that made this Migrant group, while smaller in numbers, say, than, groups coming from Europe in 17 nineties, and certainly smaller than, enslaved Africans being brought to the United States in the Nineties and early 1800. Those factors, their multiracialism, their Franco Franco Caribbean ness, And the ideological context surrounding, their migration, That made them really distinctive and it made, I argue, their impact kind of outsized compared to their the population on SIZE. It left a big Toussaint. Just by being in these cities and encountering these individuals on the streets, one was confronted, essentially, with the Haitian Revolution as it unfolded, and that to me was just Remarkable to think about.