“Rayanos y Fronterizos: Monarchical People of Color in pre-Revolutionary Saint Domingue and Santo Domingo Borderlands.”

In spite of the rich work on the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) and slave rebellions in the Caribbean, the question of how people of African descent may have taken on a royalist stance (as opposed to a republican political ideology) in order to take up arms and fight for their freedom is one that remains, albeit contentious, in need of further examination. That many of the insurgents, specifically the leaders, of the initial 1791 revolts were royalist sympathizers is not unknown. Still, it remains a topic of debate and most importantly, one that needs further analysis and proof. In light of this and, in order to assess the potential of my dissertation research, I spent five weeks in the General Archive of the Indies (AGI) in Seville, Spain.

My preliminary research questions included, 1) In what ways were the Spanish authorities conceptualizing the revolts in Saint Domingue? 2) Were there any direct communications with the insurgents of Saint Domingue? 3) Were there any original French documents within the dossiers accompanied by Spanish Translations? If so, what does this imply about possible documents in the French archives? 4) Was there mention of royalist factions amongst the insurgents? If so, what were the Spanish reactions to this? 5) What was the rhetoric of the Spanish when describing any of the insurgent leaders with whom they may be in communication? 6) In what ways, if at all, were the insurgent leaders describing their own goals, political ideologies (if any), and grievances?
Once in the AGI, I began my research by mining through the *Santo Domingo* (one of Spain’s appellate court centers in Colonial Latin America), *Estado* (State), and *Gobierno* (Government) records in the AGI. I quickly realized these documents, which contain significant legal testimonies, political and military correspondences, and first-hand accounts of the revolution, were going to provide me with a solid foundation of the Spanish accounts of the events. What I didn’t realize was that I would come across important documents detailing a mulatto leader and his platoons arrest and eventual extradition from the Spanish colony. The military leader in question was Vincent Ogé, an elite mulatto who had traveled to France’s National Assembly to protest for his rights against the white planters from Saint Domingue. While I was, and in many ways still am, interested in what kinds of communication free blacks had with the Spanish authorities, the documentation I found concerning Ogé and his fellow mulatto conspirator Jean-Baptiste Chavannes, is critical.

For instance, when the Spanish colonial lawyers questioned Jean-Baptiste Chavannes on November 25, 1790, he was quick to assert his royalist and Christian stance. While his ideology is important in terms of understanding the complex political nature of the Haitian Revolution, as well as what Chavannes felt the Spanish authorities wanted to hear, what Chavannes’ testimony says about Spanish legal policies is perhaps more telling. The Spanish colonial government, it seems, is trying to strike a very careful balance between the French colonial authorities’ demand for extradition of these revolutionaries and what their Spanish legal system says about a fair trial. Thus, even though they want maintain good relations with the French colony, they also need to take Chavannes testimony seriously because, as the lawyers state, “we shouldn’t give faith to
the independence projects and supposed subordination to the King of England, but we have to be careful and know its not impossible.”¹ This statement shows that Chavannes is using the specter of independence-inspired British supporting factions in the French colony in order to try and improve his lot with the Spanish courts. In fact, the lawyers go so far as to state that the French mulattos are “more close to our favor than the foreigners as they have been born next to us and under the same climate and influences.”² When asked how many other times he had come across the border, Chavannes stated that “he had passed many times as a rayano (literally meaning ‘line person’) and fronterizo (borderlands person).”³ Thus, this important find is revealing of two things. On the one hand, there is a sense that people of color from the French colony are using the specter of royalism and Christianity in order to ascertain themselves as defenders of the Crown. On the other hand, what these legal testimonies also reveal is that many people of color from the French colony had frequent contact with Spanish people and lands, and understood their sense of being as more than just French or monarchical – they were in fact borderlands people. Although the kind of implications this may have for Haitian Revolutionary studies is yet to be determined, I am confident that the collections in the Spanish archives have much to provide for the history of this watershed event.

Working in the Spanish archives has provided me with a solid foundation with which to move forward in developing my dissertation research. It has given me a different point of analysis with which to begin a project that traditionally takes as a point of departure the various archives in France. These sources helped me to better

¹ Archivo General de Indias, Santo Domingo 1029, Joaquín García’s letter on Ogé’s and Chavannes arrest, Number 1: page 20.
² Ibidem.
³ Ibidem, p. 105.
comprehend the thoughts and motivations of various actors within the colonial
government of Santo Domingo as well as those from Saint Domingue. Examining the
various Spanish military, legal, and administrative accounts in which the colonial
authorities analyze the situation in the French colony offers new leads in understanding
the complexity of the revolts of 1791. My research also suggests that further research
entails a methodological framework of entangled histories that include not only the
Spanish, but also French and British empires.