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“Insolent, quarrelsome, noisy and troublesome”: women’s street fights and noise in St Barthélemy in 1835

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ABSTRACT

Like many port cities in the 19th-century Caribbean, the free port of Gustavia in the Swedish-Caribbean colony of St Barthélemy had a high ratio of women to men, many of whom were enslaved women or free women of colour, disenfranchised under Swedish colonial law. They were present in public life, and can be seen in many cases of breaking ‘vågfrid’ or participating in public fights, verbally or physically. Sexual honour was a frequent point of conflict in these fights, which could be directed to not just individuals, but entire households. When we examine these cases more closely, we can see how what might at first seem to be random arguments were often embedded in interpersonal relationships, where the street became the meeting place for people, but also an area of conflict between houses. Noise was a frequent consideration in these cases, especially the racialized noise of Black women, as Caribbean homes were very open and led to noise spreading quite easily. In this way, what were at first private disputes easily became public disturbances and colonial courts worked to discipline and control noise from Black women.

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On 23 July 1835, Susannah S. Cuquillie sent in a petition to the court of Gustavia, describing how Eve Gumbs had come to her house and accused her servant Eliza of throwing water on her seven-year-old daughter Arabelle. Eve Gumbs then stormed into Susannah’s bedroom and ‘after an abundance of language, which is most infamous, she walked round the House, in the same state of rage using the same language’.¹ After Gumbs found and started beating Eliza, another servant named Sucky and the petitioner Cuquillie came to her rescue. Eve then started to attack Susannah, ‘calling her Negroe Woman & other epithets which is not to be applied at no time to anyone to whom formerly it was a reproach, especially now forbidden by his Gracious Majesty’s orders having laid a trifle fine for the use of such epithets’.²

Later the same night, Eve Gumbs’ sister Priscilla came to Cuquillie’s house and started yelling as well. According to the witness George Fleming, Priscilla had told Sucky: “‘You abused my mother today and you kicked my sister. If I had been

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present I would have broken up my toe in you'. Sucky told her 'Get out you Salt pond whore you', wherewits Priscilla answered 'your mistress is a salt pond whore, for you told me so'.³ The 'salt pond' most likely refers to *Salinas* to the east of Gustavia, where salt water was harvested.

While Eve Gumbs was charged with breaking and entering, as well as insulting words, Priscilla Gumbs was charged with breaking *vägfrid*, meaning the peace of the road, a specific Swedish law. Eve Gumbs was sentenced to a fee of 41 dollars or 16 days in prison, whereas Priscilla was sentenced to a fee of 6 ½ dollars or 4 days in prison.⁴ They were however warned that if they were to be accused for the same crimes at a later date, they would be sentenced to whipping and deportation. According to the censuses of 1835 and 1836, Eve and Priscilla Gumbs, as well as Susannah Cuquillie, were all free women of colour, while Eliza and Sucky were enslaved. They lived in the lots 304 and 312, about 100 feet apart.⁵

In order to fully understand this situation, we have to widen our scope. The dimensions of this crime, specifically Priscilla Gumbs's crime of breaking *vägfrid*, was not isolated to just these women and onto the surrounding landscape. The victims, from the perspective of the Swedish colonial court, included everyone who had to listen to Priscilla Gumbs. It is clear that language was a central aspect of the case, but it was not just a matter of an attack on honour. It was also a matter of public exposure, specifically the exposure of White inhabitants to Black noise. In a colonial setting with an increasing legal equality, the court acted to maintain a racial order within the public landscape, that most often targeted the numerous free Black women of Gustavia. Here, noise complaints were utilized to enforce an order of respectability. In this article, I will present and examine other cases of women breaking *vägfrid*, the crimes' spatial conditions and the colonial system under which they were punished.

In 1833, after free men of colour had started to advocate for their right to be elected into the regional council, the Swedish crown decided to abolish any legal difference between free Black and White subjects in St Barthélemy, while still maintaining slavery.⁶ Formally, all free men were equal before the law. Yet, when we examine the cases of women arguing in the street, we can notice that racial biases remained, and that the court and administration worked to maintain order, in this case specifically an order against noise. As Lauren Benton has shown, the application of imperial law was uneven and messy, with local conditions often transforming the law in its application, which Fredrik Thomasson has examined in close detail in St Barthélemy.⁷

Life for free Afro-Caribbean women was in many ways a complex position. Daily life existed somewhere in between the dehumanizing practices of chattel slavery and the complete liberation from White violence and subjugation. Legal freedom was still followed by a level of dependency on their surrounding society to make ends meet. Additionally, as many were separated from families, outside traditional marriages and without men to represent them or their interests, they often had to defend themselves and their homes without any expectation of male support. They likely had a history of enslavement, or possibly family still under enslavement, while they also could be slave owners themselves. The fights and insults of Caribbean women must be understood within this context. In order to set the stage of these conflicts, we will first need to take a

step back and consider St Barthélemy's socioeconomic dynamic and status after 1815 and the gender demographics of Gustavia.⁸

Port town of women

The Swedish-Caribbean colony of St Barthélemy was a small, rocky island, deriving its income from inter-imperial free trade and neutrality through citizenship, rather than a large-scale plantation economy. Entering Swedish dominion in 1784 from the French empire, in exchange for trading rights in Gothenburg, it would remain under Swedish rule until 1878, when it was returned to France. St Barthélemy was a slave society, with roughly half of its population consisting of enslaved people, until the abolition of slavery in 1847. The Swedish state developed its most advanced colonial administration both in the colony and in Stockholm, and participated to a degree in the transatlantic slave trade.⁹ As the economy was mostly dependent on neutrality and smuggling, the lack of inter-imperial warfare after 1815 led to a slow but steady decline, in parallel with the general decline of the Caribbean sugar economy. After 1830, there was no Swedish profit made from the colony. The population declined, and already by 1835, less than 2000 people lived in Gustavia.¹⁰ Still, while the colony was not a profitable affair in the 1830s, and the cultural connections between the island's inhabitants and mainland Sweden were quite thin, the lives of the free and enslaved people of the colony required the attention of a Swedish administration and court.¹¹

The main reason why the women of St Barthélemy are a critical element for understanding the Swedish colony's history is because there were so many of them. Demographically, women generally outnumbered men within the colony for extended periods of time. This has been previously studied by Francine M. Mayer and Carolyn E. Fick, in their study of St Barthélemy's population before and after slave emancipation.¹² They correctly identify that a majority of the population were women, and that 65% of Gustavia's population was female in 1854. As they state:

By 1854, the general underrepresentation of males can be explained, in part, by the overall structural changes that resulted from emigration during the earlier period following Gustavia's economic decline and, in part, by the later attraction of employment opportunities (specifically in the masculine trades) that other islands, particularly Saint Thomas, offered for Saint Barthélemy's masculine population of 15–30 years. This later migration [...] began around 1850, only a few years after general emancipation, and has persisted until very recently. This external employment attraction no doubt had an equally strong effect upon the urban and the rural masculine populations.¹³

Much of this research still rings true, but there are two things to note. First of all, this migration was clearly observable already by 1835. Second, both in 1835 and in 1854, there was a much stronger pull for the urban population than the rural population, where young men could still rely on small scale farming and the enslaved provided labour.

Still, they demonstrate that there was a clear shift from 1787, when the male population was higher than the female, but that even at this time free women of colour were more prevalent than free men of colour. This underscores the prominent role of free women of colour in the predemocratic urban Caribbean.¹⁴ This is what Mayer and Fick refers to as the feminization of Gustavia, which they tie to 'the marginalization of Saint-Barthélemy, politically and commercially, as the island becomes more of an economic

Table 1. Ratio of women to men in Gustavia 1835 and the countryside 1838. Source: census of Gustavia 1835 and census of countryside (campagne) 1838, vol. 292, FSB.

Adults	Whites		Free people		Enslaved	
<i>Ratio of Adult Women to Men in Gustavia in 1835</i>						
East	59/30	≈ 2	82/37	≈ 2,2	51/24	≈ 2,1
South	60/35	≈ 1,7	106/47	≈ 2,3	56/22	≈ 2,5
West	136/79	≈ 1,7	143/66	≈ 2,2	167/61	≈ 2,7
Total	255/144	≈ 1,8	331/150	≈ 2,2	274/107	≈ 2,6
<i>Ratio of Adult Women to Men outside Gustavia in 1838</i>						
Windward	124/100	≈ 1,2	18/12	= 1,5	154/122	≈ 1,3
Leeward	131/100	≈ 1,3	7/3	≈ 2,3	51/33	≈ 1,5
Total	255/200	≈ 1,3	25/15	≈ 1,7	205/155	≈ 1,3

burden than an advantage for Sweden, who seeks to rid herself of it as early as the 1820s'.¹⁵

If we focus on 1835/1838, as shown in Table 1, we can see how children, meaning those under 16 years of age, was the only group that generally had strict numerical gender equality. Arguably within the country and among the elderly, meaning those over 64 years of age, there are inconsistent results with women generally outnumbering men, but there was no demographic group where men clearly outnumbered women. The most consistent results can be seen with adults in Gustavia in 1835, where the ratio between men and women was two women to every one man for the White population, and successively higher for free people of colour and the enslaved, up to two-and-a-half enslaved women for every enslaved man. In the 1830:s, Gustavia was in the clearest sense a port town of women, with 1143 women and 698 men, and arguably a port town of Black women, with 617 free Black women and girls consisting of 20,6% of the entire population of the city.

Gustavia was not alone in this tendency, as women tended to dominate many Caribbean cities. We can compare it with the Danish West Indies, where Neville Hall has identified similar numbers in Christiansted, Frederiksted and Charlotte Amalie. Yet arguably the Swedish island was even more dominated by women. For example, women represented 62% of the urban enslaved in St Croix by 1835, but the same figure was 72% in St Barthélemy.¹⁶

When we examine Gustavia geographically, as seen in Figure 1, we can see that the areas where women were the head of household, meaning the person listed first in censuses, were about as many as those led by men, with no apparent geographical differentiation between the different areas. 137 lots had women listed first, compared to 130 that had men listed first. There was an equal presence of enslaved people among both households led by men and women, with slightly more presence of more than five enslaved people among male led households; eight female led households had 6+ enslaved people, as compared to 13 male led households. We can also see that 79 of the 137 female led households had only people of colour as free residents, as compared to 48 of 130 male led households. When examining households with only Whites as free residents, we see that only 34 of the 137 female led households had no free people of colour, as compared to 53 of 130 male led households. By all indications, free women of colour were a prominent presence in

Gustavia at the time, not in the margins of society, but as a significant part of the population.

As I have demonstrated in a previous article on Gustavia, there were essentially no geographical distinctions between Black and White households, at least not in the form often associated with redlining and racial segregation found in North American cities during the 20th century. This can be attributed to a number of issues, but I believe it was primarily due to the quick and sudden establishment of Gustavia as a reputable free port within the span of less than twenty years. Thus, free people of colour, who became a rapidly growing demographic during the late 18th century, did not move into the outskirts of an already occupied city centre, but one which was in the midst of its own creation.¹⁷

Violent women and gendered spaces

There is a lack of studies within a Swedish context of physical violence or aggression between women. While this is based on a history of women being victims of physical abuse, there are surprisingly few studies that have investigated for example female murderers.

The anthology *Kvinnor och våld: en mångtydig kulturhistoria* by Eva Österberg and Marie Lindstedt Cronberg, demonstrates both the typical outlines of how female violence has been studied, but also its possibilities. Most articles depict women as victims or bystanders of violence, or activists for peace.¹⁸ Cecilia Riving however discusses how women as active participants in violence were often considered abnormal and mentally ill.¹⁹ Roddy Nilsson and Marie Eriksson have done an impressive study on women's violence during the 19th century in Sweden, where they have studied murder, assault, infanticide and selfharm in various forms. Nilsson explores how different subject positions can be attributed to the women, which often, but not exclusively, acted against people in their family in order to improve their position or escape violence.²⁰

There are some studies of women's violence in Caribbean historiography. Slaveowning women, many of them White, used violence as a disciplinary tool against the enslaved, which at times became displays of sadism, which Thomasson has shown several examples of in St Barthélemy.²¹ Just as in the Swedish context, there are studies on infanticide and poisoning, specifically from the perspective of enslaved women.²² There is ample evidence of Black women engaging in open revolt, for example during the 1878 St Croix Fireburn Uprising, where women took both leadership positions as well as engaged in violence.²³ There is however much room to study Afro-Caribbean women's violence under less extraordinary circumstances, as well as how colonial courts handled such cases.

Within a Caribbean context, we have to consider the cultural framework of racial relations and racialized language. Diana Paton has studied the use of insulting language in Jamaica in the early 19th century as an alternative way for White masters to humiliate enslaved women. Here, the insulting language was gendered and was meant to attack Black women with sexualized and animalistic comparisons, often regarding their genitalia, in order to denigrate their status as human beings. At times, Black women retaliated by answering and reclaiming respect for their bodies.²⁴

Insults are however often actions that have to be placed within a spatial context, especially in early modern settings. Doing so does not dismiss the sexual and racial connotations of these insults however, but demonstrates how they were placed within a setting that often involved not just the insulter and the recipient,

but everyone around them. Recently, there has been an increase in research on the street as a historical object of study. Spatial examinations of early modern cities have often focused on the households, venues, institutions or specific public areas, rather than the street as a space in and of itself, despite streets and roads being the connective tissue of these spaces. Additionally, women's place within street spaces has often been downplayed, as historical norms of women belonging to the domestic sphere have overshadowed the empirical truth that they were very much part of public urban spaces. New research by scholars such as Danielle van den Heuvel, Sanne Muurling and Mario Pluskota has sought to amend this. Many aspects of what can be seen in this research resonate with this article, yet the Caribbean context adds other layers to the analysis that both reinforces and nuances this research.²⁵

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge court documentation as a colonial archive and the necessary source criticisms involved in studying colonial court proceedings. Michel-Rolph Trouillot has in his classic work *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* discussed how the element of creating history has been a selection of silences, in which some things are by chance or by design left out of larger historiographic trends. He also mentions that even in what is and is not documented, a lot of aspects of colonial life are left out, due to the inherent subjective opinions of colonial courts.²⁶ There is unfortunately a great deal of warranted pessimism here. Even if we can access sources about those who cannot speak, the depiction of them is arguably another one of the partial silencings of history. Yet through the effort of Fredrik Thomasson and Gunvor Simonsen, court records have been used to highlight the lives of enslaved people and free people of colour in the Swedish and Danish Caribbean.²⁷

As previously mentioned, the primary methodology of the article is the close examination of cases when women broke *vägfrid*. *Vägfrid*, meant the peace of the road, as defined by Chapter 21 of *missgärningsbalken* of Sweden's 1734 civil code. The vast majority of cases found of breaking *vägfrid* in Gustavia can be divided into two crimes: paragraph 7 and 8. Paragraph 7 indicated an assault on an open road or street with cuts or punches, or tearing off someone's clothing, which was fined for 40 *daler*. Paragraph 8 instead indicated a verbal assault on a road, street or alley, or an insult with words or other means, fineable for five *daler*.²⁸ Throughout this article I will differentiate whether someone was convicted of §7 or §8, but as will be seen, the conflicts rarely remained exclusively physical or verbal, but shifted between them or occurred simultaneously, the fight quoted in the introduction being one example.

Breaking *vägfrid* was a fairly prevalent crime in the court of Gustavia and a relatively minor offence. It took place in public and was thus not bound to one specific household and was varied in its causes, which could be social, ideological, incidental, economic or otherwise. Therefore, it enables the social dynamics of women in the public spaces of Gustavia, and the colonial administration's view of them, to be examined through several examples with various causes.

Between 1835 and 1839, I have found 27 cases of people being convicted under Chapter 21, of which 13 were women and 14 were men. Of the crimes women were convicted of, 4 convictions were of §7, physical attacks, and 10 convictions were of §8, verbal attacks, indicating that there were roughly twice as many cases of verbal as physical assault. For men, it was roughly the same. Of course, there were cases where

someone was convicted of both crimes, as well as several where Chapter 21 was considered but there was no conviction.

Due to the 1833 law change, there was no indication in the court records whether or not someone was White or Black, but it is evident that it was still considered. When the race can be confirmed, primarily through a reference to the 1835 census, it will be included in the article. Regardless, noise from free women of colour would be seen as a recurring concern for the Swedish court. One of the examples already brought up in the introduction, between Eve Gumbs and Susannah S. Cuquillie, will be considered afterwards in my discussion.

Let us first turn to a few examples of what can straight forwardly be called street fights, meaning where the context was isolated completely to the street.

Fight in the streets

On April 2nd, Betty Lake and Susannah Cuquillie were fighting at the wharf. Vice Fiscal Mathews reported that Lake was badly beaten, but could not explain why the fight had occurred. As it was brought to court, the present witnesses could not explain it, and the court seemed to dismiss the Lake's and Cuquillie's explanations. Lake and Cuquillie were charged with 5 dollars or 4 days in jail for breaking *vägrid* §8, but Cuquillie was charged with 4 dollars extra for also hurting Lake badly.²⁹ One year later, Lake was brought before the court for fighting with Lucas Potter, attacking him with a knife, wrestling him to the ground and biting him 'in the street at the point'. In his report Mathews referred to the past incident with Cuquillie as grounds for a hard penalty in this case:

... as the said woman has no property whatever, and without any know means of living, and as she is a most insolent, quarrelsome, noisy and troublesome character, that she may be called before the Honorable Court and after punishment banished the island [sic] having already received a warning to that effect ...³⁰

Betty Lake defended herself by stating that she was cutting sugar cane with her knife, which the court acknowledged was dull, when she was attacked by Lucas Potter. The attorney noted however on the record that Lucas Potter was known to be a 'calm, peaceful and unirritable person' as well as pointing to bitemarks on his arm. Witnesses also claimed that Potter was merely defending himself. Due to the fact that Betty Lake had twin children she was currently breastfeeding, the court decided to delay her deportation and keep her in jail in the meantime.³¹

There was a similar case on the 8 May 1835, with free Black woman Piah, who was accused of public assault of the woman Prudence Marlter and publicly disgraceful behaviour. She was, as the court claimed, 'one of many slaves of English subjects in Anguilla staying here, who through the slave emancipation of 1 August 1834 been freed from bondage under the condition of serving as apprentices for some years'. For many formerly enslaved people in British colonies, the apprenticeship programme was considered almost a continuation of slavery, intended to keep the enslaved within their previous labour positions.³²

Piah had been allowed to stay in St Barthélemy, under the condition that she conducted herself decently. Mathews added however that she had been:

Very rude and impertinent, using the gaudiest and most obscene expressions, without consideration of to whom she spoke or who was present, and was additionally noisy and rowdy in the streets, for which he renewed his request for her banishment from the island.³³

For her crimes of two strikes against Prudence in public, Piah was sentenced to 16 days in prison, whereafter she would be banished to Anguilla to serve as an apprentice. As with Betty Lake her rude behaviour in public was most likely what justified her banishment.

In February 1835, Sue Johnson and Christina Howell came to blows over the man Anthony Clarkson, whom Christina Howell lived with, but whom she claimed had been treating her coldly in favour of Johnson. Witnesses claimed that they were cutting each other with scissors and that by the end Johnson was almost naked. None of the witnesses seemed to know who had started the argument, but they intervened and broke up the fight. Both women were convicted of breaking *vägfrid* §8, presumably because there had been no serious injury.³⁴

If we refer to the 1835 census of Gustavia, we can see another example of the complexity of living arrangements in Gustavia. Anthony Clarkson was 31, born in St Kitts and a free man of colour and the owner of the property. He lived with Christina Howell, 41, and Bellradam Howell, 61, born in St Martin, along with 12-year-old Sarah Ann Fox, born in St Barthélemy; all three were free women of colour. It is clear that Clarkson and Howell were not married, but had a sexual relation, which now had seemed to fade in favour of Sue. Presumably Bellradam was Christina's mother, but it is unclear who Sarah was, or for that matter Sue Johnson.³⁵

If we are to find a common thread in these fights, it is that these were in large part physical and spontaneous fights. They all had some form of physical violence and were all reported by the Vice Fiscal, as opposed to one or the other party petitioning the court for justice. With the exception of Howell and Johnson, there was nothing from the court records indicating that they even knew each other prior to the fight. Here, the street acted as a flow, where people with little connection ran into each other, and conflicts erupted practically for no purpose. In a sense, these are what most consider street fights or breaking *vägfrid*, despite being the minority of cases.

In these instances the court was strict, with two cases ending in banishment, and where defendants' manners and general standing was an important factor. This would make sense if we consider the street as a public space, where violent offences had to be discouraged, as it was used by the whole community. When we turn to the other cases, where the home was closer, the context becomes more complicated.

Home defence

When we begin to consider the home in street fights, we can start by returning to the initial example of Susannah Cuquillie and Priscilla Gumbs. Here, the line between breaking the peace of the home and the peace of the road is that Priscilla Gumbs never actually entered Cuquillie's home. Yet, the home is still central in three aspects. First of all, more than in the aforementioned street fights, there was an intention in seeking out the antagonist in their home, even if you do not enter it. Rather than a spontaneous or accidental meeting in the street, Priscilla knew that Susannah lived there. Second, for the Cuquillie household, there was a need to defend not just

themselves, but their private space. Even if the attacker did not cross the threshold into the home, they could still attack it with insults or even violence. This brings us to the third aspect, noise. As Priscilla's verbal assault spread vicious claims about the sexual honour of the Cuquillie household, not only did it let the neighbours in on the fight, it may very well have offended their sensibilities. Noise was certainly a factor in the street fights, especially concerning Piah and Betty Lake, but should also be considered within the context of houses and Caribbean architecture.

To begin with, let us consider the house and interpersonal connections. Many times, arguments started between people who knew each other. In the antagonism between Whites and free people of colour, personal details could be revealed. On 13 May 1836, free woman of colour Piah Flemming was accused of fighting with Carl Fischier, who she was a housekeeper for, when she went to retrieve some clothes. While witnesses Susannah Henry and Mary Johnson did not know what had happened inside Fischier's house, as they came outside they claimed he was only defending himself against Flemming's insults and attacks. She had also insulted the witnesses with words, which Flemming later agreed with the court that White women should not have to hear. Although Piah Flemming was convicted of verbally breaking *vägfrid* §8 and breaking the sabbath, to the cost of 20 dollars or eight days in jail, Carl Fischier was not given the legal protection and respect due to masters of households, since he and Flemming had previously had sex.³⁶

Close connections could also be important in the defence of those hurling insults. In May 1836, Francis Daniel was accused of harassing her neighbour with 'the most obscene blaguard language possible'. Mathews added in his report that '[a]s such conduct has become too prevalent with such persons, it becomes necessary to put a stop to it'. However, since Daniel was very remorseful in court and those insulted had not sued her, she was left off with a warning.³⁷ We can suspect from the wording of Mathews that Francis Daniel was a free woman of colour, and that he projected her behaviour onto free Black women as a group.

Similarly, on 19 November 1839, Sarah Henricksen wrote a petition to court, that she had been entertaining a friend by her front door, when Rosey Winfield appeared and started to accost them 'in the most ridiculous scandal of abuse', for what Henricksen claimed was hours. Her guest left followed by Winfield, who would however return later and throw stones at Henricksen's house. Henricksen asked the court to prosecute Winfield 'for the scandalous abuse, as well as for the stoning of the house, as the law may direct'.³⁸ Winfield already had a bad reputation, as she three years earlier had been sentenced for breaking *vägfrid* §8 when abusing Sophia Tortin with language 'too probious to explain to your humble Court'.³⁹ Witnesses clarified that Winfield had called Tortin, 'damned whore, leprosy bitch, thief whore', for which Winfield was convicted of breaking *vägfrid* §8, and sentenced to a fine of 5 dollars or four days in jail.⁴⁰ Needless to say, it was likely that the court would not be lenient towards Winfield. Three days later however, the case was dropped, as Henricksen and Winfield had already made amends.⁴¹ What such amends may entail is hard to tell, but it is clear that the personal connection between Henricksen and Winfield, that may even have started the fight, was crucial in letting it pass without reprimand.

Attacks on the home could sometimes be not just physical attacks, but verbal attacks as well, which can be seen in two incidents in 1835 when Tamzen Halley fought with Fredrika Bagge and Jean Simon Beaujoidais, free people of colour. On January 30th, Bagge

hit Halley with a stick, after Halley had followed her and yelled insults. Bagge was convicted of breaking *vägfrid* §7 on the of February 13th, and made to pay 42 dollars or spend 16 days in prison.⁴²

Before this matter had been brought to court however, on February 7th, Halley was yelling at Bagge from her doorstep ‘in very indecorous language’, when Beaujodais told her to be quiet, since he had women in the house. Halley instead became even angrier and called Beaujodais ‘mulattoe, rascal, hangman, shoemaker and also abusing his wife’. Beaujodais then approached to punch her, and as she was so drunk that she had to hold the door to stand up, she collapsed immediately. Soon afterwards, Abraham Daly, who lived with Halley, approached and attacked Beaujodais with a stick, which Beaujodais grabbed and used to hit Daly back.⁴³ Everyone were convicted of penalties, and Beaujodais was told to control his temper more. Halley was directed to drink less and be more careful with her fire. She however rambled about not having any money for candles, so she slept in the moonlight, and indicated that she would leave the island as soon as possible. She was no longer seen in the census after this incident, which does indicate that she left.

Here, the defence of the home came in two forms. First of all, we can see how after Beaujodais assaulted Halley, Daly attacked him in order to defend their household, a conflict which took place in the street. But second, Beaujodais would also claim that he was defending his home from the offensive noise of Halley’s insults. The street could thus be seen as a conflict space, like a battlefield, between the properties surrounding it.

Public noise

Noise was in many ways a key consideration in these cases, not simply implicitly but often explicitly. While usually insults were considered offensive due to their attack on the recipient’s honour or sense of self, as well as tying them to a degrading status, as Paton has argued, many of these cases were offensive even to those who they were not directed at. Beaujodais for example was initially not angry because of his exposure to noise, but because it offended the nature of his wife and her friends. Piah Flemming also had to apologize for offending the sensibilities of those White women who had to hear her insulting her master. It is likely also why Vice Fiscal Mathews decided to prosecute Francis Daniels, not because the offended party wanted it, but as a form of noise control. For both Piah from Antigua and Betty Lake, them being ‘noisy’ was part of the motivation for their deportation. When Priscilla Gumbs was accused of offensive language against Susannah Cuquillie, she defended herself by claiming that she had not directly talked to Cuquillie, but to her ‘domestique’. However, the court responded that she used the foulest language befitting the mob ‘without consideration of the person she addressed or those who could hear her, nor the time or place’.⁴⁴

On 24 May 1839, Frances Phipps, Cecilia and Mary were charged with noisy fighting in the streets, according to §8, and fined with 5 dollars or four days in jail. Mary was not free, but enslaved, and owned by the widow Dykers. After the trial they ‘and Mary in particular, were warned to conduct themselves quietly and peacefully, and in public places restrain from making noise and expressions hurtful to decency, if they wanted to avoid harsher responsibility’.⁴⁵ Here, it is clear that the act of disrupting the public space was tied to ideas about race and maintaining a slave society.

Most of the cases concerning men who broke *vägfrid* were generally concerned with either physical attacks or threats of such, less so than insults. There were however men who were accused of noise and disruptive behaviour. On 3 May 1835 Abraham Daly went to the house of White merchant William Haddocks and 'without any provocation or cause whatever abused in a most scandalous manner the said Mr. W Haddocks and many others'.⁴⁶ As he had already twice been warned to improve his living, but also showed up to court drunk, he was deported from the island.⁴⁷ Another example were Jean and Francois Daniel, who harassed shopkeepers Louis Caens and Mr Grandval, and threatened to enact 'revenge' on Grandval in particular, for which they were accused and convicted of causing 'a noise in the street', breaking *vägfrid* §7 and §8.⁴⁸ Male noise was however not treated as much of an issue as female noise. First of all, the issue of noise was brought up in much fewer cases of public disturbance for men. Additionally, the noise of men was not treated as much as a crime against respectability, but rather as a threat of potential violence. There were no discussions that other nearby are harmed by hearing insults, or that the men had to apologize for exposing the better classes to crude language.

It is necessary to consider the architecture of the early modern Caribbean at this point and how open it was to outside noise. Take the Swedish doctor Christopher Carlander's description of Gustavia's houses when he visited the Caribbean in 1787:

There is no conception of halls, more than for you gentleman about open verandas, which are quite good for getting some fresh air. Otherwise, you enter directly from the street or stairs into the main room, and then onwards, if there are more rooms. It is reminiscent of the most virtuous republics, of the Roman kind, for here all things are happening by open doors and often open windows, so that you can see what is done and eaten in every home, unless you are unfortunate enough to be near sighted like me.⁴⁹

Temperature and ventilation needs led to open houses with open floor plans and jalousies, in which sounds must have travelled extremely easily. Obscene language thus became an annoyance for not just one person, but everyone around.

For further context, Joachim Eibach has discussed the concept of the 'open house' as an early modern phenomenon. Early modern houses were often quite open in terms of activities and discussions, with no clear boundaries between what was allowed and not allowed to see. Homes were open to neighbours, which served as both social integration and social control, and government officials expected to have access to household spaces. It was not until the 19th century that European elites started to transform their homes into closed spaces. As Van den Heuvel points out, there has not been many examples of how this concept related to street life. The 19th century was also a time when noise control was becoming more prevalent in European cities, and was no longer accepted as a natural part of urban spaces. Public arguments and street fights were considered less acceptable in many large cities. Tobias Osvald has recently demonstrated how urban spaces in Stockholm became more regulated and policed during the turn of the 19th century. Here, I believe we can see how although the Caribbean houses were architecturally very open, they were becoming conceptually closed.⁵⁰ In the Caribbean context, noise control did not exist outside of the consideration of Black language as a source of corruption. The closeness of living between White and Black women, as can be seen in our census survey, was a cause of concern in the Caribbean, as White creoles began to adopt the language of

the enslaved and free people of colour. In Jamaica, many enslaved women and free women of colour were also punished for insults and foul language.⁵¹

To illustrate how Black noise was considered an issue, and how policing of language stretched beyond the insulter and the insulted, let us consider one final example. On the 27 November 1835, free woman of colour Patty Druilhets was prosecuted for insulting White widow Deborah Gumbs, as witnessed by Susannah Aertsen, Ann Wade, Mary Ann Vaughan and Mary Brown. They claimed that Druilhets had screamed at Gumbs from her window across the street, 'and with the grossest and most insulting words molested the plaintiff, without the least provocation from their side, and with such a loud voice that they could not escape from hearing it'. They did not wish to repeat what had been said. For the purposes of the case however, it was critical to establish that this had been a public insult, despite the fact that both Druilhets and Gumbs had been in their private homes. The court argued that as the insult had travelled across the public street between the two houses, it should be considered as a public insult and thus breaking *vägfrid* §8. Patty was thus charged for five dollars, or four days in prison. She was also warned that if she wished to remain on the island, she should 'leave the better classes unmolested'.⁵² Within Caribbean social structures, it was clear that 'better classes' meant Whites. Thus, the fact that Druilhets, a Black woman, had insulted a White women created a racial dimension to the crime, and it must have been understood that if such animosity towards Whites continued, it would be cause for deportation.

Patty Druilhets was actually previously known to the court in a case from May the same year, where the enslaved girl Sally had brought a pair of shoes to Druilhets, which were later claimed as stolen. Druilhets was acquitted of this crime, but the prosecutor did mention that she was known to be a troublesome woman, who harboured slaves and

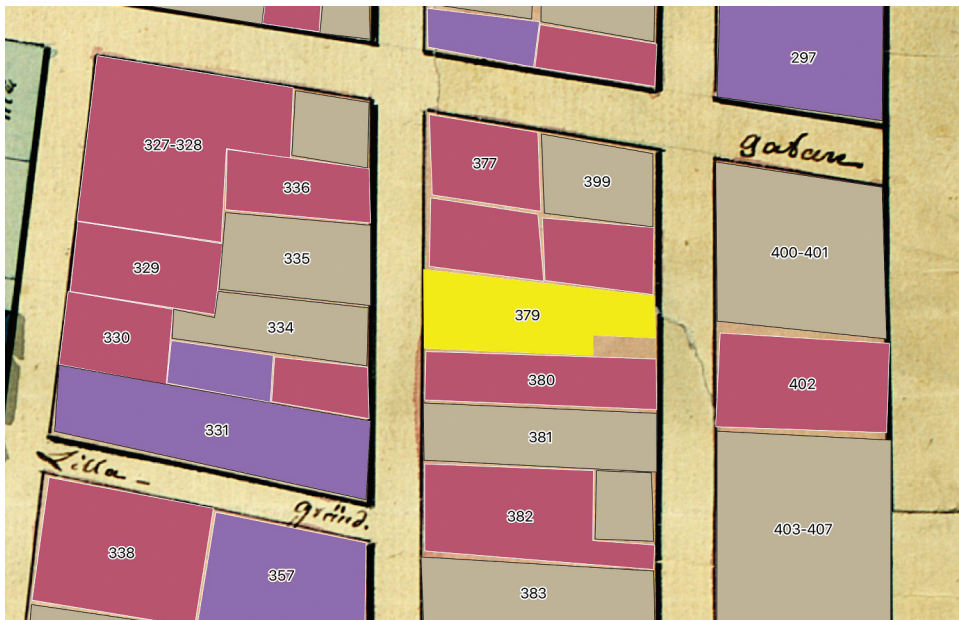


Figure 2. Households of Deborah Gumbs (yellow) and witnesses (purple) in 1835. Source: 1835 census, vol. 292, FSB.

people of ill repute at night. She was not charged for any insolent behaviour, but did receive a warning to not give reason for complaint in the future.⁵³ We can also extrapolate the rough placement of Patty Druilhets house, based on the residence of the witnesses. Based on this information, we discover that the property where Druilhets was presumed to live was listed as uninhabited by the 1835 census. If we compare her position to where the other witnesses lived, as seen in [Figure 2](#), it is clear that the noise of her insults travelled quite easily.

Whether or not someone in their home was insulated from the street or even from across the street, it was thus not simply a matter of someone in the street being unsafe. In fact, while the law necessitated that someone else was attacked by this noise, the effect this had on the sensibilities of others in the vicinity, especially women of some status, was an aggravating circumstance that was considered in the court proceedings. The need to enforce a racial and colonial order is even further visible when we consider that Gumbs was a slaveowning White woman, while Druilhets was a Black woman with friendly relations to other enslaved people. Druilhets's crime of making noise cannot be separated from the social and racial disparities between them.

Conclusion

As we examine lives of free women in St Barthélemy, they display agency and are actively participating in public society. As our quantitative data show, women were frequently the head of their households and participated in public affairs. Not a small number of them owned property and were slave holders. This was of course not universal, and there are at least two destitute women who had no means of support, Tamzen Halley and Betty Lake, not to mention the over 500 women who were deemed legal property themselves just in 1835.

If we look at the cases of breaking *vägfrid* that women participated in, most were not outright street brawls, and many were rather insults and public arguments. This can be reflected in the fact that most were closely connected to the homes and in the case of Patty Druilhets, no one was in the street at all. Spatially, we can see that women moved in the streets and interacted with both men and women. They settled business, entertained friends and interacted with their surroundings. Even if it was not exactly admirable, screaming insults from your porch indicates a simultaneous presence as a figure in both the public street and the private home. This border between the home and the street was critical for distinguishing between crimes, yet clearly contextual. In almost all cases, the fights seem to happen between women who lived in close proximity to each other, whether it was one or two blocks, or between neighbours in the same quartier. The cases when women had little connection to each other were in the clear minority, and even then it may have been simply elided by the court and witnesses. We can see that the streets were also spaces where grievances were aired, and that many women were often fully aware of the public nature of their insults.

The other side of this public nature was both the defence this would trigger, as well as the consideration that had to be made of one's neighbours and the exposure many of them had towards noise. Many of the women were repentant in court and not proud of their actions, although some remained defiant. It is clear though that this noise was racialized, with White women deemed more sensitive to and less deserving

of the insulting speech of Black women. Even after formal legal equality was established, it is clear that the court held up two different standards for White and free Black women. While many European cities during this time also started to crack down on public insults and urban noise, the multiracial and colonial contexts of Caribbean slave society meant that noise could not simply be noise, but had to carry the implications of racial contamination, and a subsequent need for colonial order. Comments from administrators such as Mathews, along with demands for women to improve their behaviour around 'better classes', suggest that they saw these incidents as part of a larger problem, and that Swedish laws could be used to discipline and prevent Black noise.

That being said, noise was not exclusively the concern of the White population. As we can see, some free people of colour such as Beajoidais were sensitive to noise being spread and were prepared to defend their households from insults against them and their families. Concerns of sexual honour is also something that reoccured in many of these conflicts, with 'whore' being one of the most frequent insults, which can be seen as tied to women's honour. In the conflict between Eve Gumbs and Susannah Cuquillie, accusations of sexual dishonour were not just between them, but between two households of women. Accusing a servant of working for a whorish mistress seem to be an insult to the whole household's sexual honour. In a small society such as St Barthélemy where many women lived outside of traditional structures, reputation was important. Still, the tensions bubbling under the surface in St Barthélemy would continue to erupt, often in the form of odious language. The street would remain a space to be contained and controlled, based on the colonial administrators' concept of racialized noise.

Notes

1. The quote is a description of Betty Lake, free woman banished from the island in 1837. Report, S A Mathews, April 25, 1837, vol. 235, FSB, 265–6.
2. Petition, July 23, 1835, vol. 233, Fonds suédois de Saint Barthélemy, Archives nationales d'outre mer, Aix-en-Provence, 385–6. This archive will be referred to as FSB as of now. This was corroborated by witnesses who stated that Eve had yelled "I am rightly served, for I was told not to commerce with these negroe wenches Mrs. Cuquillie and her Servants". See court minutes, §10, July 24, 1835, vol. 233, 345.
3. Court minutes, §10, July 24, 1835, vol. 233, 345.
4. The "dollars" refer to Spanish *reales*, which were the standard currency of the Caribbean during this time. At this time, both the Spanish *reales* and United States dollars consisted of roughly 25 g of silver, which was equivalent to 4 riksdaler in Sweden. Since the sentences set by the Code of 1734, applicable in the colony, directly translated daler to dollars, the penalties were roughly four times as expensive in St Barthélemy as in Sweden. Roughly translated into today's prices, Eve was sentenced to 450 000 SEK while Priscilla was sentenced to 70 000 SEK. The time to sit off the penalty in prison was the same however in mainland Sweden and in the colony, thus creating a larger incentive to not pay the fines. Price indexes are by the model found in historia.se, created by Rodney Edvinsson. For more on St Barthélemy's currency model, see: Olrog, *Med svensk krona*.
5. Census of 1835 and 1836, vol. 292, 49 & 108. There is a White woman called Susanna living in 312, but it is hard to determine whether or not she was the same person in the court case.
6. Thomasson, *Svarta St: Barthélemy*, 229–36.
7. Benton, *A Search for Sovereignty*; Benton, *Law and Colonial Cultures*.

8. For some examples of recent studies of women's conditions in the predemocratic Caribbean, see: Mair, Beckles, and Shepherd, *A Historical Study of Women in Jamaica*; Candlin and Cassandra, *Enterprising Women*; Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*; Paugh, *The Politics of Reproduction*; Walker, *Jamaica Ladies*; Morgan, *Reckoning With Slavery*.
9. By advanced colonial administration, I mean that in contrast to the other overseas colonies of New Sweden and Cabo Corso, St Barthélemy had a separate legal framework, more appointed administrators and specific regulations of governance, as well as the governance of the Colonial Department. It could be argued that the colonization of Sápmi also involved a major administrative apparatus, but I do not consider it as separate from the general administration as that of St Barthélemy, at least by the 19th century.
10. Pålsson, "Diversity and division".
11. For more St Barthélemy's Swedish history, see: Hellström, "... ått alla christliga förvanter ..."; Wilson, *Commerce in Disguise*; Pålsson, *Our Side of the Water*; Mulich, *In a Sea of Empires*.
12. Mayer and Fick, "Before and After Emancipation," 251–73.
13. Mayer and Fick, "Before and After Emancipation," 258–60.
14. Raapke, "Something old, something new," 49–61; Raapke, "Petites affaires"; Newton, *The Children of Africa in the Colonies*.
15. Mayer and Fick, "Before and After Emancipation," 264. Here, I think Mayer and Fick is misplacing the cause and effect. The growing presence of women did not cause the island to become commercially marginalized, but rather post-Napoleonic peace time caused the island to be commercially useless and undermined male maritime jobs. Politically also, the island was always considered marginal, even during its commercial height.
16. Hall, *Slave Society in the Danish West Indies*, 88–93.
17. Pålsson, "Diversity and division". See also: Pérotin-Dumon, *La ville aux iles, la ville dans l'île*.
18. Österberg and Cronberg, *Kvinnor & våld*.
19. Riving, "Ideal och avvikelser," 88–109.
20. Nilsson, "Arsenic the size of a pea," 97–118. See also: Nilsson, and Eriksson, *Ilcka, desperation och lömska försåt*.
21. Thomasson, *Svarta S:t Barthélemy*, 28–46.
22. Bryson, "The Art of Power"; Weaver, "She Crushed The Child's Fragile Skull"; Morgan, *Reckoning With Slavery*, 215–28.
23. Marsh, "A Socio-Historical Analysis of the Labor Revolt"; White, "Remembering Queen Mary". See also: Sheller, "Quasheba, mother, queen" for several examples of women in violent protests in Jamaica.
24. Paton, "Gender, Language, Violence and Slavery," 246–65.
25. Heuvel, *Early Modern Streets*, 3–28; Heuvel, "Gender in the Streets"; Muurling, *Everyday Crime*. See also Heuvel's research program "The Freedom of the Streets: Gender and Urban Space in Eurasia 1600–1850": <https://www.freedomofthestreets.org/>. Accessed March 17, 2023.
26. Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*.
27. Thomasson, *Svarta S:t Barthélemy*; Simonsen, *Slave Stories*.
28. See note 4.
29. Report, S A Mathews, April 5, 1836, vol. 234, FSB, 375; court minutes, §3, April 8, 1836, vol. 234, FSB, 365–6.
30. Report, S A Mathews, April 25, 1837, vol. 235, FSB, 265–6.
31. Court minutes, §8, April 28, 1837, vol. 235, FSB, 249. "... av Åklagaren witsordades så som en stilla, fredlig och oförlig person ...".
32. Heumann, "Riots and Resistance".
33. Court minutes, §4, May 8, 1835, vol. 233, FSB, 566.
34. Report, S A Mathews, February 16, 1835, vol. 233, FSB, 688; court minutes, §2, February 17, 1835, vol. 233 FSB, 677–82.
35. Census of 1835, vol. 292, FSB, 63.
36. Court minutes, §2, May 13, 1836, vol. 234, FSB, 500–1; report, May 8, 1836, vol. 234, FSB, 514–5.

37. Report, S A Mathews, May 11, 1836, vol. 234, FSB, 513; court minutes, §1, May 13, 1836, vol. 234, FSB, 499–500.
38. Petition, Sarah Henricksen, November 11, 1839, vol. 236, FSB, 324–5.
39. Petition, April 6 1836, vol. 234, FSB, 372–3.
40. Court minutes, §1, April 8, 1836, vol. 234, FSB, 364–5.
41. Court minutes, §3, November 22, 1839, vol. 236, FSB, 320.
42. Court minutes, §3, February 13, 1835, vol. 233, FSB, 696–8.
43. Court minutes, §2, February 17, 1835, vol. 233, FSB, 668–77.
44. Court minutes, §10, July 24, 1835, vol. 233, 348.
45. Court minutes, §11, May 24, 1839, vol. 236, FSB, 376–7.
46. Report, S A Mathews, May 6, 1835, vol. 233, FSB, 575.
47. Court minutes, §3, May 8, 1835, vol. 233, FSB 564–5.
48. Report, S A Mathews, August 17, 1839, vol. 236, FSB 152–3.
49. Carlander, Resan till S:t Barthélemy, 70. Similar descriptions can be seen of 19th century Caribbean homes as open. See: Ross, “Caribbean Colonial Architecture,” 25–7.
50. Eibach, “Das offene haus”; Heuvel, *Early Modern Streets*, 21; Pluskota and Muurling, 197; Osvald, *Stadens gränsplatser*. Regarding urban noise control, see: Richardson, “Sensing the street,” 83–8; Garrioch, “Sounds of the city”.
51. Mair, Beckles, and Shepherd, *A Historical Study*, 172; 235; 271.
52. Court minutes, §12, November 27, 1835, vol. 233, FSB, 316–8.
53. Court minutes, §14, May 22, 1835, vol. 233, FSB, 480–3; Court minutes, §5, June 12, 1835, vol. 233, FSB, 480–3.

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