

# Traveling to “Caribbean Sweden”\*

– St. Barthélemy as Tourist and Tax Paradise

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“Underbart att vara här, helt otroligt att detta varit svensk mark. Synd vi inte behöll ön Tack för att ni bevarar historien!!”

[Wonderful to be here, unbelievable that this was Swedish soil. Shame we didn’t keep the island Thanks for preserving the history!!]<sup>1</sup>

I FOUND THIS ENTRY IN THE GUEST BOOK of the Wall House Museum in Gustavia, the capital town of the West Indian island St. Barthélemy (Fig. 1). The museum is located in a recently restored building from the period when the island was under Swedish rule (1784–1878).<sup>2</sup> Its address is the corner of Rue de Piteå (named after the island’s twin city in northern Sweden; the original Swedish name was Köpmansgatan) and Place de Vanadis/Vanadisplatsen (after the frigate “Vanadis,” the last Swedish war ship that left the island in 1878<sup>3</sup>). It is the only public museum on the island and displays historical artifacts. The quoted entry, written by a Swedish tourist on June 16, 2016, is telling as it represents the Swedish discourse about its former colony in several significant respects: The experience of the place as “underbart” (“wonderful”) in its double meaning of great and pleasant, but also almost unreal; the description of the fact of Swedish colonialism in the Caribbean as surprising, or “otroligt” (“unbelievable”); the nostalgia pertaining to the loss of the territory (“shame we didn’t keep the island”); and the questions of historiography and commemoration: how does one preserve, or “bevarar,” the island’s Swedish legacy?

These four points form a frame within which I want to discuss the issue at hand: Swedish tourism to St. Barthélemy (St. Barths, St. Barth, or St. Bart for short), and related imaginations and memories of the colonial past. The guest book entry resonates with the findings of recent scholarship that attests to Sweden (and more generally to Scandinavia) an exceptionalist view of colonial history. Such narratives of exceptionalism stress the small scale harmlessness or mere complicity with other colonial powers concerning Swedish involvement in European overseas expansion, race ideologies, and the enslavement of Africans and their descendants (Loftsdóttir &

\* “Ett karibiskt Sverige,” Svenska Dagbladet, November 8, 2013: <https://www.svd.se/ett-karibiskt-sverige>. Unless noted otherwise, all online sources have been accessed on July 1, 2018.

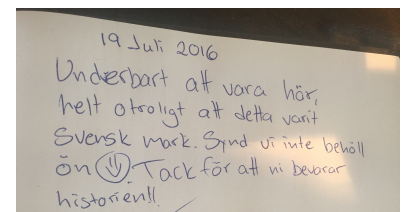


Figure 1: Entry in the guest book of the Wall House Museum in Gustavia. All photos are my own, taken on a research trip to St. Barthélemy in November 2016.

Jensen 2012; McEachrane 2014; Palmberg 2009). Knowledge about St. Barthélemy in particular and about the system and consequences of transatlantic slavery and trade in the Caribbean in general, remains limited in Sweden, except for those with a special interest in the topic. I want to argue that the museum guest book entry is representative for this tendency insofar as it speaks of the genuine surprise, or disbelief, of Swedes when confronted with colonial history. It expresses an ignorance that is perceived as unproblematic and free of shame, due to the assumption of a position of innocence.

I have elsewhere introduced the term “ex-colony tourism” (Körber 2017) to study, for the Danish context, what Bob McKercher and Patrick d’Espoir Decosta have described as “the lingering effect of colonialism for tourist movement” (McKercher, and Decosta 2007). The authors are primarily concerned with a quantitative study to prove how travel behavior can be impacted by feelings of affiliation towards former colonies. My research suggests that such feelings of affiliation are shaped and perpetuated by tourist discourse and practices. This article’s findings are based on the study of tourist advertisement, articles in travel sections of Swedish newspapers, and travel reports, as well as on fieldwork conducted in the former Scandinavian territories in the West Indies and in West Africa. Tourism has proven an apt opportunity to study the impact of Scandinavian colonialism, not only on the former overseas territories, but also on Scandinavian self-representations. Ex-colony tourism is an interesting case in that it aims to balance the recognition of a potentially uncomfortable legacy on the one hand and a cheerful and pleasant experience on the other. Indeed, what the island’s self-representations as a travel and investment destination have in common with representations of the former colony in Swedish travel-related publications is their evocation of imaginations of a Caribbean “paradise.” But what are the implications for an understanding of the Swedish colonial legacy when St. Barthélemy is described as the epitome of a Caribbean “paradise” destination?

### *St. Barthélemy and Sweden: Past and Present*

The small island St. Barthélemy in the Lesser Antilles came under Swedish rule in 1784, when France traded the barely inhabited island for trading rights in the Swedish port of Göteborg, up until 1878, when it was transferred back to France for a symbolic sum.<sup>4</sup> Its capital Gustavia is named after king Gustav III (1746–1792) under whose rule the island became a Swedish colony. Around 1800, when St. Barthélemy prospered after the Swedes had declared Gustavia a free port, the town was designed and built up from scratch, becom-

ing one among the seven biggest Swedish cities at that time. Due to the island’s topography and lack of fresh water, it has never had large plantations. As a result, no large numbers of enslaved workers of African descent lived on the island. This sets St. Barthélemy apart from most of the Caribbean. Enslaved people were, however, traded in the port of Gustavia.<sup>5</sup> In the wake of the abolition of slavery in 1847, most people of color left the island; it is a common pattern that employment opportunities were rare and working conditions dire for the newly emancipated laborers in the Caribbean and in the Americas in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially so on arid and poor St. Barthélemy.<sup>6</sup> As a consequence, St. Barthélemy is one of the few territories in the Caribbean with a white majority. No sites or institutions on the island are dedicated to the remembrance of slavery and the slave trade, in contrast to Guadeloupe, where the new museum “Mémorial ACTe: Caribbean Centre of Expression and Memory of Slavery and the Slave Trade” was inaugurated in 2015. St. Barthélemy is not represented in the museum’s permanent exhibition, which is interesting insofar as St. Barthélemy was part of the French overseas department (Département d’outre-mer) Guadeloupe until 2007, when St. Barthélemy seceded and received the – more autonomous – status of overseas collectivity (Collectivité d’outre-mer) of France.<sup>7</sup>

The Swedish coat of arms, the “tre kronor” [three crowns], is part of the coat of arms of St. Barthélemy, alongside the French lilies and the Maltese cross (Fig. 2). The Swedish flag appears likewise in front of all official buildings, alongside that of the island, the French flag, and the EU flag (Fig. 3). Apart from these symbolic representations, the Swedish history of St. Barthélemy is visible in the double street signs in Gustavia (Fig. 6). The street names from the original town plan by government secretary and physician Samuel Fahlberg (1758–1834) were re-installed in the 1960s by the then chairman of the Swedish St. Barthélemy Society<sup>8</sup>, above the French signs (Wall & Wall 1999, 77). Every year in November, a Swedish festival takes place, the so-called “Piteådagen” celebrates the partnership with the northern Swedish town Piteå<sup>9</sup>, and includes the race “Gustavialoppet” (Fig. 7). One visible link to the Swedish legacy was lost in 2016 when the airport, formerly “Aéroport Gustaf III” (after the aforementioned king) was re-named “Aéroport Rémy de Haenen” (after the adventurer and entrepreneur who was the first to land a plane on the island, to open its first hotel, and later to become mayor of St. Barthélemy). Plans exist however to lay out a “Swedish park,” “L’Éspace Gustav III,” on the site of former Fort Gustav (Fig. 3).<sup>10</sup>

There are no official political or diplomatic ties between Sweden and St. Barthélemy today except for an honorary consulate on the island. The partnership with Piteå and the twin associations



Figure 2: Signpost with the St. Barthélemy coat of arms and the view of the harbor, outside of Gustavia.



Figure 3: The Swedish, French, EU, and St. Barthélemy flags outside the Hôtel de la Collectivité (city hall) in Gustavia, with a view of Fort Gustav, one of the three forts built during the Swedish period.

"St:Barthélemysällskapet" (the Stockholm-based St. Barthélemy Society) and "l'ASBAS" (Association Saint Barth des Amis de la Suède) secure the exchange of knowledge and the maintenance of friendly relations. It is important to note that the particular postcolonial relationship between the two places is characterized by the absence of any memory of aggression on both sides. The first French settlers were barely impacted by the arrival of and administration by the Swedish<sup>11</sup>, and the Swedish period ended with a peaceful retrocession and a swift departure of the few remaining Swedes. Those who were impacted the most by power shifts and trading systems in the Caribbean during the era in question were, first, indigenous ethnic groups, and soon after, enslaved African laborers and their descendants. Neither of these two groups, from whose perspectives narratives of postcolonial friendship and innocent colonialism could be challenged, is comprehensively represented in the island's memory culture of the Swedish period.<sup>12</sup>

### *Paradise Tourism*

The selling point of St. Barthélemy to – the admittedly few – Swedish tourists visiting the island is its Swedish legacy, kept alive by the symbolic representations and initiatives mentioned above, and its status as a Caribbean "paradise." There is a commonsensical understanding of what a tropical "paradise" destination looks and feels like: sun, beach, palm trees, leisure, abundance of food and drinks, and a feeling of timelessness and seclusion. "Caribbean paradise," "Petit paradis pour milliardaires," "tropical paradise," are but a few of the headlines that turn up when one does an online search on "St. Barthélemy." But where does the concept of a "paradise" destination come from, and what does the paradise metaphor imply?

Sharae Deckard's book *Paradise Discourse, Imperialism, and Globalization: Exploiting Eden* (2009) is one example of research that points to a complicity of Western concepts of "paradise" with colonialism and capitalism.<sup>13</sup> Deckard explains how imaginations and the search of an earthly paradise first motivated European overseas expansion, exploration, and imperialism. In the wake of colonization, imaginations of an exotic Garden of Eden shifted to the consumption of "colonial produce." Finally, the opening up of former tropical colonies for tourism, real estate, and investment can be understood as consumption of the destination itself, and of connected consumer goods. As there were no big plantations, there has never been large-scale production and commodification of so-called colonial produce on St. Barthélemy.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, the commodification of the island itself, as tourist destination and investment, and the development



of an island brand represented by fashion, cosmetics, and lifestyle labels and shops, many of whom bear the island's name, is especially pronounced in the case of St. Barthélemy. One instance of a clear connection of the island brand and imaginations of "paradise" is the island's first and most famous hotel, *Eden Rock*.<sup>15</sup>

The consumption of paradise, not least in the form of modern mass travel, can be said to bear within itself the risk of loss or destruction of paradise, which generates a perpetual desire for its recreation. In the case of ex-colony travel, the reaction to a loss of empire and national glory can take the form of "colonial nostalgia" (Lorcin 2012) or "(post-) colonial melancholia" (Gilroy 2005), recognizable in instances when former colonies are described as the "lost paradise" (Thisted 2009). Thus a paradox lies at the very core of "paradise tourism" to former colonies: the attempt to keep intact, or to recreate, what is already lost (cf., for the example of the U.S. Virgin Islands, the former Danish West Indies, Nonbo Andersen 2013 and Hansen Østergaard 2017). In other words, the search for Eden implies the earlier expulsion from paradise, and can be understood as a wish to return to a state of innocence. Imaginations of paradise in the wake of the Christian tradition carry such ideas of guilt and innocence: feelings of nostalgia for a natural state before the original sin. The "sin" in the context of "paradise tourism" lies in the double appropriation of a territory: first by colonialism, and then by tourism; a guilty deed that is glossed over in tourism-related discourse. Tourism is explicitly marketed as innocent pastime.

The intertwining of travel practices, capitalist consumption, nostalgia, and discourses of guilt and innocence is especially valid for tourism from former colonial metropolises to former tropical colonies. Ex-colony tourism adds extra dimensions to the narrative of the lost paradise: the loss of territory and power, the imaginations of national greatness and glory, and the confrontations with past wrongdoings and ensuing guilt. However, tourism managers and tour sellers have vested interests in using and reframing existing historical bonds in a way that assuages guilt and suggests that, in the present, former colonizers and colonized get along with each other. My study of local and Swedish sources suggests that the way in which natural and historical conditions have been represented has contributed to framing St. Barthélemy as quintessential Caribbean tourist paradise.

### *St. Barthélemy and Tourism*

The by far most important economic sectors in St. Barthélemy are high-end tourism and real estate.<sup>16</sup> Aggressive development started

in the 1950s, when members of the affluent and influential Rockefeller family bought and converted large patches of inarable land into the family’s winter domicile, soon to be followed by others on the lookout for their personal Caribbean paradise. Many previously poor local farmers got rich by selling their land.<sup>17</sup> The small island can only be reached by private transportation, including one ferry and light propeller aircraft. There is no public transport on the island, and strict building regulations prohibit the construction of larger housing or hotel units as well as the privatization of beaches. The island’s 9,000 residents enjoy a high average standard of living and very low crime rates. Roughly half of the residents descend from the first settlers of the 18<sup>th</sup> century who arrived from France and other Caribbean islands. The other half comes from Metropolitan France and has been arriving since the post-war economic boom. None of the approximately ten present Swedish residents on the island descends from the Swedish era.

Most tourists are North American and French, and there is a growing number of wealthy, often famous, international villa owners who benefit from the island’s (relative) seclusion. French sociologists Bruno Cousin and Sébastien Chauvin show in their article in the anthology *Geographies of the Super-Rich* (2013) how political and economic decision-making by local, immigrant, and international jetset elites on St. Barthélemy shapes and maintains the island’s exclusivity, in the form of branding strategy and of *de facto* spatial segregation. The dominant accommodation model is small-scale hotels and rental villas. There is no charter or all-inclusive tourism; instead there is a big market of agencies for “personalized” stays.<sup>18</sup> Restaurants and shopping opportunities for international luxury brands are abundant, and customers benefit from tax exemptions dating back to the Swedish period.

### *Swedish Tourism to St. Barthélemy*

Only a very small number of St. Barthélemy tourists come from Sweden. As far as I know, there is no data to prove a numeric “lingering effect of colonialism” (McKercher and Decosta 2007). The chairman of the St. Barthélemy Society Roger Richter told me that small increases occur whenever travel reports are published in one of the major Swedish newspapers, but that interest subsides in between such articles. Except for the welcome signs at the airport (Fig. 4), I did not notice any special offers for Swedish tourists on the island. Springtime Travel, a Swedish agency specialized in active tours, is one of the few agencies offering trips with a special focus on St. Barthélemy. They have for several years been guided by Roger Richter and usu-

ally take place in November to enable participation in the celebrations of the annual Swedish Weekend, including the 10 kilometer “Gustavialoppet” race. At other times, the island is one of several destinations of package tours, cruises and sailing trips. Yet other Swedish tourists might visit the island as individual travelers.

Beginning with a short summary of my findings, I will now turn to a more thorough analysis of a selection of newspaper articles from travel sections, websites of travel agencies, and blog entries. Apart from observation and participation on my trip to the island in November 2016, they have been my main sources to study how the Swedish colonial legacy on St. Barthélemy is portrayed. First, there is a tendency to treat the colonial enterprise in the Caribbean as a curious and not too serious chapter of Swedish history, and the term “colonialism” is used in a carefree manner. In other texts, the term colonialism is replaced by “history,” often with an additional adjective such as “rich” or “interesting.” Most of these accounts of Swedish history do not mention any agents, as if processes of colonization and transfers of power happened without political and economic strategy. The transatlantic slave trade, slavery, and its aftermaths, are seldom mentioned. In contrast, almost all texts mention signs and symbols of national belonging, such as flags and names, as well as comparisons to places in Sweden. Thus, the texts create a sense of continuity, affinity, and entitlement – despite the temporal distance that gets emphasized by repeated occurrences of “old.” The paradise discourse outlined above is clearly recognizable as a guiding factor for how the island is represented: Not only by references to a tropical garden and safe haven, but also by allusions to the island’s consumability.

### *The Swedish Island in the Caribbean*

The “Swedishness” of St. Barthélemy is emphasized in the tabloid *Aftonbladet*’s article “Här finns Karibiens lyxigaste stränder” [These are the most luxurious beaches of the Caribbean]:

På håll liknar Gustavia ett dockskåp i svensk sommarskärgård. Den blågula flaggan vajar över låga byggnader med röda tak. Särskilt trivsamt är den lilla lyxiga semesterön för svenskar – här finns nämligen gott om spår efter vårt eget lands historia.<sup>19</sup>

(From the distance, Gustavia resembles a doll house in a summery Swedish archipelago. The blue-yellow flag waves over low-rise buildings with red roofs. Especially pleasant is the little lush vacation island for Swedes – there are plenty of traces from our own country’s history.)

St. Barthélemy appears in this article as a miniature or toy version of the Swedish landscape and architecture. The island is re-claimed



Figure 4: The terminal building of Rémy de Haenen Airport, formerly Gustav III Airport.

for Sweden, and for Swedish tourists, in several ways. One of the textual strategies is the bird’s-eye perspective or panoramic view that resonates with Annegret Heitmann’s notion of “visual landgrab” (Heitmann 2010, 154-64<sup>20</sup>), or Mary Louise Pratt’s concept of the “monarch-of-all-I-survey”, developed in her influential book *Imperial Eyes*. According to Pratt, such scenes form part of an imperialist rhetoric and ideology of “discovery” and domination. They manifest an “interventionist fantasy” in which the reality of the landscape before the viewer is displaced, and replaced with their vision (Pratt 2008, 204, 209). I want to argue that it is this performative quality of the tourist gaze that makes St. Barthélemy Swedish in the *Aftonbladet* article; to the degree that the text relocates the island from the Caribbean to the Baltic Sea. A more recent article on the news site *Omni* adds another dimension to the alleged recognizability of St. Barthélemy for Swedish tourists, namely that “(a)tt komma hit känns ungefär som att komma hem” [to come here feels almost like coming home].<sup>21</sup>

Raising a flag is yet another colonial gesture of land claim. It is common in my material that the texts are accompanied by images zoomed in on Swedish flags; in the case of the *Omni* article for instance a flag attached to a boat in turquoise water. The claim is strengthened in the *Aftonbladet* article by the emphasized possessive pronoun: not only “our,” but “our own” country’s history. In this account, the island is ready for consumption by tourists and their gaze. Strongly reminiscent of the colonial explorer myth, the expression “vacation island” implies that the existence and daily lives of (former) inhabitants are less relevant; the island is “vacated” for the leisure activities of visitors.

This tendency is emphasized in the text by the metaphor of a “doll house” to describe the island’s capital Gustavia. Daily life on the island is eclipsed, in favor of the idea that it has been, and still is, a playground for Swedish “adventurers.” The doll house metaphor, as well as the emphasis on the low buildings and the island’s smallness, are in line with the already described general tendency in Swedish public discourse to not take seriously and minimize the impact of Swedish colonialism. Rather than acknowledging colonial guilt, the article emphasizes smallness and childishness, two features associated with innocence (cf. Wekker 2016, 16).

### *Residues of Sweden’s West Indian “Adventure”*

Facts and the nature of Swedish colonial history are made more explicit in an article in the travel section of the online presence of *Nya Wermlands-Tidningen*:



Figure 5: Memorial plaque on the old Swedish cemetery outside Gustavia, commemorating the Swedes who died on the island during the Swedish period. There is no site or sign on the island to commemorate slavery and the enslaved.

St Barth [sic]... var en svensk koloni en gång i tiden för dryga 130 år sedan (1784–1878). Så var det i 94 år innan vi drog oss ur det västindiska äventyret. ... Vi lämnade den lilla steniga vulkanön till Frankrike utan synbara spår. Lite slavhandel hann vi svenskar med, några gravstenar berättar svenska namn. Årliga orkaner har för vana [sic] sopa rent och bort det mesta av det gamla.<sup>22</sup>

(St. Barthélemy ... was a Swedish colony back then, more than 130 years ago (1784–1878). It was like that for 94 years before we pulled out of the West Indian adventure. ... We left the small rocky volcanic island to France without any visible traces. We Swedes did dabble in the slave trade, and a few gravestones with Swedish names remain. Annual hurricanes are in the habit of cleaning up and away most of the old stuff.)

The text employs several rhetorical devices that signal a distance to historical events, and stress the insignificance of Swedish colonialism. The temporal distance is emphasized by doubling the information, "back then," and "more than 130 years ago," and by equating the Swedish presence on the island with "old stuff." Colonialism is presented as a collective national "adventure" – in itself another colonial trope, as suggested by the personal pronouns "we," or "we Swedes," and slave trade appears as a task that needs to be absolved. The impact of the colonial endeavour is diminished by words like "small," "a little," or "a few." The image of historical traces being blown and cleansed away by hurricanes is especially interesting. Not only does the wording disrespect the violent force of hurricanes in the region, last experienced in September 2017, but I also want to argue that the text itself performs an act of cleansing Swedish history. Metaphors like "sanitization" or "white-washing" are commonly used to describe representations of the past that forego to mention events or actions that could be understood as "dark spots on a clean slate." The article uses a similar imagery to convey the impression of Swedish innocence. But there is an interesting contradiction between the alleged absence of any traces of the Swedish period on the one hand, and the emphasis on the island's Swedish heritage on the other. First, the article claims that the island was transferred to France "without visible traces." Given that neither the town of Gustavia, the harbor in its present form, nor the three forts surrounding Gustavia would exist had it not been for Swedish colonization, the claim is an act of misrepresentation.

Second, contrary to the article's claim of the invisibility of Swedish traces, the Swedish legacy is also said to add a "picturesque" element to the island. The picturesque is originally a category from late 17<sup>th</sup> century English aesthetic theory, connected to travelling practices and art. It implies, in short, the perception, and, importantly, the creation of landscapes – in the form of gardens, painting and

writing – according to acquired taste and aesthetic categories. To be picturesque means to be worthy to being described in words, to be painted, drawn, engraved or, in more recent times, photographed, by the educated and privileged beholder. So the picturesque is not necessarily the quality of a place, but says more about the relation between a visitor, most often a traveler, and a place. Literary scholar Elizabeth Bohls explains in her book *Romantic Literature and Post-colonial Studies* (2013) how the picturesque worked in a colonial context: first, as a disciplining gaze, complicit with other practices of observing, mapping, and ultimately exploiting, and second, as an expansion, into the ‘exotic,’ of the ‘too familiar’ European scenery. The picturesque evolved, she writes, “as a way of packaging landscape into a commodity” (31f). So, to attribute a “picturesque” quality to St. Barthélemy means to re-frame the place according to a tourist gaze and to tourist consumption. In the words of anthropologist Joseph P. Feldman, the emphasis on the aesthetic quality of Caribbean islands in tourism discourse tends to adhere to a “pattern of representation” that risks obscuring “the social processes and power relations implicated in the production of ‘paradise’” (Feldman 2011, 43).

### *St. Barthélemy as Tax Paradise*

A blogger mentions that the island’s duty-free zone is a legacy of the Swedish rule:

Som svensk blir man ofta lite extra trevligt bemött, vilket kan ha sin grund i det dekret som Gustaf III utfärdade på sin tid. Dekretet, som gäller än idag, innebär att innevånarna på Saint Bart slipper inkomstskatt och ‘dylika pålagor’.<sup>23</sup>

(As a Swede, you are often treated extra well, maybe due to the decree issued by Gustaf III in his time. The decree, still valid today, implies that St. Barth’s inhabitants are exempt from personal income tax and ‘similar imposts.’)

What this and similar texts say is true: St. Barthélemy has until this very day defended its autonomous fiscal policy, dating from the establishment of the free port during the first years of Swedish rule, against attempts to align the island’s tax collection with mainland France. This leads to another dimension of the metaphor of the tropical paradise, namely the idea and reality of so-called tax havens, or fiscal paradises.

Different definitions or uses of the term “tax haven” exist: a narrower juridical definition, and a wider common use of the term. The OECD has identified three key factors for a jurisdiction to classify

as tax haven: no or only nominal taxes, protection of personal information, and lack of transparency.<sup>24</sup> The exposure of the so-called Paradise Papers in November 2017, about massive tax avoidance of individuals and corporations, shows that the geography of leading tax havens overlaps with the geography of tourist paradises, with a notable concentration on Caribbean and South Pacific islands.<sup>25</sup> St. Barthélemy is not on the list and is not considered a tax haven in a juridical sense, nor is any other part of the French Republic. Due to its exceptional tax enonerations, the island fulfills the first out of the three OECD criteria.<sup>26</sup> The metaphor of tax paradise is however commonly used when talking and writing about St. Barthélemy. The idiom points to the same concurrence of colonial geography, capitalist practices, and economic asymmetries that I have outlined as characteristic for the concept of paradise in tourism discourse, and of paradise concepts in the history of European expansion in general: tax paradises offer their wealthy investors secrecy, seclusion, safety, abundance of personal freedom, and a seemingly labor-free accumulation of wealth.

The foundation was laid in a different time under different world economical circumstances. Holger Weiss explains that what king Gustav III had aimed at with the establishment of the free port of Gustavia in 1785 – in line with trading policies of the other European colonial powers active in the Caribbean – was to create a liberal haven for enterprising merchants. The white free inhabitants enjoyed a minimum of control by the administration – in contrast to maximum control of its enslaved inhabitants, whose exploited labor the economical system rested upon (see Weiss 2013, 76, and Weiss 2016, 142). The specific tax breaks for islanders were stipulated in the 1877 treaty, signed on behalf of the king of Sweden and Norway Oscar II, which sealed the retrocession of the island from Sweden to France.<sup>27</sup>

Today, the establishment or modification of a fiscal system to attract foreign capital is a viable option for many tropical postcolonial economies. In St. Barthélemy, the extremely low rates of taxes and levies, for residents and non-residents alike, are a direct legacy of Swedish colonial policy that has been since maintained, defended, and even expanded when the island gained increased autonomy as overseas collectivity in 2007. As a result, the island features for instance as No. 4 on a list of “The five best island countries with no income tax” on the website *Nomad Capitalist*®: “Looking for total tax freedom and a taste of island life to go with it? These island nations not only provide gorgeous scenery; they’re perfectly happy to let you earn all the money you want without dipping their hand in the pot.”<sup>28</sup> St. Barthélemy thus features doubly on the list of tropical paradise islands: as tourist paradise, and as tax paradise. Both are



intertwined by their connection to capitalist practices dating back to colonial expansion in the Caribbean.

Neither the establishment of Gustavia as free port nor its present status as quasi tax paradise are exceptional in a Caribbean context. What is peculiar, or ironic, is how this aspect of St. Barthélemy’s Swedish legacy, the celebration of the island as capitalist paradise, contradicts Swedish self-conceptions: Sweden is known, or infamous, for its tax-financed welfare system (cf. Volquardsen 2014), whereas on St. Barthélemy, the existence of tax exonerations might be the only relevant heritage from the Swedish period from the perspective of many residents, investors, and tax fugitives.

### *The Europeanness of St. Barthélemy*

The combination of Swedish and French influences is unique in a Caribbean context, and this particular blend is featured and used as selling point in many Swedish and local travel reports and tourist advertisements. For instance, according to a sailing trip description by Jambotours, “fransk charm” [French charm] mixes with “svensk ordning och reda” [Swedish order] on the island today.<sup>29</sup> An article in the travel section of *Svenska Dagbladet* summarizes that “(k)ombinationen av det karibiska lugnet och den västerländska effektiviteten är perfekt” [the combination of Caribbean ease and Western efficiency is perfect]. The same article takes us on a short trip around the island:

St Barth är en pluttö. Det tar bara en timme att köra runt den bergiga landplätten. Förbi stränder och fashionabla butiker. Förbi svenska flaggor och lyxiga villor. Överallt är det klanderfritt rent. Ingen fattigdom, ingen smuts. . . . Det är lätt att förstå dem som förälskar sig i St Barth. Skönheten, lugnet och integriteten. Den franska gastronomin, de förstklassiga hotellen och de trendiga barerna. . . . Och så stränderna förstås. 22 stycken. Kritvita.<sup>30</sup>

(St Barth is a tiny island. It only takes an hour to drive around the mountainous piece of land. Past beaches and fashionable boutiques. Past Swedish flags and luxurious mansions. It is impeccably clean everywhere. No poverty, no dirt. . . . It is easy to understand those who fall in love with St Barth. The beauty, the serenity and integrity. The French gastronomy, the first-class hotels and the trendy bars. . . . And the beaches, of course. 22 of them. Chalky white.)

I want to argue that this double European legacy is used in my sources to emphasize the island’s exceptional status in the Caribbean. “One of the most amazing qualities of St. Barth is . . . how European it is considering it is in the heart of the Caribbean,” says the luxury hotel Le Toiny’s online guide to the island.<sup>31</sup> The attested European-ness implies, according to Hotel Le Toiny, that tourists can avoid



Figure 6: Double street signs in Gustavia. The Swedish signs correspond with the original design and town map of the Swedish period when Gustavia was built up from scratch. They were re-installed in the 1960s by the then-chairman of the Swedish St. Barthélemy Society.

"the usual trappings of the Caribbean," such as crime, mass tourism, and security measures such as gated communities" (ibid.). In many sources on St. Barthélemy, "European" equals "French"; the Le Toiny website and *Svenska Dagbladet* article both mention food and fashion. By mentioning the Swedish flag as a characteristic feature of the St. Barthélemy landscape, the *Svenska Dagbladet* article symbolically claims the territory, its wealth and flawlessness, for Sweden. But there is an additional implicit layer to the description of the island's Europeanness in the region, namely race.

The *Svenska Dagbladet* article uses a range of metaphors to emphasize the island's cleanliness, purity, or impeccability. The adjective "klanderfri," meaning blameless, or untainted, links tidiness to moral virtue – but also to social groups: "ingen fattigdom" [no poverty]. Poverty is connected to dirt, whereas the signifiers for Swedishness and Frenchness are linked to material luxury, beauty, and moral integrity. The same is true for the hotel's description of its locality that juxtaposes the European sophistication of St. Barthélemy with the alleged vulgarity of the rest of the Caribbean. With some knowledge about St. Barthélemy it is hard to ignore the unspoken connection of race and (absence of) nuisances: not only are the beaches dazzlingly white (and clean), so too are the vast majority of residents and visitors. Sociologists Cousin and Chauvin confirm my own impression that "the entire Antillean heritage remains marginal" in the mixture of Europeanness and "global exoticism" that shapes the branding of St. Barthélemy (2013, 193).

I describe elsewhere in more detail how the representation of St. Barthélemy as exceptional is based in equal parts on the emphasis of the European, and the devaluation of the indigenous and Afro-Caribbean heritage (Körber forthcoming). There is a striking omission in most of the Swedish material of the history of the slave trade and enslavement.<sup>32</sup> One instance is the gray box alongside the aforementioned *Svenska Dagbladet* article, informing the reader that "(d)en fattiga ön blommade upp under svensktiden och levde på bomullsodling och handel" [the poor island flourished during the Swedish period and subsisted from cotton farming and trade]. The article does not mention enslaved Africans and their descendants who were displaced and brought to the island, were sold as chattel in the harbor of Gustavia, and built the city.<sup>33</sup> The "Caribbean Sweden," such the title of another *Svenska Dagbladet* article,<sup>34</sup> is apparently a Caribbean without Afro-Caribbeans (or, for that matter, indigenous or Latino-Caribbeans), a White Caribbean.



Figure 7: Cap provided for all participants of "Gustavialoppet", the Gustavia race, which is the main attraction during the annual Swedish Weekend, or "Piteådagen", The coat of arms combines the Swedish crown, pelicans (representing St.Barthélemy), and reindeer (representing the northern Swedish twin town Piteå).

### *Concluding Remarks*

The focus of Swedish travel journalism about the island, and the implied claim of an innocent Swedish colonial history, is in my view a missed opportunity for readers to learn about the factual historical circumstances of Swedish overseas expansion and about the relevance of the legacy of slavery for Sweden today. The texts provide little foundation, for instance, to understand why Sweden is included in the group of European countries addressed by the CARICOM (Caribbean Community) Reparations Commission negotiating compensations for the victims of "genocide, slavery, slave trading, and racial apartheid," and their descendants.<sup>35</sup>

The travel advertisements and travel reports present the Caribbean colony as an exception and a curious chapter in Sweden's history. This is in line with a more general history of claims and narratives of exceptionalism that have assigned to Sweden, and Scandinavia, the position of goodwill, innocence, harmlessness or moral superiority vis-à-vis global conflicts, violence, and power imbalances. Conflicting with such self-images, Nordic histories of colonialism, slavery, race ideologies and race biology have traditionally been downplayed in historiography and public discourse and have only recently been subjected to critical scrutiny. This corresponds to the portrayal of St. Barthélemy in tourism-related sources as amateurish colonial adventure. That St. Barthélemy is not only a tropical paradise, but also a tax paradise today, gets reiterated in Swedish and local sources as Sweden's major feat: in earnest, by those critical of tax collection and public expenditure, and jokingly, by those recognizing the irony in view of the more recent Swedish history and Swedish self-representations.

But St. Barthélemy, too, is described as having an exceptional status in the Caribbean, the main features of which are wealth and whiteness. Both of them are a consequence of the strategic political and economic exploitation of an initially unfavorable situation. Sweden has contributed with well-advised kings, and, in a much more implicit way, with its own exceptionalist version of the histories of colonialism, slavery, and race, that allows the status of St. Barthélemy to be unchallenged and its Europeanness doubled. While the Swedish and the island's exceptionalist narratives are not directly causally linked, they reflect each other and correspond to each other in the shaping of the idea of an immaculate tropical paradise. Activism, educational initiatives, and scholarship in Sweden have begun to challenge these imaginations; in tourism discourse, they are, so far, kept in good order.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>All translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup>For the history of the “Wall House,” and the mystery around its name, see “L’histoire du Wall House”: <http://www.comstbarth.fr/pageLibre0001352e.aspx>. One of the article’s authors, Arlette Magras, owns the island’s most comprehensive, private, collection of archival material on the Swedish period.

<sup>3</sup>See Bharati Larsson (2016, 49-117) for a discussion of the Vanadis Expedition with the very same ship (1883-5) and its function within a national colonial iconography.

<sup>4</sup>For the history of St. Barthélemy and Swedish-administered slave trade and slavery, see Pålsson 2016, Thomasson 2015, Weiss 2013 and 2016, and Wilson 2016. I am very grateful for the information I received from Nils Dufau, vice president of the Collectivité de Saint-Barthélemy and chairman of the Association Saint Barth des Amis de la Suède (l’ASBAS), during a conversation in Stockholm in July 2016 and a visit to St. Barthélemy in November 2016.

<sup>5</sup>The scope of the Swedish trade with enslaved Africans is difficult to determine. Only a few vessels with human cargo traversed the Atlantic under the Swedish flag. Gustavia was however one of the most important trading ports in the Antilles during several periods, especially for inner-Caribbean trade and again after other colonial powers had abolished slave trade. There are more exact numbers for the scope of enslavement on the island. The census of the year 1800 shows for instance that 2700 black people lived on the island at the time, out of which ca. 1800 lived in Gustavia (the ratio of urban and rural enslavement is exceptional and due to the fact that the island’s economy was based on trade in the harbor, in contrast to the region’s predominant plantation economies). Ca. 1/3 of them were born in Africa. Most of them were enslaved (Weiss 2016, 144 and 167). The number of so-called free blacks and free coloureds increased in the following decades, but the total percentage of black and coloured inhabitants decreased when Gustavia harbor lost its significance. At that time free blacks and merchants with their slaves left the island for better opportunities elsewhere. Slavery was abolished by Swedish decree in 1847, and already in 1872, only 87 out of 2400 inhabitants were black (*ibid.*, 252). See also Lavoie, Fick & Mayer 1995.

<sup>6</sup>As was common practice during abolition processes, the Swedish government compensated plantation and slave owners for the loss of their cheap labor force as they – and not the enslaved – were “considered the injured party” (Beauvois 2016, 1). Such compensations hardly, if at all, led to acceptable employment and working conditions for the emancipated laborers. Most of them were forced to continue working on the same plantations,

heavily burdened with tax and rent claims. The so-called Fireburn revolt of 1878 on St. Croix in the then Danish West Indies is one instance where workers protested these circumstances; see the public art project “I Am Queen Mary” by La Vaughn Belle and Jeannette Ehlers, inaugurated in Copenhagen in March 2018: <https://www.iamqueenmary.com>.

<sup>7</sup>The so-called DROM-COM (départements et régions et collectivités d’outre-mer; until 2003 DOM-TOM: départements et territoires d’outre-mer) are French-administered territories outside the European continent; in other words, the only remaining French post-colonies that still form part of the French Republic. Their statuses vary, and remain contested (Dahomay 2017; Majumdar 2007, 232-8; Vergès 2017. St. Barthélemy is mentioned in none of these publications; an indication of how the island differs from its neighboring and comparable territories in terms of economy, demographics, and legacy of slavery).

<sup>8</sup>The St. Barthélemy Society, based in Stockholm, is dedicated to maintaining friendly relations with the island, expanding knowledge about the shared history, and preserving the common cultural heritage on both sides of the Atlantic. See their website: <http://stbarthsallskapet.se>.

<sup>9</sup>The history of the partnership is explained as follows on the website of Piteå municipality: “I februari 1976 försökte fyra medlemmar från Piteå Segelsällskap ‘återerövra’ ön. Försöket misslyckades men ledde till att en delegation från St Barth följande år besökte Piteå.” [In February 1976, four members of the Piteå Sailing Club attempted to “re-conquer” the island. The attempt failed, but resulted in a delegation from St. Barthélemy visiting Piteå the following year.] (<https://www.pitea.se/Invanare/Kommun-politik/Internationellt/Vanorter/saint-barthelemy/http://www.pitea-stbarth.com/default.asp>)

<sup>10</sup>The opening of the park including a “Swedish house” was originally planned for November 2018, but must be postponed due to the aftermaths of the hurricanes of September 2017. The date would have coincided with the 140<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the transfer of the island back to France, and with the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the St. Barthélemy-Piteå twinning agreement. See <http://stbarthsallskapet.se/?p=1872>

<sup>11</sup>This is reflected by the linguistic development of the island. Gustavia developed as cosmopolitan English-speaking space, whereas different varieties of French have been spoken on the rest of the island since before the Swedish period. See Maher 1996.

<sup>12</sup>This demographic fact, tracing back to particular historical developments and circumstances, is the main difference between St. Barthélemy and the former Dano-Norwegian territory in the Caribbean, today the U.S. Virgin Islands. 2017 marked the centennial of the transfer of the former Danish West Indies to the United States. It became very obvious in the course of the commemorative events that competing, even contradictory, versions exist of the shared past and its consequences on both sides of the Atlantic. For a discussion of Danish narratives of innocent colonialism see Körber 2018, and Nonbo Andersen 2017.

<sup>13</sup>For more research on configurations of “paradise” in (mainly U.S. American) colonial, capitalist and tourist discourses see Merrill 2009, Rosenberg 2014, Skwiot 2010, and Strachan 2002.

<sup>14</sup>Sugar was the most important crop elsewhere in the region. The desire for sugar can be said to have set the transatlantic triangular trade in motion, responsible for the deportation of millions of Africans to work on Caribbean plantations.

<sup>15</sup>I found another instance of gendered, capitalist and colonial imaginations of Caribbean “paradises” in St. Barthélemy’s many glossy magazines, many of which juxtapose advertisements for watches for men with beach fashion for women. One advertisement for a chronograph watch reads “For The New Emperor.” Most fashion shoots place half-naked women on the beach or before iconic vistas of the island’s bays. One of the island’s best-established fashion brands is *Lolita Jaca St. Barths*. Such images contribute to shaping an idea of the Caribbean island as a place to still be conquered by European explorers. The island itself is represented by sexualized female bodies inviting a penetrating male heterosexual gaze. Mary Louise Pratt and Anne McClintock, among others, have already in the 1990s investigated overlaps of imperialist and heterosexist fantasies in Western colonial representations (Pratt 2008 [1992]; McClintock 1995). Tourist and “paradise” discourses continue such representative patterns in which the appropriation and consumption of overseas territories and female bodies intersect. St. Barthélemy is an interesting case in this context in that it is not the body of the “native” woman that is exoticized, sexualized, and consumed. Instead, creolized Caribbean culture is absent from the advertisements, and white models represent the island’s “French elegance and chic” (<http://www.lolitajaca.com>).

<sup>16</sup>See, for instance, the page on St. Barthélemy in the CIA’s *The World Factbook*: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/tb.html>

<sup>17</sup>The official website of the Collectivity puts it like that: “The tourist development of the island is very recent and has ended the regnant poverty. It is one major economic driver of the island.” (“Le développement touristique de l’île est très récent et a mis fin à la pauvreté qui régnait. Il est un principal moteur de l’île.) See <http://www.comstbarth.fr/histoire.aspx>

<sup>18</sup>For instance, you can get “baguettes, croissants or pain de chocolat” delivered to your villa, or get a charter flight to a golf course on a neighboring island – St. Barthélemy does not have its own due to the island’s topography – and “be back in time for the apéro hour” (<https://www.wimco.com/villa-rentals/caribbean/st-barthelemy/Vendome-Guide.aspx>, 28 and 52).

<sup>19</sup>*Aftonbladet*, August 7, 2006: <https://www.aftonbladet.se/resa/resmal/karibien/ovrigakaribien/article12025791.ab>

<sup>20</sup>Heitmann invokes W.J.T. Mitchell’s (1994) description, in his chapter “Imperial Landscape,” of sites of “visual appropriation.”

<sup>21</sup>*Omni*, March 8, 2016: <http://omni.se/st-barth-ett-karibiskt-sverige/a/meeE>

<sup>22</sup>*nwt.se*, January 17, 2011, updated January 6, 2015: <http://nwt.se/mera/helg/resor/2011/01/17/en-solig-vinterdag-pa-piteagatan-i>

<sup>23</sup>*Hoom*, n.d.: [http://hoom.se/docs/saint\\_barthelemy.pdf](http://hoom.se/docs/saint_barthelemy.pdf)

<sup>24</sup>OECD, <http://www.oecd.org/ctp/glossaryoftaxterms.htm#T>

<sup>25</sup>See, for instance, the map on technology news website Fossbytes: <https://fossbytes.com/paradise-paper-sleaks-major-names-queen/>

<sup>26</sup>The island’s tax exonerations have been criticized in France as the end of any “fiscal solidarity” with the rest of the French Republic, and especially with Guadeloupe, with which St. Barthélemy formed one overseas department until the secession of 2007 (Chauvin & Cousin 2006).

<sup>27</sup>The complicated juridical matter of how to interpret the Treaty of Retrocession of August 10, 1877, is explicated in a report from 2002: <http://www.citoyensbh.com/statut/pdf/Rapport%20ASBAS.pdf>

<sup>28</sup><http://nomadcapitalist.com/2013/05/12/top-5-island-countries-with-no-income-tax/>

<sup>29</sup>Jambotours, n.d.: <http://www.jambotours.se/resa/segling-till-skattkammaren/#step-two> (the sailing trip, of which St. Barthélemy formed a part before was not on offer for the winter season 2017/18, probably due to the aftermaths of the hurricanes in the fall of 2017).

<sup>30</sup>*Svenska Dagbladet*, December 25, 2006: <https://www.svd.se/karibiens-svensko>

<sup>31</sup>Le Toiny, n.d.: <http://www.letoiny.com/how-to-get-to-st-barth/>

<sup>32</sup>Two recent TV programs have led attention to the missing commemoration of the island’s, and Sweden’s, history of slavery: *Vår mörka historia* (Our dark history, TV4, 2013), and *Nationen: Svensk slavhandel* (The nation: Swedish slave trade, Sveriges Utbildningsradio AB, 2016: <https://urisko.la.se/Produkter/199002-Nationen-Svensk-slavhandel>)

<sup>33</sup>The Swedish administration did not own their own enslaved workers, so they borrowed enslaved laborers from the island’s farmers against a small fee, or demanded lent laborers *in lieu* of taxes, to build Gustavia’s houses and streets (Weiss 2016, 159-61).

<sup>34</sup>“Ett karibiskt Sverige,” *Svenska Dagbladet*, November 8, 2013: <https://www.svd.se/ett-karibiskt-sverige>

<sup>35</sup>CARICOM Reparations Commission: <http://caricomreparations.org/caricom/caricoms-10-point-reparation-plan/>

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