

# Enterprising Women

GENDER, RACE, AND POWER

IN THE REVOLUTIONARY ATLANTIC

*Kit Candlin and Cassandra Pybus*



# ENTERPRISING WOMEN

---

*Gender, Race, and Power in the  
Revolutionary Atlantic*

KIT CANDLIN  
AND  
CASSANDRA PYBUS

The University of Georgia Press  
Athens and London

© 2015 by the University of Georgia Press

Athens, Georgia 30602

www.ugapress.org

All rights reserved

Set in Adobe Caslon Pro by Graphic Composition, Inc.

Printed and bound by Thomson-Shore, Inc.

The paper in this book meets the guidelines for  
permanence and durability of the Committee on  
Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the  
Council on Library Resources.

Most University of Georgia Press titles are  
available from popular e-book vendors.

Printed in the United States of America

14 15 16 17 18 c 5 4 3 2 1

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Candlin, Kit.

Enterprising women : gender, race, and power in the revolutionary Atlantic /

Kit Candlin and Cassandra Pybus.

pages cm. — (Race in the Atlantic world, 1700–1900)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-8203-4455-3 (hardcover : alk. paper) —

ISBN 0-8203-4455-9 (hardcover : alk. paper)

1. Racially mixed women—Caribbean Area—History—19th century.
2. Women, Black—Caribbean Area—History—19th century.
3. Businesswomen—Caribbean Area—History—19th century.
4. Social stratification—Caribbean Area—History—18th century.

I. Pybus, Cassandra. II. Title.

HQ501.C35 2014

305.40896'9729—dc23

2014011856

British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ENTERPRISING  
WOMEN

# Race in the Atlantic World, 1700–1900

*Published in Cooperation with the Library Company of Philadelphia's  
Program in African American History*

## SERIES EDITORS

Richard S. Newman, *Rochester Institute of Technology*

Patrick Rael, *Bowdoin College*

Manisha Sinha, *University of Massachusetts, Amherst*

## ADVISORY BOARD

Edward Baptist, *Cornell University*

Christopher Brown, *Columbia University*

Vincent Carretta, *University of Maryland*

Laurent Dubois, *Duke University*

Erica Armstrong Dunbar, *University of Delaware and  
the Library Company of Philadelphia*

Douglas Egerton, *LeMoyne College*

Leslie Harris, *Emory University*

Joanne Pope Melish, *University of Kentucky*

Sue Peabody, *Washington State University, Vancouver*

Erik Seeman, *State University of New York, Buffalo*

John Stauffer, *Harvard University*

O brave new world, that has such people in it!

—Miranda in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

---

**T**HIS BOOK HAS REQUIRED extensive research in far-flung places that would not have been possible without generous grants from the Australian Research Council, which also provided a five-year professorial fellowship for Cassandra Pybus and a four-year postdoctoral fellowship for Kit Candlin.

We owe a huge debt of gratitude to independent researchers Chris Rathbone, John Wilmer, and David Alston, who have unstintingly shared research with us that has proved invaluable. Equally invaluable has been the generous assistance we received from Curtis Jacobs of the University of the West Indies in Grenada. We cannot thank these people enough.

We are also indebted to the *Legacies of British Slave-Ownership* team working at University College, London, under the direction of Catherine Hall, and in particular we want to acknowledge the help we received from Nick Draper. Over the years we have been encouraged and stimulated by discussions with numerous scholars and especially wish to acknowledge Gad Heuman, Barry Higman, Lucy Frost, Jerry Handler, Daniel Livesay, Peter Hulme, Catherine Hall, Richard Drayton, Rebecca Scott, Maya Jasanoff, Marcus Rediker, and Richard Newman.

We have been more than fortunate to work in an outstanding intellectual environment in the School of Philosophical and Historical Inquiry at the University of Sydney, and we are grateful for the support we have received from the school and from Maria Cortes and Cam Pham in particular. Special thanks are due to Andrew Fitzmaurice, the head of the Department of History, and to our colleagues in the research support group: Penny Russell, Kirsten McKenzie, Clair Lowry, Blanca Tovias, Ann Cuthoys, Richard White, Mark McKenna, Judy Keene, and Cindy McCreery.

For their personal support and their generous offers of accommodation, we thank Jo Pearson, Adam Low, Peter Hulme, and Tain and Grace Tompkins. For their research and editorial assistance, we thank Darien Rozental, Justine Greenwood, Sarah Crawford, and Keren Lavelle.

Archives were indispensable to this book, and we are more than grateful to the staffs of the National Archives of the United Kingdom, the Na-

tional Archives of Scotland, the Family Record Center of the Church of the Latter-day Saints in Utah, the Liverpool Record Office, Special Collections at the University of Virginia, the National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago, the Department of Archives of Barbados, the Barbados Museum and Historical Society, the Supreme Court Registry of Grenada, the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, the London Metropolitan Archives, the British Library, the Nottingham Library's Special Collection, and St. George's Church, Benenden.



## CONTENTS

---

### *Acknowledgments* ix

#### INTRODUCTION. Elisabeth and Her Sisters i

#### CHAPTER ONE. The Free Colored Moment *War and Revolution in a Brave New World* 15

#### CHAPTER TWO. Bars, Brothels, and Business *Rachael Pringle Polgreen and Rosetta Smith* 32

#### CHAPTER THREE. By Labors and Fidelity *Judith Philip and Her Family* 57

#### CHAPTER FOUR. A Lasting Testament of Gratitude *Susannah Ostrehan and Her Nieces* 80

#### CHAPTER FIVE. The Queen of Demerara *Mrs. Dorothy Thomas* 103

#### CHAPTER SIX. By Habit and Repute *The Intimate Frontier of Empire* 126

#### CHAPTER SEVEN. Uncertain Prospects *Mixed-Race Descendants at the Heart of Empire* 147

#### *Conclusion* 169

#### *Notes* 181

#### *Bibliography* 215

#### *Index* 231

## INTRODUCTION

---

### *Elisabeth and Her Sisters*

**ELISABETH** SAMSON, a spinster aged forty-nine, had set her sights on becoming the wife of the organist of the Dutch Reformed Church in Paramaribo, the tiny capital of the colony of Suriname.<sup>1</sup> To this end, she had instructed her solicitors in the Netherlands to petition the Dutch States General, the highest authority for colonial affairs, requesting permission to marry. The year was 1764. The Political Council of Suriname had already refused her permission because eighty years earlier a ruling of the Suriname Company, which ran the place, had prohibited marriage between Europeans and Africans. Back in 1685, when the Suriname Company first sought to curtail the practice of Dutch men marrying their enslaved concubines, the principals would not have imagined that an African woman would seek to marry a Dutch man. Now this was exactly what Elisabeth Samson proposed, proudly affirming in her petition to the States General that she was "a freeborn Negress." She wanted to be married to the man of her choice and was not about to be denied.

Elisabeth Samson could buy and sell most of the Political Council of Suriname. She was a black woman, but she also was one of the wealthiest planters in the Atlantic world: the owner of a number of substantial properties in and around Paramaribo, including a very large mansion situated on prime land, six massive plantations, including one that was over a thousand acres, and many hundreds of slaves. Having personally visited the Netherlands, she knew Dutch law and understood the way the Dutch colonial system worked. To her great satisfaction, the Dutch States General declared that Dutch law did not prohibit interracial marriage and their ruling overrode that of the Suriname Company. The only problem was that the legal deliberations had taken three years, during which time her fiancé had died. Unperturbed, she promptly fixed upon another Dutch man, to whom she was married at her mansion in December 1767.

Elisabeth Samson was born in 1715 to an African woman called Nanoe, who had been enslaved but was manumitted on the death of her owner in 1713, along with her two mulatto children, Maria and Charlo. Nanoe had six other children with her enslaved African husband, and these children remained in bondage even when she was freed. Her last child, Elisabeth, was born free in 1715 because her mother was then a free woman. The manumitted son, Charlo, became a carpenter, and he purchased the six other children from his father's widow, then progressively manumitted his siblings over the next decade until the whole family was emancipated. Elisabeth grew up in the household of her half sister Maria, who married a wealthy Swiss planter and, after his death, a German merchant. Elisabeth was highly literate and was trained by her brother-in-law in business matters, at which she proved remarkably adept.

By nineteen she had begun to accumulate property, and by her mid-twenties she was the owner of two small coffee plantations. Sometime in her twenties she acquired a business partner who was also her lover, a German army captain named Carl Creutz. He received a grant of one thousand acres in 1749, and with Elisabeth Samson's capital and her two hundred slaves, the couple created a large and successful coffee plantation, which they called "Clevia." "Clevia" was registered in their joint names, as were a second plantation, "La Solitude," and two large houses they owned in the town. The slaves, however, were clearly demarcated as the property of Elisabeth Samson alone, and she retained sole ownership of her original plantations. It was she who controlled the operation of the plantations, managed the household, and transacted all the business, while Creutz attended to political matters and went off into the jungle to do battle with the Maroons.

Despite living on the frontier, the couple lived in grand style, occupying a lavishly furnished mansion in Paramaribo that was staffed by forty-four slaves and filled with a cornucopia of luxury goods, including hundreds of bottles of wine and nineteen dozen Japanese porcelain teacups. The inventory of their household filled more than thirty folios. Elisabeth Samson and Carl Creutz wanted for nothing, unless it was legitimacy. Creutz was a member of the Political Council, so he knew that the local law of Suriname prohibited marriage between Europeans and Africans, but that did not restrain him from ostentatiously flaunting his relationship with a black woman as his lover, his business partner, and his social equal. The governor grumbled about the couple in his private diary but did nothing about it,

given that Carl Creutz was his good friend and Elisabeth Samson was very rich.

In 1762 Creutz died at the age of forty-seven. He had no children, so his will left his half of their joint estate to Elisabeth Samson for her lifetime, after which it would go to his brothers. Within two years Elisabeth Samson had paid the Creutz brothers in Germany the considerable sum of 155,000 guilders in order to consolidate the property as her own in perpetuity. That accomplished, she then proposed marriage to her tenant, a Dutch man many years younger than her who lived above the stables on the adjoining block. Christopher Brabant was merely the church organist, so he had no political status to uphold and protect. Presumably, he was keen to marry Elisabeth Samson and move into the luxurious mansion next door to enjoy the fruits of her vast wealth, but it was she, not he, who initiated the official request to marry. The Political Council upheld the law against such a marriage, even though it acknowledged there were favorable circumstances in this particular case. As the governor explained to the authorities in The Hague, the marriage of Elisabeth Samson to Christopher Brabant meant that he would become her legal heir, and "the wealth the young man will inherit in due time will," the governor argued, "come into white people's possession." This was a very good thing for the governor, since it was "not recommendable [that] the black people are rich and have possessions . . . and become high and mighty like white people are."<sup>2</sup> Although this was an attractive proposition to the Political Council, it was not a sufficient inducement to break its own law.

During the legal deliberations in The Hague it would scarcely have slipped the notice of the Dutch authorities that this black woman was past fifty and most unlikely to have any children, so the marriage would ensure that her fortune flowed into Dutch hands. Although Brabant died during the three years it took the Dutch authorities in The Hague to allow the marriage, Elisabeth Samson soon found another young Dutch man to marry. When she died in 1771, Hermanus Zobre inherited all of her properties and possessions, making him a millionaire at the age of thirty-three. If he was grateful to his late wife he gave no sign of it, not even bothering to erect a tombstone in her memory. In little over a decade, Elisabeth Samson's carefully managed wealth would all be frittered away on her husband's ill-conceived projects and high living. All her money was gone and the property was taken for debt by the time he died in 1784.

Elisabeth Samson had an unworthy husband and no children to preserve her memory. Until the twenty-first century, she remained little more than a colorful piece of local folklore in Suriname and otherwise was entirely unknown in the history of the Dutch empire, despite a large amount of material relating to her residing in the Dutch archives. It is thanks to the painstaking research of Suriname writer Cynthia McLeod that we know about her impressive life.<sup>3</sup> Growing up in Suriname, McLeod knew about Elisabeth Samson from local history, but assumed that she must have been a slave concubine who had been manumitted on the death of her master, who then left her his fortune. What other narrative could there be to account for a fantastically rich black woman in the early eighteenth century? That she was a self-made entrepreneur was inconceivable. It was when McLeod went looking for Elisabeth Samson in the Rijksarchief in The Hague, as well as searching archives in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and Germany, that she found a very different story from the one she had received from Surinamese history. It was highly gratifying, she reports, that her research was able to “have salvaged the remarkable person of Elisabeth out of the sphere of ‘the helplessly forlorn and pitied black mistress’ who inherits the fortunes of her industrious white master.”<sup>4</sup>

Certainly the micro-biography of Elisabeth Samson is intriguing, but is it of any real use to historians of the Atlantic world? Surely this black woman is *sui generis*, a historical anomaly of passing interest for her enterprise and audacity? Can this exceptional case tell us anything meaningful about race and gender in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world? We took the view that it could. The mere knowledge that the daughter of two enslaved Africans could be an independent agent and amass her own personal fortune in the middle years of the eighteenth century complicated and challenged much of what we had understood about race and gender in slave colonies. More important, it gave us a tantalizing glimpse of what was possible for a free black woman to achieve in the Atlantic slave world. We might have dismissed her extraordinary circumstances as particular to unique features of the Dutch empire, with no relevance to the Anglo imperial sphere, were it not for having stumbled upon evidence of another fabulously wealthy black woman, this time from a British colony, who had demanded that the Colonial Office in London overturn a colonial law that discriminated against her as a free woman of color.

That woman was Dorothy, or Doll, Thomas, born a slave on Montserrat around 1756, who went on to establish business interests across the British

colonies of the Windward Islands and the South American littoral. Her existence was uncovered by chance by Cassandra Pybus while undertaking research on a project entirely unrelated to the British Caribbean.<sup>5</sup> At the same time that the biography of Thomas began to reveal itself, Kit Candlin discovered other such women in the colony of Trinidad.<sup>6</sup> This book builds upon this initial research and published findings, but greatly expands the detail and implications, as well as making inevitable corrections to some of our earlier errors and assumptions.

One would search in vain for any mention of these women in the historiography of the British Caribbean, or even in local histories of the colonies where they did business; they simply disappeared from view. These women were largely illiterate and left no family papers, no letters, no diaries, and no oral history. To look for their life stories might seem an impossible task, but our excavation of colonial archives, newspapers, parish records, and contemporary travelers' accounts yielded a rich trove of materials that complemented what we had learned about Elisabeth Samson. Along the way we were hugely surprised to find quite a few more entrepreneurial black women in the archives we consulted, and even more surprised to find that they were comparatively wealthy. This was so unexpected that we felt it was crucial to reconstruct these contradictory colonial lives to provide much-needed nuance to the historiography and to give greater texture to the story of the Caribbean slave colonies.

The idea was born that we should excavate the colonial archives to find other enterprising black women in the British Caribbean colonies in the long eighteenth century. We understood this would be something of a Herculean task, but it could be done. Since the groundbreaking manifesto of Carlo Ginzburg and Carlo Poni in 1979,<sup>7</sup> the intensive archival research needed for the recovery of the lives of forgotten people has been transformed by digital technology. Each year the capacity to find minute information grows exponentially with the digitization of a vast range of archival sources plus sophisticated search engines, not to mention the indefatigable work of genealogists and family historians, who proved to be invaluable for this project.

GIVEN THE BREADTH OF EXPERIENCES we found among free women of color across the British Caribbean, as well as the complexities presented by the many different Caribbean archives, we felt that a study that incorporated the entirety of the Caribbean would have been a task at once too

large and too diffuse. What we needed for our project was a region of the Caribbean where we could intensively search the archives and still keep the project cohesive. Certainly it had to be transcolonial, given that the women we had already found were particularly adept at crossing borders and boundaries, rather than spending their whole lives in just one colony. One of the significant features we were able to discern was their capacity to make or remake themselves in a variety of different situations, and their ability to exploit the gaps in a fluid political and racial climate. We wanted to highlight the transcolonial and transcultural aspect of these women's lives, and so looked for a region of the British Caribbean that was particularly multicultural and fluid during the Age of Revolutions. We chose to concentrate on the southern Caribbean, including the colonies of Grenada, Trinidad, and Demerara, which were important late colonies for the British and places that were contested and fought over to a far greater degree than other territories.<sup>8</sup> The imperial insecurity of the region would have likely profoundly influenced the lives and the choices of the women, and we also suspected that such political insecurity may have produced a number of such women by the end of the eighteenth century.

During this time the British Caribbean was changing markedly as island colonies adjusted their imperial connections. While there was nothing to quite equal the extraordinary swap that saw the British exchange the wilderness of Suriname for New York, colonies such as Grenada, Dominica, Tobago, and St. Vincent, known as the "ceded islands," were easy pickings from France as a result of the Seven Years' War. These imperial acquisitions were followed at the end of the century by the takeover of Dutch Demerara by the British in 1796 and Trinidad from Spain in 1797, as part of the renewed war with France. These were forgotten places, barely imaginable in the metropolitan capitals of Europe, undeveloped and sparsely populated, filled with the flotsam of the Atlantic. This was a liminal world where complex, multiracial communities numbered in the hundreds, not thousands, and the African slaves were hardly counted. Most of these colonies, at the time of cession at least, were poor and marginal, with virtually no investment in infrastructure or defense.

Aspiring and established planters looking for new opportunities, many of them with slaves, flocked to the ceded islands, seeking to build or rebuild their fortunes on the edges of the Atlantic. Alongside these planters came others, rich and poor, who also sought the freedom and anonymity



that might be found there. Smugglers and privateers, many of them heavily involved in illicit trade with the Spanish American colonies on the mainland, made this region their home, while the predatory navies of Europe and America sought to defend slippery, ever-changing interests. As with frontiers everywhere, these islands and the sea between them became synonymous with insecurity and danger.

But there were advantages to be found here. The ceded islands became destinations of desire not just for whites, but for free Africans and their descendants, who sought the sanctuary that an undeveloped frontier might offer. These southern islands had been mainly colonized in the last waves of Caribbean expansion by a mixed bag of Europeans other than Britons and were unique in their liberties within the British sphere. Older possessions like Jamaica had strict racial laws, but these new colonies were less secure, and the British colonial authorities made concessions to French, Spanish, and Dutch colonists who took a less absolute view of race. This made the ceded colonies attractive to free Africans and their descendants. Cooks, cleaners, washerwomen, nursemaids, tradesmen, storekeepers, and hoteliers all took the opportunity to refashion their lives in the region.

All these arrivals radically changed the ethnic profile of these places. On Grenada and St. Vincent, numbers both white and black increased almost exponentially. In just ten short years from 1788 to 1798 the free population of Trinidad jumped from three thousand to twelve thousand, the majority free colored, while the number of slaves rose even more dramatically. These raw, volatile colonies were just the kind of places where an enterprising free colored woman could thrive. By the beginning of the nineteenth century just under half the slave owners on Grenada, Tobago, and Trinidad were women, and many of them were women of color. The business records that survive from these colonies are filled with the petty transactions of such women, often with other women, buying slaves and other property, owning shops and trading goods.

By the late eighteenth century, the southern Caribbean presented a particular phenomenon of fluid, contested colonies with a history of insurrection, even while located in the cockpit of British colonial efforts in the Atlantic world. As the Age of Revolutions spread war throughout the region, colonies changed hands repeatedly or descended into chaos. In the transient insecurity that this world engendered, some free colored women were able to reach dizzying heights of success in comparison to women not



just in the Caribbean but anywhere in the British world.<sup>9</sup> The freedom that could be found in an insecure frontier society provided marginal subjects with many more opportunities than those in the metropole, and the free colored women who are the subject of this book grabbed these opportunities with both hands. To understand how they thrived in this world we need to scrutinize the social milieu of these colonies and shift the focus from the white male elites and their traumatized, degraded slaves, and seek out the women who found distinctive advantages there in the turbulent years between 1763 and 1840.

So this book is about wealthy free colored women in a frontier world, some of whom grew powerful enough to affect colonial justice, make demands of white men, possess many slaves, and own hundreds, sometimes thousands, of acres of the most valuable farming land in the world. Of course, there were free colored women who rarely experienced a life beyond the petty world of prostitutes, hucksters, and washerwomen, who would never own any land or slaves and who would not acquire a share of the hefty compensation paid by the British government for emancipating the slaves. Nevertheless, the ebullient, enterprising colonial subjects we have chosen to research present an extraordinary story that has yet to be fully told in the context of Atlantic history.

This is a uniquely southern Caribbean tale. As a site of inquiry, the British colonies in the southern Caribbean hold advantages for our research other than the numbers of free colored women. Because of their geographical position it is possible to compare and contrast the newer ceded colonies with the long-established colony of Barbados, which was settled by the British in 1627. Barbados was an important node for the empire in the region; it was, as visitors observed, “the London of the West Indies.” A much older and comparatively more stable colony than its neighbors, it was also where some of the women in this story were born or was a place they passed through. Focusing our research in the region that surrounded Barbados makes it possible to examine the comparative dynamics between that pivotal British colony and more recently acquired territories.

The newer colonies, as Barry Higman has argued, represent the second and third stage of colonies in the Caribbean, yet they have received far less scholarly attention than places such as British Jamaica, Spanish Cuba, or French St. Domingue.<sup>10</sup> The colonies of Grenada, Trinidad, and Demerara, near to and feeding off Barbados, are a highly appropriate location for ex-