INTRODUCTION

Forum Introduction: Gender, Intimate Networks, and Global Commerce in the Early Modern Period

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Abstract

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, new patterns of knowledge, credit, and capital were created by global expansion. These, in turn, created new opportunities for groups of people who previously had little access to global trade. These individuals—women as well as men—increasingly engaged in commercial transactions, some of them relatively autonomous, others challenged and hindered by various forms of institutional control and constraint. Emphasising the intimate nature of networks means examining the quality rather than the quantity of certain networks, which ultimately facilitates a shift away from well-known historical agents such as influential merchants, powerful politicians, and various nobility and royals. The Gender, Intimate Networks, and Global Commerce in the Early Modern Period forum seeks to add to our knowledge of the diverse ways that intimate economic networks developed in both the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds, in Europe as well as en route elsewhere, among the well-off as well as the relatively poor, and among free people as well as the enslaved.

Keywords: Networks; global; gender; early modern

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In recent years, the intimate lives of historical agents have come to play an increasingly important role in imperial studies and adjacent fields.1 For example, Susanah Shaw

Romney has found that intimate networks made up of early modern people’s immediate, affective, and personal associations powerfully influenced the form and content of economic engagement in the Dutch Atlantic colonies. Other scholars have found similar forces at work in the West Indies, the west coast of Africa, and South and Southeast Asia. As a framework, the idea of intimate networks allows for attention to both the quantity and the quality of people’s social ties. In particular, the emphasis on quality of ties allows for the appreciation of other actors, including women, non-elite men, interlopers, and enslaved persons. There has been a tendency to assume that poor European women were too distant from the networks of global trade to influence them in any substantive way or that social life on board ships was radically separate from life on land. This forum’s contributors are interested in adding to our knowledge of the diverse ways that intimate economic networks, often with women at their centre, could develop in both the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds, in Europe as well as en route elsewhere, among the well-off as well as the relatively poor, among free people as well as the enslaved.

Intimate networks were but one of the myriad of networks that shaped early modern people’s lives. Formed by different institutions, types of credit, and relationship, the different networks overlapped and intersected, creating a complex web of economy and sociability. The intimacy consisted of similarly intricate amalgams of kinships, friendships, and romantic relationships, alongside other types of relationships found in workplaces, in neighbourhoods, or in educational settings. Francesca Trivellato has influentially argued that participation in commerce generated new conversations between non-kin—people who were otherwise strangers—and she shows how these relationships generated new legal instruments intended to alleviate some of the dangers that accompanied trading with non-kin. Several of the articles in this forum confirm that some people ultimately relied more on close friends than on family. Relationships created through proximity (living in the same neighbourhood, serving on the same ship, being enslaved by the same master), or a history of several successful business transactions or forms of affinity we can no longer trace weighed more heavily for some people than did family connections. By focussing on

4 Romney, New Netherland Connections, 18.
7 Francesca Trivellato, The Familiarity of Strangers: The Sephardic Diaspora, Livorno, and Cross-Cultural Trade in the Early Modern Period (London: Yale University Press, 2009), 20. It is important to note that Trivellato is not talking here about slavery, although this idea could suggest the enforced proximity of slavery as well.
networks created within as well as outside extended kinship networks, we expand upon and challenge existing assumptions about how women could form as well as maintain commercial and economic ties.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, overseas expansion increasingly meant that many networks came to be shaped outside of European metropoles. In these new settings individuals had to rely on fewer connections than previously as they were removed from existing networks, voluntarily or by force, temporally and spatially. Emerging European empires in Asia and North America brought together people from different social backgrounds and of varying status, including freedom and unfreedom, which necessitated forming social ties beyond one’s immediate social and kinship group. The examples presented in this forum feature geographically and chronologically diverse examples, but they all present cases in which the constant personal negotiations required to create, maintain, and strengthen networks become visible.

Early modern global commercial expansion also necessitated the creation of new patterns of knowledge, trust, credit, and capital, which in turn provided economic opportunities to groups of people who previously had little access to global trade. European as well as non-European port towns and cities, colonies, factories, and trading stations became connected to one another through multifaceted networks. In turn, these networks allowed some new people—women as well as men—to engage in commercial transactions, some of them relatively autonomous, others characterised by various forms of institutional control and constraint.

Relevant here is recent research focussing on large trading companies, which has highlighted the social origins of companies and their embeddedness within the political, commercial, and social lives of early modern people. Companies consisted of a skein of entangled networks, intimate as well as less so. Edmond Smith argues that corporations “functioned as communities, with trust reputation and good relationships essential for their success.” Though trading companies like the East India Company grew to be company states, the companies were “restricted and directed by individuals within the complex web of social interactions and relationships.” Trading companies’ decisions were the result of constant negotiations between individual networks’ agendas. They


12 Smith, Merchants, 59–60.

13 The literature on company decision-making and the influence of interest groups is growing rapidly; see for instance Edmond Smith, “The Global Interests of London’s Commercial Community, 1599–1625: Investment in the
influentially shaped European commerce in Asia and (to a lesser extent) in North America, but were in turn shaped by the many different personal agendas of individuals and networks. The different cases examined in this forum were a part of the fabric that constituted the trading companies and they in turn, directly as well as indirectly, “restricted and directed” the trading companies. And vice versa: the trading companies both restricted and provided opportunities for individuals simultaneously.

Geographically, the forum covers Europe and the West and East Indies. They were, of course, very different worlds, socially and commercially. In the Indian Ocean world, the various European East India Companies, powerful indigenous empires, and many smaller polities created a complex skein of overlapping jurisdictions, commercial agendas, and competitive political and military interests.\(^{14}\) Competition was rife in the West Indies too, but it consisted of rivalries between European powers for territory, trade, and control of the seas, and it was overlain by the systematic use of violence aimed at controlling the large population of enslaved people on which the economies of most European colonies depended. Commercially speaking, moreover, the Indian Ocean and the Atlantic worlds generated different kinds of networks.\(^{15}\) In the Indian Ocean world the large European trading companies inevitably absorbed a lot of trade, and they also actively sought to enforce and extend their monopolies. There were plenty of private traders in the East Indies, but both European and indigenous traders were often at loggerheads with one or another of the companies.\(^{16}\) European private traders found themselves forced to trade primarily in the commodities the companies were not interested in, or else engage in various kinds of subterfuge. By contrast, trade in the West Indies occurred largely outside of corporate monopolies during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and it was comparatively unregulated or regulated at the island level.\(^{17}\) On both sides of the globe, East India Company,” Economic History Review 71:4 (1 November 2018): 1118–46; Julie M. Svalastog, “Challenging Porous Frontiers: Atlantic Merchants and the Potential of the Indian Ocean, 1640–1650,” Journal of Early American History 9:2–3 (10 December 2019): 145–62; Joris van den Tol, Lobbying in Company: Economic Interests and Political Decision-Making in the History of Dutch Brazil, 1621–1656 (Leiden: Brill, 2021).


\(^{15}\) A number of individuals had interests in both spheres, maximising their commercial options and becoming citizens of the world. There are many studies of the eighteenth century in particular examining these people; see for instance Hancock, Citizens; Rothschild, Inner Life. To a lesser degree this was also the case in the seventeenth century; see Aske Laursen Brock and Misha Ewen, “Women’s Public Lives: Navigating the East India Company, Parliament and Courts in Early Modern England,” Gender & History 33:1 (2020): 3–23.


\(^{17}\) This is not to say that companies did not operate here—for instance, the Dutch West India Company was quite influential in the Americas for more than a century—but they found it more difficult to uphold a monopoly or enforce their rights concerning trade and mobility of individuals. See for instance Henk Den Heijer, Geschiedenis van de WIC: Opkomst, bloei en ondergang (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1994); Nuala Zahedieh, “Regulation, Rent-Seeking, and the Glorious Revolution in the English Atlantic Economy,” Economic
these systems, seemingly limited individuals’ autonomy, often in drastic ways. Recently, Cátia Antunes and Amélia Polónia have argued that free agents were instrumental in shaping early modern empires through their challenges to states and monopolies. They frequently worked under a larger company carapace as company employees or imperial agents, but once they began working towards their own goals, they became agents of informal empire.18 They exploited formal structures to build their own networks through intimate and at times fragile connections. In other words, companies and state monopolies could also provide new opportunities to exploit emerging local, regional, and global markets by providing more durable structures than private individuals typically could.19

The forum examines the intersections between intimacy and the economy, but the contributions differ in scope and focus, influenced by varying geographies, institutions, and opportunities, as well as by record survival. Each article provides a different piece of the puzzle to show how people carved out room for manoeuvre that would allow them to participate in commerce despite other disadvantages. In theory, family was a major trust-basis for long-distance networks of trade. This is certainly the case for some of the individuals and groups discussed in these articles. Many European women, up and down the social spectrum, had male relatives who went either to the West or East Indies. For women left “at home,” the extension of their individual networks through marriage was often key. The coming together not only of two individuals, but of two families and their extended networks, were important in expanding opportunity.20 Some wives took advantage of this to become small-time entrepreneurs and even to engage in much more substantial operations.21 Women who travelled and women who stayed behind played a similar role in information networks, intermingling important news of the family with commercial news; they were also heavily involved in the credit arrangements that permitted their male relatives to carry on trade while also trading independently.22 Lately, Sophie Jones and Siobhan Talbott have brilliantly demonstrated how essential the role of female relatives’ labour was in creating and maintaining commercial networks. They were not merely acting for the male heads of households but were autonomous agents in the economy, utilising the extended network uniquely afforded by marriage.23 As Susanah Romney has aptly phrased it, “marriage made people kin, and ink put that kinship to economic use.”24

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21 Romney, New Netherland Connections, 103.
24 Romney, New Netherland Connections, 110.
During the same period in which kinship, including marriage, came to create ties over larger distances, European expansion forcibly dispossessed many people from the kinds of connections that would normally be utilised for economic purposes. European expansion created massive disruptions in family ties, most notably with respect to Indigenous Americans, Africans, and some Asians, who were separated violently from their natal and affinal families. Moreover, colonial legislators realised the necessity of regulating sexual intimacy because claims to kinship could complicate questions concerning inheritance in societies in which the concept of “race” opened up the possibility of a person being considered property. Enslaved people established new kinds of connections, involving other enslaved individuals, former slaves, newly forged (or fictive) kinship ties, and even their enslavers or former enslavers, but these were both hard-won and precarious. As one of the contributors to this issue shows, this did not preclude entrepreneurial activity, although the character of economic participation was different and the realm of possibilities considerably narrower. These were intimate ties of a much more troubled kind.

Intimate networks were naturally not limited to Europeans. The networks came into existence precisely because empires and companies brought a great diversity of people together, willingly and unwillingly. When Europeans began trading to Asia in greater numbers in the sixteenth century, it was fairly common for foreign traders to marry a local wife temporarily. Thus women would act as intermediaries, and helped hapless foreigners navigate local customs; on the west coast of Africa, so-called cassare weddings served a similar purpose. Barbara Watson Andaya argues that local wives were indispensable for successful trading, because in Southeast Asia women, not men, were in charge of retail sales. An alliance with the right woman could greatly improve business. Though the increase in international trade disadvantaged the majority of Southeast Asian women, it also provided opportunities for some. A few Asian and mixed-race women were even able to enter the European colonial elite through marriage, not least because, in some cases, elites were more wary of low status Europeans entering their ranks than they were of locals. On the other hand, Sophie Rose and Elizabeth Heijmans have recently shown that legal double standards concerning extra-marital relations that already existed in the Netherlands were enhanced in Dutch colonies, where they were


26 Romney, New Netherland Connections, 16.


29 This was not a harmonious period of interracial relationships, but rather placed Asian women at the centre of changing hierarchies undermining previous structures; see Durba Ghosh, Sex and the Family in Colonial India: The Making of Empire (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). This is particularly true of the Dutch colonies in Indonesia; see Deborah Hamer, “Marriage and the Construction of Colonial Order: Jurisdiction, Gender and Class in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Batavia,” Gender & History 29:3 (2017): 622–40, 634–6.
heavily influenced by race, enslavement, religion, and class. Intimate connections did not come without (significant) downsides. If an individual ended up in court or if the marriage did not work out, gender, race, and distance from events or from natal kin could be used against women and endanger their continued prosperity. Moreover, Rose and Heijmans have recently shown that race, enslavement, religion, and class heavily influenced existing legal double standards concerning extra-marital relations in Dutch colonies.

The articles in the present issue seek to create a broader understanding of intimate networks’ integral role in the creation of early modern global capitalism and culture by focusing on the relationship between the social and economic lives of women and plebeian men in the early modern period. This is a call for more research into the various mechanisms that shaped early modern networks rather than a definitive picture of global commerce.

In “Capital and Kin: English Women’s Transatlantic Networks and Property in Barbados,” Misha Ewen examines how women in England forged relationships with brokers and used various economic and legal methods to manage their wealth and property in Barbados during the seventeenth century—property that included enslaved Africans. English women developed new tools and competencies in the context of plantation slavery, including appointing attorneys to oversee their affairs. Whilst women frequently drew upon familial networks, their intimate ties stretched to include close friends and associates who were sometimes entrusted with their affairs in preference to kin. A trusted and skilful proxy was essential for long-distance business management, and this was not a role that kin could always adequately perform.

Margaret Hunt’s essay “An English East India Company Ship’s Crew in a Connected Seventeenth-Century World” uses a series of court cases related to a single late seventeenth-century English East India Company ship, the Modena, to argue for a more “connected” understanding of early modern long-distance voyages and trade and of the largely non-elite men who sailed the ships. It particularly critiques Michel Foucault’s notion of the heterotopic ship, supposedly detached from the ties and rules that obtained on land. Her essay asks: what were the ties that bound a crew together, and what did that have to do with maritime communities? Is the belief that sailors were “allergic” to the ties of marriage and family really supported by the evidence? If not, how did these intimate connections work in a global context? What were the different roles of women and men in sustaining connections, how did these connect to issues like credit, long-distance trade, and inheritance? What happened when these ties were disrupted by tragedy such as the death of a sailor, or an entire ship being lost at sea?

During the same period when the relatives of the Modena’s crew sued prominent members of the English East India Company for justice, the feme sole trader Catherine Nicks was apprehended by soldiers employed by the same company for infringing on its monopoly. In “‘Your Sister Growes Rich by Her Great Trade’: Catherine Nicks’s Intimate Economy,” Aske Laursen Brock introduces an intimate network that spanned Europe and Asia in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, underlining how women created opportunities for themselves and their extended network. Using the case study of Catherine Nicks, the article examines how the East India Company’s network, in spite of the company’s desire for impermeable monopolies, lent itself to people—including some women—who could seek personal and familial gains underneath the larger corporate umbrella.

The volume continues with Lucas Haasis’s “Buying Patience: Ordering and Purchasing Wedding Jewellery and Furniture through Intimate Networks during Eighteenth-Century Mercantile Marriage Initiation and Preparation.” Whereas Catherine Nicks found a way of positioning herself within a transnational trading network, actively forming connections outside of her marriage, Haasis shows that women also found ways to assert themselves from within more intimate settings. Haasis focusses on the earliest stages of marriage—the betrothal period and concrete preparations for living together. The article shows that the importance of marriage for both merchant and wife afforded women with some economic influence and room for negotiation. Haasis demonstrates how Ilsabe Engelhardt, future wife of the Hamburg merchant Nicolaus Gottlieb Luetkens, had her say in the run-up to their marriage by requesting and ordering from her future husband precious jewellery and furniture as compensation for his repeated postponements of their marriage. Marriage in mercantile circles was often not only a commercial business for merchants; it was also an investment on the part of the future wife.

In “Petites Affaires: Pacotille Commerce and the Intimate Networks of Free Black Women and Women of Colour in the Eighteenth-Century French Colonial World,” Annika Raapke examines pacotille commerce and commercial networks among free women of colour. This focus provides a lens on female economic activity and trade and intimate networks in the ancien régime Caribbean colonies. Surviving documentation of pacotille commerce allows us to see women of very different backgrounds as knowledgeable and skilled agents within the socioeconomic framework of eighteenth-century global trade. Specifically, we discover women who combined their knowledge of the male-dominated trading spheres with their own intimate networks in profitable ways. This essay explores not only what these women knew about long-distance trade, but also how they used their local expertise and worked their intimate networks for personal gain in the eighteenth-century French colonial world.

Each contribution considers singular cases to highlight the complex nature of the early modern economy; showing how the lives and experiences of individuals and groups can be used as keyholes through which glimpses of past worlds can be seen. Lawrence Stone has convincingly argued that by focussing a “searchlight” on particular actors in specific contexts, a “whole social system and set of values can be brilliantly illuminated.” The cases examined here allow us to attain a better understanding of the relationship between these beliefs and values on the one hand and intimate social connections on the other. In addition, they help us understand how these relationships were operationalised for survival and economic gains depending on time and place. The cases presented here in many ways represent what Edoardo Grendi has referred to as the “exceptional normal”: people in history seemingly on the margins, who if studied in detail, can shed light on broad socioeconomic phenomena and developments. Their cases represent “telling examples,” highlighting presumed absences in the source material. Though the cases might appear exceptional, they were actually common, reflecting on agentic norms of European

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societies. The events discussed in this forum’s cases—be it free black women’s pacotille trade, the negotiation of a marriage, or the ties that bound a ship’s crew together—represented trivial, common, and usual practice for the contemporaries. The “common past patterns of action which were collectively shared and performed by several people or groups of people in the past,” were, rather than being unusually cosmopolitan in nature, the result of early modern people coming to terms with a spatially expanding world, in which connections over vast distances became more common.

Early modern people’s relationships oscillated between extreme dependencies upon, and an almost nauseating intimacy with, relative strangers on the one hand, and positions of misplaced trust or misconstrued ties resulting in fragile personal economies on the other. Beyond the organisations and institutions that traditionally defined and shaped networks, early modern women and men embraced (or were thrust into) new associations, which provided novel economic opportunities but which entailed other shortcomings. This forum’s focus on women and the particularities of gendered intimate networks within a broad chronological and geographical scope reveals a sharper, more complex and diverse image of economic and social agency in the early modern world.

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Misha Ewen is Lecturer in Early Modern History at the University of Bristol and is the author of The Virginia Venture: American Colonization and English Society, 1580–1660 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022)

Lucas Haasis is a postdoctoral researcher and the research coordinator of the UK-German Prize Papers Project (www.prizepapers.de). He is also a lecturer of Early Modern History at the Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg, Germany. His research focusses on 18th-century letter-writing practices, mercantile culture of the 18th century, materiality studies, and praxeological approaches in historiography and global microhistory. His most recent publication is The Power of Persuasion: Becoming a Merchant in the 18th Century (Transcript, 2022).

Margaret R. Hunt is senior professor of history at Uppsala University, Sweden. She is the author of The Middling Sort: Commerce, Gender and the Family in England 1680–1780 (University of California Press, 1996) and Women in Eighteenth-century Europe (Routledge, 2010). She is co-author (with Philip J. Stern) of The 1689 Siege of Bombay: The East India Company at the Height of Mughal Expansion (Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2017).

Annika Raapke is DFG Walter Benjamin Postdoc at the University of Göttingen, Germany. She specialises in the history of the 18th-century French Caribbean. Her first monograph is the German translation of her English-language PhD-Thesis on bodies in the French Caribbean titled ‘Dieses verfluchte Land’. Europäische Körper in Brieferzählungen aus der Karibik, 1744–1826 (Transcript, 2019). Her publications address questions of gender, emotions and family, food, health and illness in the colonial Caribbean context, as well as methodological considerations such as practice theory.


40 Lucas Haasis, The Power of Persuasion: Becoming a Merchant in the 18th Century (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2022), 67. Jan de Vries has recently argued that global microhistorians’ focus on individuals who were unusually cosmopolitan has led to misleadingly hopeful conclusions concerning a heavily connected cosmopolitan past with an overt accentuation of the positives of global encounters; see Jan de Vries, “Playing with Scales: The Global and the Micro, the Macro and the Nano,” Past & Present 242:14 (21 November 2019): 23–36, 29.