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Cutting corners: when borders, culture and empire do not matter



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Cutting corners:
when borders, culture and empire do not matter

Inaugural lecture by

Prof.dr C.A.P. Antunes

on the acceptance of her position of professor of
History of Global Economic Networks: Merchants, Entrepreneurs and Empires
at Leiden University
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Rector Magnificus, Dean of the Faculty of Humanities, Chair of the Institute for History, Your Excellency the Portuguese Ambassador to the Kingdom of the Netherlands, ladies and gentlemen,

In 1853, George Bancroft argued that ‘commerce (...) defies every wind, outrides every tempest, and invades every zone’.¹ Bancroft portrays trade as a forceful activity of defiance, independence and resilience. But if trade was as forceful as Bancroft portrays, what kind of world did its overwhelming impact create? I argue that, through the entanglements of commodity chains, Early Modern trade shaped, and was shaped by, extensive global networks and business strategies that created an intensive, interconnected world where institutional borders, cultural barriers and institutions of empire became irrelevant.

1. Commodity Chains, or the showcasing of extensive global networks

As an object of study, the Early Modern slave trade, which William Wilberforce described as ‘so enormous, so dreadful, so irremediable’, is concomitant to themes such as abolition and emancipation.² Beyond the human suffering and individual tragedies, however, it has a less personal and more systemic meaning in that it was both the beginning and the end of a series of commodity chains touching five continents and crossing three oceans.³ European traders transported hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans to plantations in the Americas. They funded their purchases of slaves by selling low-value products that their African counterparts quickly found unsuitable.⁴ By the late seventeenth century, significant amounts of cowrie shells, textiles, alcohol and tobacco were being used for systematic purchases of slaves on the West Coast of Africa. The shells and textiles were imported from the Indian Ocean,⁵ while alcohol and tobacco came from the Americas.⁶

In the Americas, slaves were sold to three main buyers. Firstly, to plantation owners who used them to produce cash crops

that were shipped to European markets and sold to cover the costs of purchasing the slaves, to pay mortgages used to acquire the plantations, to repay credit granted for maintaining colonial households, and to fund the costs of shipping crops to Europe.⁷ Secondly, slaves were sold as domestics in the growing cities of the Americas, where they became symbols of social distinction for their masters⁸, who employed them in their households or rented them out for profit. Thirdly, they were sold to work in silver and gold mines.⁹

Most of the silver mined in Spanish America was exported to Seville through the *Carrera de Indias*. However, smaller quantities were exported, overland and via the Pacific, to Manila, where they entered the Sino-centric world of exchanges and partly offset Europe’s trade imbalance with China.¹⁰ In the Chinese market, the silver was used to purchase luxury products that were mainly exported directly to Europe, but sometimes to America via the Pacific route. Raw materials and manufactured goods, meanwhile, entered the intra-Asian networks, some of which passed through or terminated in the Indian sub-continent and Indian Ocean, or the place of origin of the shells and textiles that were essential for acquiring slaves in West Africa.

These commodity chains, explained here from the transatlantic slave trade perspective, comprised multiple sub-systems of production and exchange of products, people, capital, ideas and information in Africa, the Americas, Asia and Europe. Within this articulated world, it is difficult not to perceive historical categories like ‘Atlantic History’, ‘Indian Ocean History’ or ‘Pacific History’ as reductive. Being reductive does not imply that these categories have no merit - indeed, they enable historians to zoom in on specific dynamics of the above spaces. However, historians often fail to zoom out into a less systemic and more global understanding of the significance of the connectivities. These categories are as unhelpful as those of ‘nationally’ conceptualized spaces such as the British, Dutch, French, Portuguese or Spanish Empires. Likewise, smaller units

of analysis, such as commercial cycles determining phases of colonial expansion (the 'Pepper Empire', 'Sugar Empire', 'Gold Empire' or 'Silver Century') or modes of economic exploitation and colonization (such as the various East India Companies, the Royal African Company, among many others), fall short in addressing the complexity and connectivity of exchanges encapsulated by a more global approach. So how were these commodity chains sustained?

2. Secret of business: intensive global interconnectedness

Early Modern commodity chains thrived on individual initiative and collective human agency, symbolized by networks and characterized by skillful ingenuity. Producers, manufacturers, but mostly traders were essential in establishing and maintaining these chains. It was their vision of the world, often guided by principles of economic, social and political gain, that framed and shaped exchanges, fostered connections and generated successful symbiotic rather than integrated markets.¹¹

In Africa, the transatlantic slave trade was dependent on two sets of trading networks: one linking the hinterland (where many were enslaved) with the coastal settlements, and one maintaining the slaves at the coastal forts and towns while they awaited transport across the Atlantic.¹² While the former mostly comprised Africans from various family groups and religious denominations, the latter comprised Eurafricans.¹³ These commercial and cultural brokers, middlemen or go-betweens formed the key between the landed hinterlands and the maritime trading routes.¹⁴ They also functioned as essential bolts in relationships between European traders and companies operating on the maritime frontier and the African authorities under whose sovereignty these Europeans had to trade.¹⁵ While hinterland traders focused on local connections and on articulating the continental trade, Eurafricans and Africans on the coast became essential in connecting local and regional networks to transcontinental partners.

The Europeans and Americans trading on the coast, mostly from Brazil, belonged to a broader network that articulated the African exchanges with those with America, Asia and Europe. Bartering slaves for cowrie shells and Indian textiles fostered the development of two distinct networks. One group of traders operating directly from Europe acquired Indian Ocean textiles on the European markets by participating in the main East India trading companies' auctions and shipping these textiles to Africa, where they became transaction costs associated with the slave trade. Similar networks developed across the Arabian Sea and into the Mediterranean for re-exporting cowrie shells to Africa. The former networks departed from Brazil, acquired the textiles in the factories, forts and towns of the Portuguese *Estado da Índia* and shipped them across the Cape of Good Hope to Rio de Janeiro and Bahia and, from there, to the African markets.¹⁶ However, these networks faced competition from Indian exporters shipping textiles to the East Coast of Africa to fund purchases of slaves. East African slaves were sold to buyers in the Arabic Peninsula and European settlements in Asia or introduced into the Atlantic slave trading system via the Cape of Good Hope.¹⁷

The second group of traders operated directly from the Americas, selling sugar cane byproducts from Brazil and the Caribbean (cachaça and rum) to barter for slaves on African markets. Local planters-turned-producers became the business partners of regional traders organizing shipments across the South Atlantic.¹⁸ A similar trend can be seen for tobacco: initially, only low-quality tobacco was exported to Africa to exchange for slaves. But, like with cachaça, the Brazilian traders dominating the trade quickly diversified into low-quality tobacco to barter for slaves in African markets, and high-quality tobacco to be sold to European traders operating in these markets and who shipped it to their European home ports for sale to European consumers. Tobacco, cachaça, cowrie shells and textiles structured trading circuits and transcontinental markets, while also framing social hierarchies, consumption behaviours and social transformation in Africa.

In the Americas, slaves were sold at auction or through professional brokers¹⁹ operating as intermediaries between slave traders, plantation owners, city dwellers and mine operators. They combined this role with providing credit for purchases of slaves, guaranteeing payments for slave traders and acting as colonial agents for exports of cash crops and raw materials to Europe.²⁰ Simultaneously, brokers within the Spanish Monarchy's sphere also collected duties levied on slave trading and, sometimes, were agents of European principals holding exclusive slaving contracts and licenses from the Monarchy.²¹ Sporadically, they were also responsible for transporting slaves overland or along rivers to mining districts.

The transportation of silver overland to Acapulco was organized by local agents, who were responsible for transport, security and surveillance until the cargoes were loaded onto the galleon departing for Manila. Once there, the silver entered the Sino-centric trading complex via exchanges organized by the Chinese communities in the Philippines. The silver served to balance European purchases in China through Taiwan, Macao and Canton.²²

American silver taken to China was in direct competition with silver received from Japan in exchange for Chinese silk and other products. Owing to Japan's regulated trade, the Shogunate was reliant on foreigners such as the Dutch and Chinese for its trade with China. However, silver's availability in the Japanese market created profitable opportunities for Japanese traders to engage in trade with Chinese and Korean networks.²³

American silver transferred into China via the Pacific helped balance Europe's trading deficit with China. That deficit was only marginally offset by intra-Asian trading networks selling raw materials and finished and luxury products into the Chinese markets via overland or sea routes. These intra-Asian networks were operated by Asian trading 'nations' from multiple cultural and religious backgrounds, both

autochthonous and diasporic.²⁴ Like Brazilians in the South Atlantic or Spanish American agents in the Caribbean, what they had in common was the ability to articulate local manufacturers, local exchange networks, regional trading connections and regional tax farming. These networks were essential in building a bridge between textile weavers, manufacturers and producers in the interiors of the Indian sub-continent and the main maritime gateways, where traders, trading companies and Brazilian networks acquired textiles to export to European markets as luxury goods, or to barter for slaves on the East and West African coasts.²⁵

The people organizing, facilitating and enabling the networks that ultimately created these sets of commodity chains had varying *modus operandi*, goals and strategies and displayed very different entrepreneurial behaviours. However, two features seem common to all: while global trading networks developed around the need to connect economic activities in the hinterlands with market demand in coastal areas and consequently articulated and mediated between local, regional and global nodes, agents, networks and markets, in what I argue was often a hierarchical connection resulting in regional market integration, some network members were also linked by horizontal relationships and a degree of self-organization, inherent to the Early Modern constraints on the circulation, transmission and adaptation of information. Local and regional networks relied on groups' social organization, including cultural markers such as place of origin, family group, language, ethnicity and religion,²⁶ and business was conducted among members sharing 'strong ties' with family, friends and coreligionists.²⁷ Global networks, conversely, functioned because local and regional merchants moved beyond their shared 'strong ties' to establish connections outside their socio-cultural environments. These networks, therefore, were the result of multiplex relationships of individuals linked by what Mark Granovetter called the '*strength of weak ties*'.²⁸ In short, and following Mark Casson's theoretical premises, global networks were embedded in

horizontal relationships based on long-term durability, symbiotic relationships between members and their intermediation function.²⁹

The simultaneous and mutually enforcing nature of these networks at local, regional and global levels, combining vertical and horizontal features, has analytical consequences for historical narratives. Local merchants in Europe had more in common with local merchants in Africa, the Americas, China or Japan than with global merchants operating in their region. However, this division did not prevent intertwined social and economic relationships between these different networks. In essence, merchants were organized at three levels: vertically, according to zones of production, transformation and trade; horizontally, according to levels of participation in the integrated networks; and cross-network, according to levels of social prominence in a specific community.

6

Historians have traditionally resolved the problem of the limitations imposed on relationships between global merchants with widely differing cultural blueprints by arguing for the cross-cultural nature of the exchanges between global network participants. Since cross-cultural economic exchanges do not benefit from the same social regulations as mono-cultural exchanges (where group pressure, social shaming or exclusion can be used to punish deviant and cheating behaviour), they are reliant on cooperation in socially construed spaces of trust, such as that provided by the language of merchant correspondence and institutionalized agreements (contracts).³⁰ Only if one or all of these conditions are met can global networks operate, across space and time, beyond the cultural borders raised by individual social affiliations and identities in what Francesca Trivellato poignantly saw as clear evidence for the existence of a global mercantile culture.³¹

My proposal is for an alternative consideration to that of Trivellato's. What if, instead of relying on cooperation and the language of trust implicit in mercantile correspondence

or institutionalized agreements, global merchant networks shared a common conceptual framework that developed across different continents, at different times and within different social, economic, political and cultural constellations, but resulted in the conceptualization and acceptance of three economic principles? Court records of commercial disputes suggest, firstly, that participants in global networks were aware of the principle of exchange and thus knew intrinsically that reciprocity is expected if a product or object changes hands, with cultural differences reflected in the value of the exchanged item or the accepted means of payment. Secondly, they had a common recognition that if one party in an exchange reciprocates less than fully, an imbalance arises and compensation becomes necessary, with the cultural divide determining whether such debt is a question of free will and, thus, a moral issue, or a contingency. The outcome of this cultural assessment then frames the means of payment and compensation. While some regard payment of principal and interest as enough, others see payment of principal and delivering one's extended family into slavery, or honourable death through suicide, as the only means of restoring the balance inherent in reciprocity. The third common concept links directly to the second. Parties failing to reciprocate during an exchange and also unable to repay a debt with appropriate compensation endanger their reputation and become less trusted. And where reputation is associated with religious mores, loss of honour is directly concomitant to merchant behaviour and morality.

My core argument, based on the universal understanding of the essential concepts of exchange, reciprocity, debt/compensation and reputation, is that merchant culture existed, although the enforcing of the values directly associated with these essential concepts varied greatly across the cultural divide, not only among the Abrahamic religions, but also in other religious constellations. Were there no restrictions on what cross-cultural global networks sharing a common merchant culture could achieve?

3. Inciency of Borders, Culture and Empire

Commodity chains structured around the knowledge, information and connectivity of global merchant networks were not reliant solely on the competence or initiative of individual merchants and trading communities. They also depended heavily on the institutional framing of spaces and spheres of legality that conditioned the way in which merchants could organize such chains.³²

Spaces and spheres of legality were conceived of and designed by states, which then decentralized the enforcement of legality to state-like institutions that took on responsibility for regulating economic life through jurisdictional taxation, control of the borders of territorialized legality with violence, mediation of relationships between the state and other polities through diplomacy, and for the governance of people within the territorialized legal spaces by judicial adjudication. These state-like institutions, ranging from the *Carreira da Índia* and *Carrera de Indias* to the chartered and joint stock companies, were created specifically for this purpose and have been portrayed by historians such as Philip Stern, especially in the case of the joint stock companies, as ‘company-states’.³³

Competing European states defined legality through two premises. On the one hand, the limits of what a state considered its right to exploit outside Europe translated into the defining and imposing of borders on territories that escaped direct control by European states. Not only did these borders conflict with existing claims by other European counterparts, but also with claims by local polities and states in Africa, the Americas and Asia.³⁴ In this sense, Early Modern European empire borders were often areas disputed between Europeans, but also between Europeans, Africans, Americans and Asians.

On the other hand, legality was also defined by rights to access and exploit specific resources, and these rights translated into territorial or market claims. The exclusive and monopolistic

rights conceded by European states to royal monopolists and to chartered and joint stock companies served three purposes. Firstly, they defined the frame within which Europeans could compete against each other outside Europe. Secondly, they defined economic operators’ exclusive rights to control individual European domestic markets, in what historians often refer to as mercantilism. Thirdly, they tied specific social groups to the state, thus sharing wealth and sovereignty with a selected few, described by Regina Grafe and Alejandra Irigoin as ‘stakeholders of empire’.³⁵

At first sight, the compartmentalization of areas of trade and exclusive rights of exploitation did little to foster commodity chains and served as a hindrance to global trading networks. However, I propose a more nuanced analysis of the relationship between states, institutions of empire and global trading networks. At different moments in time these parties opposed, cooperated and represented each other, while simultaneously and interchangeably articulating legal and illegal circuits and moving into spaces of cross-imperial and frontier exchanges to transform what Richard White sees as a ‘middle ground’ into what I claim was ‘common ground’.³⁶

In the European imagination, the transatlantic slave trade was regulated by European monarchs and commercial companies. The Spanish *asiento de negros* and the charters of the African and West India companies granted them exclusive rights to buy slaves in West Africa and sell them on to Caribbean and American markets. While the *asiento* conceded rights to import slaves into the Spanish West Indies, the exclusive rights in the charters of the Danish, Dutch, English, French and Swedish companies allowed them to trade only at their respective forts on the coast and to serve their American and Caribbean plantation colonies (except where the Dutch, English and French companies participated in the outsourcing of the *asiento*). The sources show, however, that Europeans also traded among themselves in the same manner as they competed. Ships of different

origins and under different flags bought slaves in competitors' forts, while 'free operators' were able to facilitate trade for institutional and non-institutional traders along the coast. The legal boundaries Europeans established against each other obviously ignored or set aside institutional controls designed by African states, such as the Kingdom of Dahomey or the Ashanti Empire, who also saw themselves as controlling the same sources of income and commercial routes. Curiously, these zones of legality established by Africans and Europeans also created opportunities for global networks to participate in the illegal trade of enslaved Africans, to use institutional loopholes arising when the two institutional worlds met and, simultaneously, to engage in legal trade.³⁷

Legal and illegal slave trading into the Americas took advantage of the right to introduce enslaved Africans into plantation colonies by creating scope for illegal transportation of slaves to remote islands in the Caribbean, between the different insular and mainland Caribbean settlements and towns, and also across two major river systems, the River Plate and the Amazon.³⁸ This illegal trade was rooted in the acquisition, both legal and illegal, of slaves in West Africa and on traders' willingness and ability to evade taxes on a massive scale and thus reduce their transaction costs. Slave traders used illicitly acquired products like Indian textiles and Brazilian tobacco to pay for slaves, with some tobacco being illegally re-exported to Europe and paid for, in part, in smuggled goods (silver, cash crops and raw materials) that were then reintroduced into the intra-American trading circuits or sold into Europe as legal produce. However, perhaps the longest-lasting consequences of the complementary nature of these circuits were the exchanges across the different imperial borders.

While the silver circulating in the Americas and the Caribbean resulted partly from deviant circuits of exchange, another very striking sphere where legal and illegal exchanges were intertwined was in Japan. Faced with competition

from American silver introduced through Manila and the increasingly strict rules of Japanese regulated trade, Japanese traders often became involved in illegal trade, either by illegally purchasing products from the Dutch and the Chinese, or by establishing regional import-export operations to Korea, Taiwan and Macao in the hope of eluding the *bakufu*, while also being careful, so as to prevent their silver from becoming devalued, to avoid trade when Manila-based traders were active in the Chinese markets. In this case, the restrictions imposed by the *bakufu*, including the exclusive rights granted to the VOC and Chinese traders were, on the one hand, disregarded and, on the other hand, shared with the VOC and fellow traders through intricate mechanisms of trade and credit.³⁹

Another example of where illegality and legality took similar shape and followed the same trajectory was private trade, where European and Eurasian employees of European companies and empires in the East often served their employers, while also maintaining private business arrangements with local and regional traders. Although this private trade was discouraged by all European institutions in Asia, it was par for the course ever since Vasco da Gama first arrived in Calicut in 1498 and a way to compensate employees for low wages and simultaneously buy their loyalty at times of crises (including war and naval blockades). Only when profits from private trade threatened the position of specific individuals or institutions did the latter move to punish deviant behaviour or legalize private trade within the boundaries set by the institutions.⁴⁰

The European markets, too, were permeable to illegal trading. Even in markets where mercantilism was heavily enforced, like England and France, illegal imports, transported by third parties, were common. Smaller trading companies, like the Swedish, Danish, Ostend or Brandenburg companies, were able to introduce their imports into the larger consumption markets provided by the British, French and Spanish monarchies and

the Dutch Republic.⁴¹ These smaller companies, with their multinational directors and employees, as well as diasporic groups, added value to illicit transactions as they were able to resolve disputes in court and argue for property rights based on regimes of legal pluralism or regimes of subjection (to a specific king or republic).⁴²

Although primary sources do not allow a definitive statement on the correlation between legal and illegal global transactions during the Early Modern period, these examples stand for a generalized behaviour that is simultaneously oppositional, cooperative and representative. It is only within the premises of entangled history that I can encapsulate the study of global trading networks and their relationship with the colonial institutional landscape. As the examples attest for these network participants, physical, legal and cultural institutionalized borders were insipient in influencing the trajectory of the commodity chains they commanded. While, in this sense, European overseas empires during the Early Modern period were violent and exclusive, they were also utterly inefficient in enforcing individual, collective and institutional borders. Their success can be found, instead, in the way European maritime empires were able to include, rather than exclude, global merchant networks in their operations. This success was twofold.

On the one hand, global merchant networks slowly but steadily became stakeholders of empire, and thus their destiny became co-dependent on that of the state. While for Europeans this often meant a short, quick and guaranteed path up the social ladder, for non-Europeans it meant a short path towards participating in worlds of trade beyond their culturally defined system. As a result, many developed a symbiotic relationship with colonial regimes. In this way, the subjects of empire, transformed in the nineteenth-century imperial age into citizens of empire, were able to enjoy benefits of trade and move into institutional positions within the colonial and imperial projects.

Although global trading networks defied the borders imagined, imposed and weakly enforced by central states and their delegated institutions, they did not operate solely on the precept of opposing the state, but instead on a sliding scale of legality and illegality, depending on whether they were actively or passively tolerated by the institutions.

On the other hand, colonial institutions could not have enforced their domain without the actions of these global networks. Empire's existence was dependent upon spaces of tolerated illegality that simultaneously weakened and strengthened the colonial project's edifice. Thus, Early Modern global merchants, turned nineteenth-century citizens of empire, become citizens of the world in the postcolonial moment.

I conclude with a concrete example of a global, cross-imperial, multicultural network that operated legally and illegally, across different empires and zones of trade, and that seems to have regarded borders, culture and empire as an afterthought in its daily activities. Articulated by a European firm, this case stands at the centre of an ongoing project with Susana Münch Miranda and João Paulo Salvado.

In the early eighteenth century, Jean-Baptiste Cloots, merchant and financier in Amsterdam, was by all Early Modern standards an extremely wealthy man. He made his living by providing financial services to firms in Amsterdam and abroad, in three of which he held a special interest. His *comptoir* provided the starting capital for his nephew Paulo Cloots and Willem de Bruijn to open a Lisbon office, while he also supported his brother, Paulo Jacomo Cloots, who had a partnership in Antwerp with Willem's brother, Daniel de Bruijn. In addition, Jean-Baptiste provided services to another brother, Egidio Cloots, who opened a *comptoir* in Cadiz. But what were the De Bruijn and Cloots families doing across Europe? Paulo Jacomo in Antwerp, in partnership with Daniel de Bruijn, managed a successful commercial circuit

of luxury and woollen textiles, produced in the Antwerp and Amsterdam hinterlands and exported to Iberia. His success enabled him to marry into the Antwerp financial family De Prêt, who held interests in the European and overseas trades. Being in the De Prêt sphere enabled him, in turn, to invest in fitting out ships to trade slaves in West Africa, thus challenging the exclusive rights of the Dutch and English companies. Paulo Jacomo was also prominent in promoting an Ostend East India Company under the protection of the Habsburg Emperor, a project that proved extremely successful. For Paulo Jacomo, the Bengali textiles acquired through the Ostend Company were paramount in allowing him to acquire enslaved Africans in West Africa, while the tea from Canton was introduced, illegally, in England and the Netherlands.⁴³ In Lisbon, his nephew Paulo Cloots and partner Willem de Bruijn quickly abandoned their goal of selling luxury and woollen textiles for consumption in the Portuguese cities and the Portuguese empire in exchange for imports of wool. They saw the potential for profit in the overseas trade and the need for financial services in Lisbon, activities that provided better and more secure income, and therefore started discounting bills of exchange for foreign merchants in Lisbon, via Amsterdam and London, using Jean-Baptiste's networks and liquidity. To improve the Lisbon firm's liquidity, the partners then looked for a way to profit from the Brazilian gold cycle through the auctioning of the royal contract for exploiting tobacco revenues, followed by the right to fit out their own ships. This provided the perfect excuse for regularly sending a ship with a supercargo to Brazil to exchange textiles and other products for gold. Their closeness to the monarchy also gave them access to other markets. Like Paulo Jacomo in Antwerp, De Bruijn and Cloots participated in the slave trade in West Africa and Madagascar, side-stepping the exclusive rights and mercantilist policies of the Portuguese and the French monarchies, as well as the Dutch VOC and WIC charters. They were also able to send ships, within the Lusophone world, first to the *Estado da Índia*, and later to Macao, where they gained access to the rich trades of China in a similar

way to Paulo Jacomo in Antwerp. In Cadiz, Egidio Cloots guaranteed the provisioning and fitting out of the Ostend's company ships after they were forced to divert to free ports when the British and the Dutch pressured the Emperor to liquidate the company. From Cadiz, the ships sailed to China and Bengal, with supercargoes and international crews of English, Scottish, Irish, Dutch and Portuguese. After the ships returned to Cadiz, the Asian products were placed into the European markets through free ports such as Hamburg, non-mercantilist markets such as those in the Dutch Republic, or simply through illegal shipments to France and England. At the core of these exchanges, Jean-Baptiste provided liquidity to his family members and partners, who facilitated Indian textile imports' entry into slave trading circuits in the Indian and Atlantic oceans, while profiting from the tea trade and tobacco exclusive, especially through tax farming. Along the way, the Cloots family sought to profit from the Brazilian gold cycle and illicit imports of diamonds from the East and to function as 'merchants of souls', while enrolling crews and supercargoes in Cadiz and shaping a global network. This strategy placed them in an intensively globalizing and interconnected world, where they abided by – as much as broke – institutional, cultural and imperial borders across multiple continents and oceans, thus rendering these borders irrelevant.

I would like to thank the Executive Board of Leiden University, the Dean of the Faculty of Humanities, the Chair of the Institute for History, and the Chair of the Economic and Social History Section for the trust and honour bestowed upon me.

Today, I have stood alone before you. However, this has not been a lonely journey. Amélia Andrade has been an academic example and a very good friend. Richard Griffiths and Femme Gaastra have always put great faith in my abilities. My work has been thoroughly discussed by men I greatly respect: Jaap Bruijn, Wim Blockmans, Leonard Blussé, Piet Emmer and Peer Vries. It is in the comradeship of the Economic and Social History Section that I feel most at ease. I dearly miss those

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My final words go to my family. To my mother, from whom I learned that 'impossible' is a synonym of 'lazy', that 'obstacle' is only an excuse not to move forward and that 'working hard' is what most people do. To my dearest and oldest friend, Lena, who understands the silence as much as the noise and has stood firm with everything I have done over the past thirty

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Ik heb gezegd.

Notes

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- 2014-2015 Marie Curie ITN Partner: *ForSeaDiscovery – Forest Resources for Iberian Empires: Ecology and Globalization in the Age of Discovery*
- 2013 Young Academy of Europe
- 2013-2018 Starting Grant, ERC: *Fighting Monopolies, Defying Empires, 1500-1750: A Comparative Overview of Free Agents and Informal Empires in Western Europe and the Ottoman Empire*
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Abstract

In 1853, George Bancroft argued that 'commerce (...) defies every wind, outrides every tempest, and invades every zone'. Bancroft portrays trade as a forceful activity of defiance, independence and resilience. But if trade was as forceful as Bancroft portrays, what kind of world did its overwhelming impact create? I argue that, through the entanglements of commodity chains, Early Modern trade shaped, and was shaped by, extensive global networks and business strategies that created an intensive, interconnected world where institutional borders, cultural barriers and institutions of empire became irrelevant.



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