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Review Of "New Netherland Connections: Intimate Networks And Atlantic Ties In Seventeenth-Century America" By S. Shaw Romney

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Recommended Citation

Robert S. DuPlessis. (2015). "Review Of "New Netherland Connections: Intimate Networks And Atlantic Ties In Seventeenth-Century America" By S. Shaw Romney". *Enterprise And Society*. Volume 16, Issue 3. 714-716. DOI: 10.1353/ens.2015.0007
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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

New Netherland Connections: Intimate Networks and Atlantic Ties in Seventeenth-Century America

Journal:	<i>Enterprise and Society</i>
Manuscript ID:	Draft
Manuscript Type:	Book Review

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Manuscripts

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3 Susanah Shaw Romney. *New Netherland Connections. Intimate Networks and Atlantic Ties in*
4 *Seventeenth-Century America*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2014. xviii
5 + 318 pp. ISBN 978-1-4696-1425-0, \$45.00 (cloth); 978-1-1496-1426-7, \$44.99 (e-book).
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8 This well researched monograph explores the many ways that interpersonal relationships among
9 predominantly non-elite individuals assisted Dutch trade and colonialism in New Amsterdam
10 during its brief existence in the middle third of the seventeenth century. In five substantive
11 chapters, Susanah Shaw Romney painstakingly traces commercial, family, and fictive kin
12 connections among a wide variety of individuals—African, Amerindian, and Dutch, enslaved
13 and free, female and male, indigenous and immigrant—within and, less often, across ethnic and
14 racial boundaries. Of particular moment to readers of this journal, the author demonstrates that
15 “intimate networks” (“ties that developed from people’s immediate, affective, and personal
16 associations” [18]) enabled individual men and women of modest means to participate in
17 transatlantic trade outside the chartered Dutch West India Company (WIC). Equally important,
18 Romney argues, such relationships maintained vital trade between Native Americans and
19 colonists despite repeated outbreaks of violence, fostered a unique type of slave emancipation,
20 and facilitated New Netherland’s peaceful transfer to English control.
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25 *New Netherland Connections* is an excellent example of scholarship that is currently reorienting
26 the historiography of empires and commerce away from large-scale, formal institutions toward
27 more fugitive, less structured forms of participation, notably by extending analysis of networks
28 rooted in credit and trust from the extensive associations organized by and for professionals to
29 more adventitious relationships among a broader range of individuals and groups. The book
30 draws as well on the venerable strand of social history that emphasizes the agency of “ordinary”
31 people, in this instance the indigenous, the enslaved people, and female settlers, combined with a
32 more recent “turn” in Atlantic and global history toward accounts of geographically mobile and
33 improvisationally entrepreneurial individuals and kin groups.
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36 The initial two chapters make fine use of Amsterdam notarial archives to recreate lives
37 and labor existing outside the WIC. The first, focused on Amsterdam, examines
38 interpersonal bonds—with family members and friends and also with rooming house
39 proprietors, many of them female—that assisted the recruitment of men for WIC service
40 and the subsequent transatlantic management of such individuals’ finances in ways that
41 promoted geographic, occupational, and in some cases socio-economic mobility. In the
42 second chapter, the scene shifts to New Netherland (the Dutch colony in the greater
43 Hudson River valley of present-day New York), where Old World personal relationships
44 were both recreated and revised. Romney insists that family ties were as central to trade
45 in New Netherland among the prosperous professional merchant elite as among the many
46 artisans, sailors, and other non-professionals who likewise engaged in market exchange.
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50 Based on careful appraisal of still understudied New Netherland colonial records,
51 chapters three and four are the most impressive and original. The third provides a
52 capacious description of the vigorous trade between settlers and indigenous inhabitants
53 that encompassed not only the well-known exchange of furs for imported manufactures
54 but the perhaps more vital supply of foodstuffs and firewood. Ongoing trade did not
55 necessarily denote peace, however, and Romney argues that the coexistence of commerce
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3 and conflict resulted largely from the failure of settlers and Native Americans to establish
4 substantive intimate ties that could have bridged their deep cultural differences. Chapter
5 four, in contrast, shows the salutary effects that viable transcultural relations could have,
6 albeit on the limited scale of the “half freedom” achieved by a small group of WIC slaves
7 who agreed to remain Company laborers in return for the removal of many of the
8 liabilities of bondage. According to Romney, partial emancipation became possible after
9 the group had formed what the Dutch recognized as viable intimate networks involving
10 stable families and networks of godparentage encompassing enslaved converts to the
11 Dutch Reformed Church as well as important Dutch settlers. Thereby, Romney maintains,
12 those slaves demonstrated not only their economic importance to the Dutch but also,
13 through marriage and conversion, their commitment to forms of affiliation that colonists
14 valorized. The final chapter, about five individuals who served as negotiators in New
15 Netherland’s endgame, contains suggestive but sketchy material about the mobilization
16 of interpersonal relationships for political purposes.
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21 Much of the book proposes interactive structuring of the Dutch imperial authority and
22 commercial projects on the one hand and initiatives by intimate networks on the other,
23 and Romney adduces plausible if not always persuasive evidence in support of her theses.
24 Disconcertingly, however, she is also prone to reductive and one-sided statements, and
25 this linguistic and apparently interpretive vacillation, as well as overgeneralizations about
26 the agency of her protagonists in the making of New Netherland and of the Dutch
27 Atlantic economy, undercuts the force of her arguments. Claiming, e.g., that “women’s
28 relationships built this empire” [303], is no more convincing than the outdated top-down,
29 centralized, institutional argument that the author inverts. Moreover, in the absence of
30 quantitative economic analysis, the relative importance of trade conducted by intimate
31 networks as compared with that of the WIC remains an open question.
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35 Building on her sedulous detective work in the archival and printed sources, Romney’s
36 close attention to New Netherland allows for remarkably detailed depiction of a range of
37 micro-level relationships. But this focus also entails neglect of broader contexts, not only
38 regarding other Dutch colonies and long-distance commerce but also concerning other
39 European trade and imperial ventures of the time. A few of these issues are raised in
40 footnotes, and some scholarship is critically though briefly evaluated therein. But had that
41 material been integrated into the text, it could have been more adequately examined and
42 perhaps helped nuance some of the author’s balder assertions (not to mention enhancing
43 the book’s readability).
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47 *New Netherland Connections* provides much food for thought both for specialists in
48 Dutch and Dutch colonial history and for students of empire and commerce throughout
49 the early modern Atlantic. Thanks to Romney’s research, they will want to place in
50 comparative perspective her theses on the important role that popular participation played
51 in local and long-distance trade, in inter-communal relations, and in the circumstances in
52 which colonial slavery could be modified if not evaded. It may then be possible to judge
53 the degree to which the fascinating stories that the author has uncovered were unique to
54 the Dutch Atlantic—or even to New Netherland—and how much they were rooted in the
55 early stages of European colonization and global commerce.
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(Word count: 1030)

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