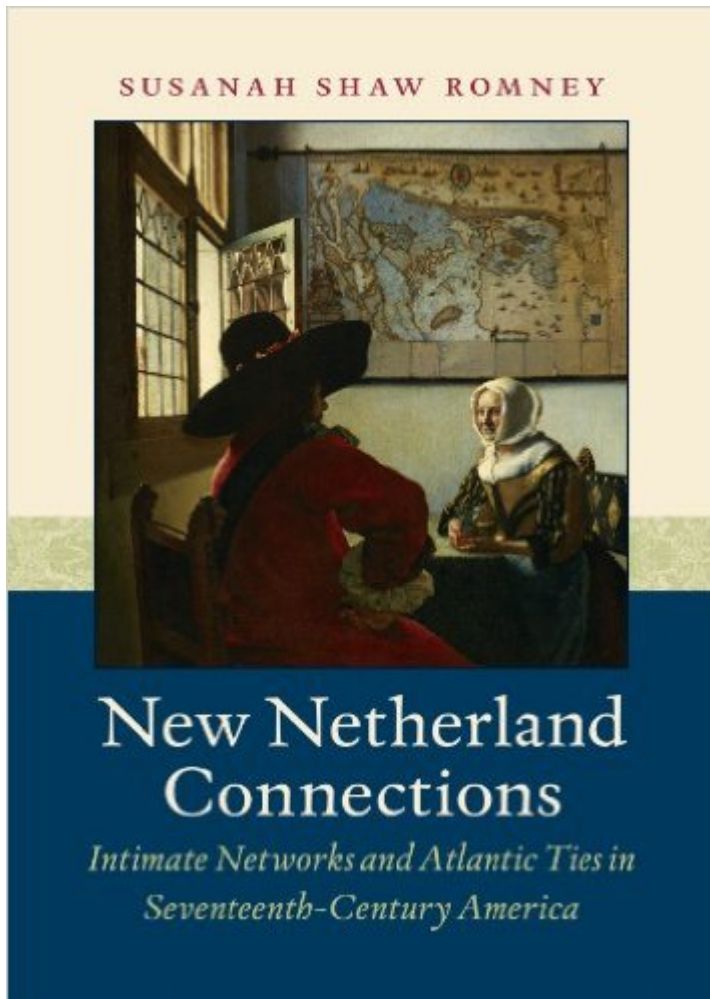


# The Perils of Intimacy

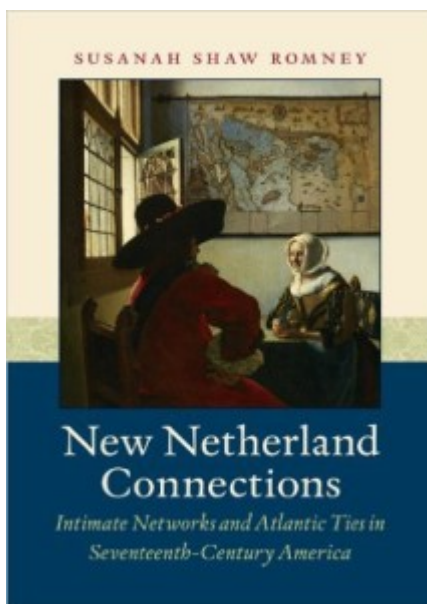


In the heart of Amsterdam there is an archive. And in that archive there is a card catalog listing the records of hundreds of notaries. The card catalog in the Amsterdam Municipal Archive is a thing of legend among Dutch historians, for the notarial records are an incredibly rich source for the economic and social history of the early modern Dutch world. Notaries played a crucial role in the economic and social life of the Dutch Republic and its overseas colonies, recording the business dealings of uncounted hosts of common people struggling to make a living in the Dutch world. As the catalog has yet to be indexed, few historians have dared to wade into its uncharted seas of manuscript references, never mind the often very difficult-to-read manuscripts themselves.

One wonders what intimacy has to do with cross-cultural relations, especially in a situation like New Netherland where, unlike Dutch Indonesia, the Dutch did not control the local inhabitants to the extent that they could govern their intimate behavior.

Susanah Shaw Romney is one of the few and the brave who has successfully unlocked a portion of the notarial archive. Scholars working on New Netherland have long anticipated her work. They will not be disappointed. Romney's window onto the world of small-scale interactions related to New Netherland is a tremendous achievement for the social history of New Netherland. Romney has not only worked through the Dutch archives, but the surviving Dutch documents in America. Although many of these have been translated at various times over the past century and a half, those translations are not always reliable, and so, wherever possible, Romney relies on her own translations (this is not always possible because a number of the sources were burned, in whole or part, when the New York State Archives caught fire early in the twentieth century). Anyone who has tried to work with seventeenth-century Dutch sources must recognize this book as an impressive achievement of research.

Scholars will be mining Romney's footnotes for years to come, but what about her argument that the "intimate networks people constructed, rather than actions taken by formal structures or metropolitan authorities, constituted empire"? What she calls "intimate networks . . . consisted of a web of ties that developed from people's immediate, affective, and personal associations and spanned vast geographic and cultural distances." By combining "the study of imperial intimacies with the study of imperial networks" she wants to suggest "a new model for the exploration of immediate relationships in early modern empires" (18). The "function of intimate networks was not benign," Romney points out (20). Instead, they implicated all sorts of ordinary people: women of all sorts, poor sailors, bakers, enslaved Africans, and even American indigenous leaders in the expansion of Dutch power overseas.



Susanah Shaw Romney, *New Netherland Connections: Intimate Networks and Atlantic Ties in Seventeenth-Century America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 2014. 336 pp., \$45.

In a refreshing change from the current wave of literature that deploys words like “intimacy” and “colonialism” in their titles, this is not a study of “colonizers’ desires to regulate sexual intimacies within colonial locales” (22). Instead, Romney is interested in the social, economic, and even political consequences of intimacy. Unfortunately, intimacy, a word that in one form or another appears on most pages of this book, is never really defined, and we are left to project our own random associations with that word into her text. Different readers will have different associations with the word intimate, and it’s unclear how well our associations apply to the seventeenth century. Then people shared beds with strangers they were not having sex with, lived cheek by jowl with a multitude of transients in places like Amsterdam and otherwise operated in very close quarters on ship and ashore. What was considered “intimate” in the Dutch Golden Age? And would Africans and indigenous Americans have shared a similar sense of intimacy, as her inclusion of them in the final three chapters of the book suggests?

Romney’s intimate networks generally depend on some sort of personal tie involving a woman. Generally, these women are married to an individual through whom they gain access to a wider world of social and economic possibility, and it is those possibilities, rather than the sexual or marital relations themselves, that most intrigue Romney. Her first two chapters do a terrific job of showing the ways that Dutch women actively participated in the military, economic, and social aspects of Dutch expansion in the early seventeenth century. They arranged complex business deals that spanned the Atlantic Ocean with (or sometimes without) their intimate partners. They recruited poor, drink-loving immigrant men who happened to seek shelter in their taverns into the unrewarding service of the Dutch West India Company as soldiers and sailors. They sailed back and forth on ships to strengthen their family ties and the Dutch presence in New Netherland, sometimes settling down permanently, other times returning to compete in Amsterdam’s urban and maritime economy once again. At the very least, scholars will now have to take seriously the role of Dutch women, from the wives of sailors to those of great merchants, in the creation of the Dutch Empire: a significant contribution in its own right that challenges, with rich evidence, the idea that the shipboard world of the Atlantic was a male preserve.

The first two chapters of the book, treating, respectively, the engagement of Amsterdammers with the overseas world and women’s direct participation in colonizing enterprises, are the best and most convincing. The subsequent three are somewhat less so. Rather than stick to the thematic exploration of intimate networks, Romney tries to turn her book into a history of the New Netherland colony that includes the experience of the enslaved Africans and Native Americans as well as the Europeans, and which in some way can be grafted onto the standard chronological narrative of the colony’s development. Chapter three, drawing on the work of Daniel Usner, argues for a frontier exchange economy in early New Netherland, where Dutch colonists and indigenous people engaged in a range of everyday economic exchanges, from trading furs and liquor to food and firewood. Her sources for this are primarily court records produced

when such interpersonal interactions went wrong. And, in the end, she finds intimacy between individuals to be elusive, concluding, "participation in daily exchange did not lead to more peaceful cross-cultural relationships" (143).

One wonders what intimacy has to do with cross-cultural relations, especially in a situation like New Netherland where, unlike Dutch Indonesia, the Dutch did not control the local inhabitants to the extent that they could govern their intimate behavior. This question is even stronger in the final chapter, which essentially discusses diplomatic relations between various indigenous leaders (male and female) and Dutch authorities, and relations between the Dutch and their English conquerors. Yes, Native American diplomacy involved the language of close kinship: fathers, brothers, etc., and it depended on face-to-face meetings in diplomatic councils, but is this really intimacy? Networks of alliance and trade are certainly at stake here, but what makes them intimate? Early modern European history has other concepts, like patron-client relations, or simply networks of various sorts (kin, business, religious), that might be employed in these cases with equal if not more force.

The desire to bring the analysis down to the level of an intimate, interpersonal connection leads to a new account of slavery in New Netherland that is intriguing, but not always compelling. Focusing on the unusual grant of "half-freedom" to a number of West India Company slaves, whereby they gained a degree of personal liberty but were held to certain serf-like conditions of continuing service to the company, Romney wants to see this as an achievement for the enslaved Africans. Despite the traumatic disruption of the slave trade, they managed to create a community through marriage and family formation and hard work, demonstrating their value as members of the New Netherland community. A more comparative perspective that took into account contemporary Dutch slave societies in Brazil and the Caribbean might conclude that half-freedom was a way for the West India Company to enjoy some of the benefits of slave labor without having to pay for it. For Romney, "Intimate relationships among Africans made possible the situation in which half freedom appealed to the whites who had the power to grant it" (242). Romney also traces out who sponsored the baptisms of New Netherland's children of African parents, suggesting the parents were hoping to enroll prominent European colonists as potential benefactors of their children. Again, more comparative work on the roll of prominent godparents in such baptisms might put this phenomenon in a different light.

This significant contribution to the history of New Netherland would have been strengthened by a tighter focus (the text feels at times overlong and repetitive, like other Omohundro Institute productions) and more direct engagement with the historiography in order to clarify Romney's points. The first two chapters have many substantial footnotes discussing Dutch and Atlantic world scholarship, while the footnotes in the later chapters are much thinner, again suggesting where the real strength of her contribution lies. Her efforts to include a wide range of New Netherland society in her analysis are admirable, but a leaner, meaner, Dutch-centered text might have made a bigger

impact.

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