

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

Susanah Shaw Romney

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With *New Netherland Connections*, Susanah Shaw Romney links developing conversations about networks in the early modern world and personal ties' role in shaping empires, through an exploration of what she calls "intimate networks." Noting that seventeenth-century Hudson Valley residents built webs of relationships across "vast geographic and cultural distances," she offers *New Netherland* as a model for studying the construction of early modern empires (p. 18). Tracing intimate ties from the Netherlands to New Netherland on the eve of English conquest in 1664, Romney argues that "The intimate networks people constructed, rather than actions taken by formal structures or metropolitan authorities, constituted empire" (p. 18). Though perhaps too willing to subordinate more formal structures and authorities, by uncovering the intimate networks of diverse individuals to drive a narrative about the shape of New Netherland society, Romney demonstrates the links between the personal and the imperial.

The most compelling part of the book is its first two chapters, which detail the tactics Netherlanders employed as they moved throughout the Atlantic. That prominent Netherlanders like the Van Rensselaer family relied on networks that mixed family and commercial concerns is no surprise, though Romney's insightful reading of family letters highlights the degree to which a gendered language of family foregrounded personal ties. More remarkable is Romney's painstaking work with underutilized notarial records to document the intimate ties poor and middling members of Dutch society created as they moved their bodies and limited resources

around the empire. She follows actors such as Geertge Nanningsdochter, whose multiple ocean crossings blurred the line between traveler and settler, and whose several marriages extended her network of connections on both sides of the Atlantic. Rather than sundering kin and professional ties, colonization carried those relationships abroad and created arenas in which to build new intimacies. Men and women of all economic ranks were thus similar in “manipulating social bonds to advance their own interests” as they “simultaneously created the economic empire of the Dutch Atlantic” (p. 120-121).

Subsequent chapters on the colony’s relations with Native American neighbors and enslaved Africans demonstrate that intimate networks simultaneously “undergirded colonial inequalities” (p. 20). Physical proximity and the food trade meant that informal, face-to-face trade relations underpinned the regional economy. However, they never overcame cultural boundaries, such as Dutch men’s tendency to cast sexual relations with Native women in terms of a sexual marketplace, rather than assigning those encounters to the same realm of intimate family ties as marriage. Ultimately, then, “Economic networks, but not intimate ones, reached among the region’s villages” (p. 188). Conversely, Romney argues that the 1644 grant of half-freedom to a group of West India Company-owned slaves did reflect the intimate ties enslaved people had built with each other through formal marriage, and with white patrons through godparentage. Wary of intimate networks’ power to combat the atomization of slavery, however, colonists soon decreased Africans’ access to formal marriage and baptism. Approaching the strict limits imposed on intimate networks as a form of non-physical violence might have allowed Romney to consider violence generally as a tool for shaping networks, further aligning the experiences of Native and enslaved individuals.

While intimate networks failed to span cultural divides, the final chapter demonstrates that they could empower individuals to act as go-betweens. Exploring the roles of five such people, Romney complicates interpretations of cultural brokers as liminal people by instead locating their power in their centrality to distinct intimate networks. Fittingly, when English forces arrived at New Amsterdam in 1664, two women intimately tied to the colony's elite but personally lacking formal authority reportedly visited English forces. Negotiations for a peaceful surrender began soon after, hinting that political authority flowed through intimate networks rather than official political channels.

That so many of these intimate networks depended on more formal imperial structures and institutions might suggest the two realms were not just intertwined but more mutually constitutive than Romney sometimes acknowledges. Consequently, Romney asserts, "intimate networks proved ultimately more durable than colonial regimes" (p. 286). Although the continuity of those networks remains unexplored here, future scholarship addressing the tantalizing possibility that a succession of colonial regimes was superimposed atop a foundation of intimate networks might further support her case.

As her account of New Netherland's final days suggests, Romney's work "forces us to jettison any distinction between the intimate and imperial" (p. 304). The real power of her examination of intimate ties is its ability to treat in equivalent terms the experiences of diverse contributors to the construction of a nascent Dutch empire. Romney has clearly shown the degree to which intimate networks structured the Dutch Atlantic, and provided a model for other scholars of early modern empire to emulate.

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