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“Your sister grows rich by her great trade”: Catherine Nicks’s Intimate Economy

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Abstract

“Catherine Nicks’s Intimate Economy” 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 a trading company’s network, in spite of the company’s desire for impermeable monopolies, lent itself to women and others who could form durable intimate networks underneath the larger corporate umbrella for personal and familial economic gains. It questions how the early modern maritime and global economy worked while also examining the nature of company monopolies.

Keywords: Networks; Gender; Early Modern; Asia; Maritime

On 20 December 1692, East India Company (EIC) judge advocate John Dolben issued an arrest order for Catherine Nicks, the wife of the company’s chief in Conimeer [now Koonimedu, in Tamil Nadu, India], John Nicks. She refused to obey, so to underline the seriousness of the demand, Dolben ordered some musketeers and a corporal to “secure her in her house” as he feared she desired “privately to fly from Justice.”¹ According to Dolben’s information, Catherine broke into the company’s godown (warehouse) in Conimeer and took great quantities of “cloth of the first sort.” She transferred the cloth to a warehouse belonging to Elihu Yale, the company’s president in Madras [Chennai]. In other words, she stole from the company in partnership with the most important company employee. The two would ultimately work together for almost three decades. Catherine was married, but had the status of *feme sole*, which allowed her to work independently from her husband.² Though her role was legally acceptable, she was still “notoriously known” in both Fort St. George–Madras and London among her critics—mainly employees and leasers of the EIC—to be a trader separate from her husband.³ Through her commercial shrewdness, she

¹ *Records of Fort St George: Diary and Consultation Book 1693*, ed. H. Dodwell (Madras: Superintendent Government Press, 1918), 7–8.

² Marjorie K. McIntosh, “The Benefits and Drawbacks of *Femme Sole* Status in England, 1300–1630,” *Journal of British Studies* 44 (2005): 410–38, 413–4. For women under coverture and the instruments used to circumvent it in the age of mercantile capitalism, see Amy Louise Erickson, “Coverture and Capitalism,” *History Workshop Journal* 59:1 (2005): 1–16.

³ Dodwell, *Diary and Consultation Book 1693*, 7–8. For her reputation in London among the EIC officials, see British Library, London [hereafter BL], India Office Records [hereafter IOR], E/3/92, The Company at London to the President and Council at Fort St George, 11 September 1689.

became an integral part of commercial life in Fort St. George and created an intimate network spanning Europe and Asia.

The company undoubtedly hoped that her arrest would curtail her enterprise. It appeared to work, because soon after her arrest, Catherine petitioned the company for permission to return to England on a company ship. The company agreed to this, but when Catherine did not pay for the passage on time, the captain offered her place to one Mrs. Walthrope. In the end, it appears that four of her children made the long journey back, while Catherine stayed in India. There she became the agent for the disgraced president Yale, whom the company let go following the events of 1692 and forced to return to Europe alongside Catherine's husband in 1699.⁴ Instead of marking the end of her career as an entrepreneur, her arrest and her partner's eventual expulsion from India marked the beginning of the next chapter, in which her business seems to have expanded. Without powerful company allies in India, Catherine Nicks built a network on her own, investing in goods, ships, and people.

Using Catherine Nicks's private correspondence and the posthumous settlement of her estate to reconstruct her wide-ranging network, this article highlights the intimate nature of the early modern global economy and examines how intimate networks provided opportunities for women, who are often thought to have had little access to markets. The formal organisation and geographical reach of early modern trading companies, in particular the English East India Company, lent itself to women, among others, exploiting the porous nature of commercial networks.⁵ Women's multiple contributions to the various networks, both formal and informal, have however, with few exceptions, been overlooked.⁶ This article outlines how women as trading partners, wives, and relations of employees were integral in shaping and maintaining durable ties across the world. This in turn shows that early global capitalism was shaped by the contributions of people who, through extended intimate networks, worked alongside as well as against the trading companies' agenda.

Catherine Nicks's example points to the intersection of organisations, such as the EIC, and institutions, such as family and kinship. At a first glance, she was a node in a sprawling kinship network, working with her sister, her sons-in-law, and potentially her husband. Hers was but one of many family networks that shaped the early British Empire. In Asia, the families of EIC officials built a web that transcended and, at times, subverted existing social, commercial, and political norms, to the chagrin of the company.⁷ Margot Finn has recently explored how women associated with the EIC in the eighteenth century actively used the language of love and affection in both social and cultural rituals, but also when navigating the emerging empire and its politics, to secure the wealth of their families. According to Finn, company women's "labour of love"—their role in reproduction—furthered both company and empire.⁸

⁴ Dodwell, *Diary and Consultation Book 1693*, 70.

⁵ Aske Laursen Brock, "Networks," in *The Corporation as a Protagonist in Global History, c. 1550–1750*, ed. William A. Pettigrew and David Veevers, Global Economic History Series, vol. 16 (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 96–115.

⁶ Women's roles as investors have recently been examined in more detail; see Misha Ewen, *The Virginia Venture: American Colonization and English Society, 1580–1660* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2022), 37–56; Amy M. Froide, *Silent Partners: Women as Public Investors during Britain's Financial Revolution, 1690–1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁷ David Veevers, "Inhabitants of the Universe": Global Families, Kinship Networks, and the Formation of the Early Modern Colonial State in Asia," *Journal of Global History* 10:1 (2015): 99–121, 103.

⁸ Margot Finn, "The Female World of Love & Empire: Women, Family & East India Company Politics at the End of the Eighteenth Century: The Female World of Love & Empire," *Gender & History* 31:1 (2019): 7–24, 8.

As the world became smaller, families had to come to terms with large abstract questions of commerce, institutions, and servitude.⁹ However, on closer examination, Catherine Nicks's close network transcended both the immediate and extended family. Susanah Romney emphasises that the concept of intimate networks connects people of different creeds and qualities through credit obligations, trading ventures, and trust. In her work on the Dutch Atlantic world and the creation of empire, she argues that overseas expansion created new types of networks. As the political, cultural, and social setting changed, so did individuals' ties to each other. The diversity of people brought together by colonial expansion meant that networks were shaped differently than in the European metropolises.¹⁰ As trade and connections between continents intensified, new possibilities also became available for those who stayed in Europe.¹¹

Catherine Nicks was born in High Ham, Somerset, in 1662 to John and Maria Barker.¹² Her father may, at some point in his life, have been an East India Company ship's captain (see below). She had at least one older brother, Jedidiah, born 1655, and an older sister, Dionesia, born in 1657, who made it to adulthood, as well as several brothers and sisters who most likely died in infancy.¹³ According to an early historian's assessment of her spelling, she probably did not receive a formal education, but nonetheless she wrote letters in her own hand. Importantly for her later entrepreneurship, she might have had access to handbooks on arithmetic or bookkeeping.¹⁴ Family is inarguably one of the cornerstones of an individual's social network. Families accumulated connections and harboured knowledge, which made entry into a profession easier for children.¹⁵ Based on her and her siblings' later professions, it seems fair to assume that her family had commercial connections: all three children engaged in overseas commerce in one way or another.¹⁶ Jedidiah was a captain for the Royal African Company and Dionesia dealt in chinaware and cloth in London.¹⁷ Dionesia was a central part of Catherine's life and business and she desired Jedidiah to be as well. On 24 February 1701, Catherine

⁹ Emma Rothschild, *The Inner Life of Empires: An Eighteenth-Century History* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011), 1.

¹⁰ Susanah Shaw Romney, *New Netherland Connections: Intimate Networks and Atlantic Ties in Seventeenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 16.

¹¹ Romney, *New Netherland Connections*, 52–62.

¹² She was baptised Katherine Barker on 24 April 1662, but later in life she would sign letters with “Cat,” so for the purpose of this article, she is referred to as Catherine. For her baptism, see Somerset Heritage Service, Taunton, Somerset [hereafter SHS], D\P\HAM.H/2/1/2, 24 April 1662. Her father John might have held the lease for the mill in town until 1662; see “High Ham,” in *A History of the County of Somerset: Volume 8, The Poldens and the Levels*, ed. Robert Dunning (London: British History Online, 2004), 70–91, <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/som/vol8>.

¹³ Her brother John Barker lived only two months in 1653–54, Elizabeth Barker lived two months in 1668, and Benjamin Barker appears to have had a similar fate: SHS, D\P\HAM.H/2/1/2.

¹⁴ For this largely anecdotal claim concerning her education, see Henry Yule, *The Diary of William Hedges, Esq. (Afterwards Sir William Hedges), during His Agency in Bengal: As Well as on His Voyage out and Return Overland (1681–1687)* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1887), cclx. For arithmetic and bookkeeping, see Amy M. Froide, “Learning to Invest: Women's Education in Arithmetic and Accounting in Early Modern England,” *Early Modern Women* 10:1 (2015): 3–26, 5.

¹⁵ Charles H. Parker, *Global Interactions in the Early Modern Age, 1400–1800*, Cambridge Essential Histories (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 78; Richard Grassby, *Kinship and Capitalism: Marriage, Family, and Business in the English Speaking World, 1580–1720* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 3.

¹⁶ For families in commerce during the seventeenth century, see for instance the example of the Lever family in 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 Jedidiah captained at least three slave voyages, according to slavevoyages.org, before he fell out with the RAC; see The National Archives, Kew [hereafter TNA], C 10/230/4, 1688, African Company v Barker. Dionesia's business will be discussed in more detail in the following.

wrote to Dionesia remarking that she “Should be extrem glad to See Jed[idiah] in Indea.”¹⁸ Even if she was not as close to her brother as she was to her sister, they were still in contact after many years apart. However, he died before he made it to India. Following his death, the family was, in Dionesia’s words, “now reduced to a small number.”¹⁹ Catherine and Dionesia appear to have been the last two members of the family engaged in overseas commerce. Whether they acquired their skills through formal teaching or through experience, the sisters possessed the necessary ingenuity to make their business work over vast distances.

“Notoriously known to be a separate merchant”: Forging a Network in India

We know little about Catherine and her life before she arrived in India in 1678 at age sixteen, when EIC records mentioned her as an unmarried English woman. She was one of twenty-five young women the company sent to India with the hope she would marry one of their employees.²⁰ It is possible that Catherine’s opportunity to go to India was a matter of chance, but it could also have been due to family connections. At a meeting of company committees at East India House in November 1677, a decision was made to send twenty-five unmarried young women “of mean condition and good fame” to India. In the same meeting, the committees agreed to give widow Marie Barker £5 to pay her servant on board the *Bantam Pink* and £10 for charity relief following the death of her husband captain John Barker.²¹ Catherine’s parents were also named John and Maria Barker; they may well have been the two people mentioned in the minutes. This might in turn explain how Catherine subsequently became one of the twenty-five young women who set sail for India following that meeting. Regardless of how her journey came about, she settled in India in 1678 and two years later she married the EIC secretary John Nicks, who had arrived as an apprentice ten years prior, in the second-ever wedding entered into the parish register in the newly built St. Mary’s Church in Madras.²²

In India, Catherine’s network expanded beyond kin and family; she came to rely on a much more diverse set of people. Madras was a melting pot of different races, religions, and people, which Catherine fully exploited. She appears to have arrived without connections. She went to India as a potential bride, which automatically presented her with a connection—her future husband—though not necessarily a good one. Her marriage to John Nicks lasted twenty-nine years—from 1680 to her death in 1709—and produced at least eleven children. However, she mainly worked separately from her husband, in line with the customary rules for a married feme sole trader. The law of London and other English boroughs, on which the law in Madras was based, stated that for a married (not widowed or unmarried) feme sole merchant to trade independently and be liable for her own debts, her husband had to agree to her trading separately. He could not be involved in any way at all with her business, all debts should fall to her in this status.

¹⁸ Yule, *Diary of William Hedges*, cclxi. In the transcription of the letter, the brother’s name is given as Ted, which is also the name mentioned in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. However, the brother was baptised Jedidiah, so the nickname is more likely Jed than Ted.

¹⁹ TNA, C 108/299, Dionesia Tombes in London to Catherine Nicks at Fort St George, 5 January 1705.

²⁰ *Records of Fort St George: Diary and Consultation Book 1678*, ed. C. M. Schmidt (Madras: Superintendent Government Press, 1911), 168. For companies’ discussions concerning women going abroad to the East and West Indies, see Julia Schleck, “The Marital Problems of the East India Company,” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 17:3 (2017): 83–104; David R. Ransome, “Wives for Virginia, 1621,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 48:1 (1991): 3–18.

²¹ BL-IOR, B/34, Court of Committees, 7 November 1677.

²² Andrew Grout, “Nicks [née Barker], Catherine (d. 1709), merchant,” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

When the company confirmed John Nicks as chief of their factory at Conimeer on 11 September 1689, they demanded that he prevent his wife's "crafty trading," which the directors viewed as prejudicing their business. They claimed to understand the method of her trading, but would not accept it if she made "her gains of our loss."²³ By 1689, at least in the eyes of the EIC, twenty-seven-year-old Catherine was already a trading entity separate from her husband. John Dolben, the company's judge advocate, then repeated this when he referred to her as being "notoriously known to be a separate merchant."²⁴ Whether Catherine and John worked together appeared to be of less importance to the people around them, who viewed them as separate agents.²⁵

Outside of the direct influence of metropolitan networks and on the edge of company control, relationships, particular business relationships, were fluid. For instance, the judge who originally issued the arrest warrant for Catherine, John Dolben, also fell out with the EIC. He arrived in India after gambling away both his and his wife's fortune in England; the tenure in Asia was a last resort.²⁶ As a direct result of the case against Catherine, John, Elihu Yale, and their Indian partners—Anco, Peddana, and Vincatte—Dolben demanded a bribe to set Anco free from prison. When this was discovered the company decided that Dolben was "unfitt for the R^t: Hon^{ble}: Comp^{as}: service" and dismissed him.²⁷ However, like so many before him, he stayed in India as a free merchant, investing in ships and goods. In 1706, John Dolben invested with Catherine Nicks and eight others in the ship *St. Maria* going to Malacca, captained by the Armenian merchant Coja Satore.²⁸ The size of the free merchant community in Madras (those who had fallen out with the EIC) meant that it was not only possible, but necessary, to put differences to one side and invest together.²⁹ This was not necessarily an indication of a warm and hearty relationship between Catherine and the former judge, but certainly one of economic pragmatism.

The pragmatic approach to business demonstrated by Dolben and Nicks's co-investorship also underlines the porous nature of the East India Company trade. The company directors in London depended on the reliability of their overseas employees and developed different strategies to keep them faithful.³⁰ However, their employees in turn relied on local and intraregional merchants in order to augment their fortunes. This paradoxical relationship became a breeding ground for malfeasance, in particular after 1680, when the EIC left the so-called country trade in the hands of private merchants.³¹ Effectively, EIC ship captains' personal interest helped spread the reach of the

²³ BL-IOR, E/3/92, The Company at London to the President and Council at Fort St George, 11 September 1689.

²⁴ Dodwell, *Diary and Consultation Book 1693*, 7–8.

²⁵ They were also fined individually for the part they played in the godown scheme: John was fined 8,000 pagodas and Catherine only 600; Dodwell, *Diary and Consultation Book 1693*, 64.

²⁶ Paula Watson and Stuart Handley, "Dolben, John (1662–1710), of Epsom, Surrey," in *The History of Parliament: The House of Commons 1690–1715*, ed. D. Hayton, E. Cruickshanks, and S. Handley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). For men using the EIC as a last resort, see Olwen Hufton, "Women without Men: Widows and Spinsters in Britain and France in the Eighteenth Century," *Journal of Family History* 9:4 (1984): 355–76.

²⁷ *Records of Fort St George: Diary and Consultation Book 1694*, ed. H. Dodwell (Madras: Superintendent Government Press, 1918), 96–7.

²⁸ TNA, C 108/299, Accounts and correspondence. Copy of will of Katherine Nicks, 15 November 1709.

²⁹ Craig Muldrew, "'A Mutual Assent of Her Mind?' Women, Debt, Litigation and Contract in Early Modern England," *History Workshop Journal* 55 (2003): 47–71, 52.

³⁰ Ann M. Carlos and Stephen Nicholas, "Managing the Manager: An Application of the Principal Agent Model to the Hudson's Bay Company," *Oxford Economic Papers* 45:2 (1993): 243–56; Julia Adams, "Principals and Agents, Colonialists and Company Men: The Decay of Colonial Control in the Dutch East Indies," *American Sociological Review* 61:1 (1996): 12–28.

³¹ Country trade refers to Europeans' participation in the existing inter-Asian trade: European merchants sailing between the many ports in Asia made fortunes. Emily Erikson and Peter Bearman, "Malfeasance and the

company: what at first seemed a disadvantage became an advantage for the company.³² Though the EIC in many ways was the antithesis of intimate networks, the company relied directly on the intimate connections of their captains, factors, and merchants in Asia, which in turn created a situation where close personal ties were too important to be ignored.³³ With her vast experience in India and with intercontinental connections, Catherine became one of many private traders who inadvertently furthered the EIC's business, despite the company's rather strained relationship with many of them.³⁴

Catherine's children were integral to her networks. Two of her daughters, Anne and Jane, married in India, and she sent another four children—Ursula, Elizabeth, Dionesia, and Elihu (named after his godparent, Elihu Yale)—to live with her sister in London.³⁵ In India, her sons-in-law became central trading partners. Jane married the merchant Richard Cary in 1702 and Anne married the East India Company servant William Warre in 1704. Richard was a close partner in the last years of her life, while William, in his role as executor of her will, settled her estate. In the probate accounts he made note of money received on bonds, from ships, and from the sale of wine, liquor, and diamonds, as well as the payments to local painters, dividends to co-investors, and IOUs. At the time of her death, Catherine had shares in no less than nineteen voyages to at least nine different locations, from Persia and Mocha in the west to Batavia and Manilla in the east. William Warre was her partner in at least eighteen business transactions, making him her most important trading partner by far.³⁶

The posthumous settlement of her estate in 1710–11 provides a glimpse of her networks at the end of her career and shows a woman who traded with English, Armenian, Danish, and Jewish merchants in addition to interacting with diverse indigenous merchants, intermediaries, and slaves, and with both English and Indian authorities. In settling her accounts, her son-in-law William Warre names fifty-one individuals who either owed money to or were owed money by Catherine. With four exceptions, none of these was related to her by marriage or blood.³⁷ In other words, over the course of twenty-nine years, she had managed to build a considerable network in India that consisted almost wholly of *strangers*.³⁸ The settlement of her estate generally showed a great willingness to invest in the country trade. She invested in voyages to the west coast of India (Surat), Philippines (Manilla), China (Guangzhou), Persia, Yemen (Mocha),

Foundations for Global Trade: The Structure of English Trade in the East Indies, 1601–1833," *American Journal of Sociology* 112:1 (2006): 195–230, 201.

³² Emily Erikson, *Between Monopoly and Free Trade: The English East India Company, 1600–1757* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2014).

³³ Maxine Berg et al., "Private Trade and Monopoly Structures: The East India Companies and the Commodity Trade to Europe in the Eighteenth Century," in *Chartering Capitalism: Organizing Markets, States, and Publics*, ed. Emily Erikson, Political Power and Social Theory (Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2015), xxix, 123–45, 135–6.

³⁴ Timothy Davies, "British Private Trade Networks and Metropolitan Connections in the Eighteenth Century," in *Goods from the East, 1600–1800: Trading Eurasia*, ed. Maxine Berg et al., Europe's Asian Centuries (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015), 154–67.

³⁵ Mentioned in her will; TNA, PROB 11/598/36, 2 June 1724. Another five of her children—John, Isabella, Sibella, Catherine and Mary—were buried in India before her own demise; see Julian James Cotton, *List of Inscriptions on Tombs or Monuments in Madras Possessing Historical or Archaeological Interest*, 2 vols. (Madras: Superintendent Government Press, 1945), 1: 13.

³⁶ TNA, C 108/51, Merchant's account books in Fort George. Accounts of the estate of Catherine Nicks.

³⁷ The exceptions being her husband, John, the sons-in-law William Warre and Richard Cary, and William Warre's father.

³⁸ The market encouraged new conversations between strangers and generated new tools with which to curtail the uncertainties; see 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.

Indonesia (Batavia), Bengal, Malaysia (Johor), and Africa (Mutapa). Like other European private merchants, Catherine relied on close connections to local merchants (names like Ranga Chittee, Pedana, and Duggapa appear throughout her documents) and she appears to have worked particularly closely with Armenian traders.³⁹ The Armenian merchants became increasingly important following the EIC's war with the Mughal Empire in the 1680s. During this period, the company made an official deal with some merchants from the Armenian diaspora, giving them extensive privileges in return for logistical and commercial aid.⁴⁰ This meant that a great number of Armenians settled in Fort St. George from the 1680s and onwards, thereby augmenting the number of possible business connections.

On 26 June 1704, as the Armenian merchant Coja Satore set sail for Manilla, he named his "good friend" Catherine Nicks to be his "true lawfull attorney" with permission to "sue or levey require recover and receive any of person or persons all such sum or sums of money goods or merchandize" due to him.⁴¹ Catherine invested her own money in the same journey and later invested more money in Satore's voyages to various parts of East Asia. A letter of attorney could be given to anyone, but, as the main issue was one of trust towards the recipient of the letter, a wife or other relative was the conventional choice in the early modern period.⁴² Fort St. George was teeming with merchants, captains, and moneylenders of all races and religions, a great number of whom would have been very capable attorneys, but evidently he did not trust them as much as he trusted Catherine. We cannot know for sure why Satore chose her, but it points to Catherine being trustworthy, dependable, and skilled in business. Satore's choice of Catherine, moreover, indicates a closeness between the two also underscored by him referring to her as a good friend. Her skills and ability to create close connections to highly mobile merchants allowed Catherine's business to prosper.

Relying on Friends and Family

Outside of India, Catherine's most important connection was her older sister, Dionesia. It was not uncommon in the seventeenth century for sisters to run businesses together and look to each other financially.⁴³ Dionesia was likely married by the time Catherine went to India, to a Mr. Hudson, which explains why she did not make the journey. It is unclear when her first husband died, but in 1694, Dionesia married again. Her match with Henry Tombs, a tea, chinaware, and muslin seller, worked both to her own and Catherine's advantage. Dionesia traded on her own alongside her husband and provided Catherine with a vent for the cloth and valuables she sent back.⁴⁴ Dionesia did so well for herself in London that Elihu Yale advised Catherine, on 24 February 1703, that

³⁹ Holden Furber, *Rival Empires of Trade in the Orient, 1600–1800* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1976); Ian Bruce Watson, *Foundation for Empire: English Private Trade in India 1659–1760* (New Delhi: Vikas, 1980).

⁴⁰ Sebouh David Aslanian, *From the Indian Ocean to the Mediterranean: The Global Trade Networks of Armenian Merchants from New Julfa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Philip J. Stern, *The Company-State: Corporate Sovereignty and the Early Modern Foundation of the British Empire in India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 65.

⁴¹ TNA, C 108/299, Letter of attorney from Coja Satore to Catherine Nicks, 26 June 1704.

⁴² Margaret R. Hunt, "The Sailor's Wife, War Finance, and Coverture in Late Seventeenth-Century London," in *Married Women and the Law: Coverture in England and the Common Law World*, ed. Tim Stretton and Krista J. Kesselring (Montreal: MQUP, 2013), 139–62, 144.

⁴³ For a recent example of sisters' working businesses over large distance, see Misha Ewen, "At the Edge of Empire? Women's Ceramic Collections in Seventeenth-Century Newfoundland," *Cultural and Social History* 18:1 (2021): 23–44.

⁴⁴ For Dionesia's trading see TNA, C 7/222/45, Philip Margas vs Henry Tombs and Dionesia Tombs, 1698.

“your sister grows rich by her great trade,” and in his opinion Catherine too could become rich in London.⁴⁵ From Elihu’s letters it becomes clear that Dionesia earned her way by selling cloth, some of which Catherine sent home to cover the expenses connected to caring for the children, but she was also in some way connected to the EIC. In 1702 Elihu informed Catherine that her “littles ones are with your sister over against the East India House, where the crowd makes their remarks.” What these remarks were is unknown, but it could be in connection with sailors’ pay or other economic bonds between company and female constituents.⁴⁶ Dionesia’s business consisted of far more than the cloth and goods Catherine sent home; she was an entrepreneur in her own right.

Catherine’s four children in London influenced her business in India in a number of ways, making her work harder to augment the family fortune. The letters she received in India and those she sent to Europe intermingled feelings and intimate tenderness “with the language of credit and debt.”⁴⁷ The children’s well-being became the refrain in letters to Catherine, with Dionesia using this theme to stress that her sister should send more goods or money or that she should return to England. The children were initially under Dionesia’s guardianship, and they formed a very close relationship with their aunt. In January 1706, Dionesia sent a very intimate account of her relationship with her nieces and nephews to Catherine: “when thay have been ill I have maid them my bedfellows and never thought much of it.”⁴⁸ While her sister ensured their health and education, Catherine paid their way and ensured they had suitable clothes. She sent cloth and goods to London to pay for their subsistence and she sent gifts as well: fans, Bengal wrought petticoats, toys, and nightgowns, among other things.⁴⁹ On 20 October 1702, Elihu advised Catherine that her sister had “disposed of 64 pounds of your Chintz which deducting all charges makes £164.”⁵⁰ However, he doubted the money and remaining cloth would last until Catherine returned to England. That the cloth was unlikely to cover costs was undoubtedly true, considering that Dionesia had put the children into a boarding school in Islington that cost Catherine £233 per year.⁵¹ Some children who lived away from their parents were welcomed into other intimate networks, which in turn allowed them to form their own intimacies.⁵² However, in the case of Catherine’s children, it appears that Dionesia was more than happy to let them go away from her immediate oversight instead of raising them alongside her own and her husband’s business, which might have benefitted them more in the long run.

Dionesia was doubly invested in the children: not only were they kin, but Catherine took care of her only son, Richard (Dickey) Hudson, who went to India to make his start in business. The sisters were bound to one another through the well-being of

⁴⁵ TNA, C108/299 24, Elihu Yale to Catherine Nicks, 24 February 1703, Elihu Yale in London to Nicks at Fort St George.

⁴⁶ For women in particular demonstrating against the EIC, see the example concerning the ship *Modena*, Margaret R. Hunt, “Women and the Fiscal-Imperial State in Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries,” in *A New Imperial History: Culture, Identity and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660-1840*, ed. Kathleen Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 29–47, 44–5.

⁴⁷ Sarah M. S. Pearsall, *Atlantic Families: Lives and Letters in the Later Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 130.

⁴⁸ TNA, C 108/299, Dionesia Tombs in London to Catherine Nicks at Fort St George, 25 January 1706.

⁴⁹ TNA, C 108/299, Elihu Yale in London to Catherine Nicks at Fort St George, 28 December 1704; TNA, C 108/299, An account of things delivered to Captain Edward Harrison according to the order of Mrs Catherine Nicks before she dyed being for her children.

⁵⁰ TNA, C 108/299, Elihu Yale in London to Catherine Nicks at Fort St George, 20 October 1702.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Susanah Shaw Romney, “Intimate Networks and Children’s Survival in New Netherland in the Seventeenth Century,” *Early American Studies* 7:2 (2009): 270–308.

their children and Dionesia informed Catherine in January 1704 that “your children are very well and you may be very satisfied of my care of them.”⁵³ Richard, by contrast, did not fare well in India, appearing to fail in both health and business. Dionesia regretted sending him overseas, but she had used the accumulated knowledge of her family and wrote in January 1706 that she “did think [sending him overseas] was the best way for him to begin.”⁵⁴ The sisters both agreed it was best to send him home on the first available ship, but he died before he was able to return.⁵⁵ This appears to have been one of two principal reasons for a change in the dynamic between the two sisters. The second was the return to London of Catherine’s close friend and business partner, Elihu Yale.

Upon his return to England, Elihu remained one of the cornerstones in Catherine’s network while also using her as a treasured commercial agent in Asia. When a London merchant desired Elihu’s “recommendation of him to some friend [in India],” he could not “doe it better than to [Catherine].”⁵⁶ Business partners such as Yale and Satore clearly trusted her—she was obviously a highly trustworthy merchant to her partners—which undoubtedly was the root to her success. In spite of her acumen and assistance in his business, Yale wished for her speedy return to England, because, he argued, “I have noe friend I can trust soe well as you.” Moreover, he thought her children would benefit from her presence.⁵⁷ Soon after his own arrival in 1702, he felt that Dionesia was “too busie and publick to take due care of them.”⁵⁸ Later, in December 1704, he found her “very frugall in their education,” indicating that she was cutting corners.⁵⁹ His comments appear to be a critique of Dionesia’s ability to take proper care of the children, indicating that she should be more private and stay at home.⁶⁰ However, Elihu’s remarks were directed at Dionesia and not women in trade generally. In the same letter he stressed that “your sister growes rich by her great trade, which I fancy you can well as her in a short tyme,” encouraging Catherine to continue in trade following her return.

Dionesia’s preoccupation with trade placed Elihu in a difficult position, because he felt obligated to ensure the children’s well-being by visiting them more frequently. He was convinced he could not “doe what I earnestly desire there is such notices of my kindness,” because it would stoke the rumours that he was romantically involved with Catherine.⁶¹ In Fort St. George, Catherine occasionally stayed with Yale at his garden house without her husband, but with her Jewish friend Hieronima de Paiva, which, according to some EIC employees, was the cause of great scandal.⁶² The many rumours in Madras meant that it was probably with good reason that Elihu worried about rumours in London concerning his and Catherine’s relationship, and as a result he kept his distance from the children to avoid further scandal. When intimate networks became too intimate in public opinion, they could become detrimental to everyone involved. Nonetheless, later letters show that he frequently visited the children and his interference in their upbringing caused a rift between the two sisters.

⁵³ TNA, C 108/299, Dionesia Tombs in London to Catherine Nicks at Fort St George, 24 January 1704.

⁵⁴ TNA, C 108/299, Dionesia Tombs in London to Catherine Nicks at Fort St George, 25 January 1706.

⁵⁵ He died age 19, 29 March 1705; see Cotton, *List of Inscriptions on Tombs*, 1: 11.

⁵⁶ TNA, C 108/299, Elihu Yale in London to Catherine Nicks at Fort St George, 28 December 1705.

⁵⁷ TNA, C 108/299, Elihu Yale in London to Catherine Nicks at Fort St George, 20 October 1702.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ TNA, C 108/299, Elihu Yale in London to Catherine Nicks at Fort St George, 28 December 1704.

⁶⁰ For a discussion of the previous binary perception—Golden age to separate spheres—see Amanda Vickery, “Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women’s History,” *Historical Journal* 36:2 (1993): 383–414.

⁶¹ TNA, C 108/299, Elihu Yale in London to Catherine Nicks at Fort St George, 20 October 1702.

⁶² Yule, *Diary of William Hedges*, cclix; Hiram Bingham III, *Elihu Yale, the American Nabob of Queen Square . . . With Illustrations [Including Portraits]*, (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co, 1939), 268–9, 296–7.

Catherine Nicks's children were in their aunt's care for almost a decade, but around 1707 the arrangement stopped abruptly. According to Dionesia, the conflict began as a disagreement between her and Elihu in 1706 over the raising of Elizabeth Nicks. It sounds quite dramatic, as Elihu "came one day and took Mrs. Betty and put her to a dancing masters hooes," which Dionesia felt was an improper place for a young woman of quality.⁶³ The situation escalated. Elihu accused Dionesia of feathering her nest by keeping the children, and complained that she had received "grate presents from him," both of which she vehemently denied. She protested to Catherine that she had been "a true mother to them as ever I was to my one [*sic*]." ⁶⁴ In the end, Catherine sided with her old friend Elihu, much to Dionesia's frustration. The latter burst out in February 1709 that her sister Catherine "seemed to believe that base suggestion that I maintained my family by boarding four children with other people."⁶⁵ Whatever the reason, Catherine appears to have valued her old friend Elihu more than her sister, writing even before the falling out with Dionesia that her children had "no other frend but [Elihu] and me and god."⁶⁶ The care of the children—Catherine's most intimate treasure—eventually shaped her business arrangements and her commercial network.

Strength of Intimate Ties?

Catherine Nicks made her last will and testament in November 1709 at Fort St. George—"very sick and weak." She made her son-in-law William Warre, her friend Thomas Lovell, and George Lewis of Madras the executors, with her husband's permission. The three men were to "receive, collect and recover all such sums or sums of money with any manner of way to me appertaining herein in India."⁶⁷ Any valuables received were then to be transferred to her London connections: Elihu Yale, Stephen Evance, or captain Edward Harrison, who in turn were to distribute them to her four children living with Dionesia. Her husband John was also a sizeable beneficiary—he was to receive 4,000 pagodas of her estate once all debts were paid—indicating that, though she was a merchant in her own right, she was not estranged from her husband. However, Dionesia was not mentioned in the will. After working closely together for at least a decade, it appears their relationship could not be patched together again following their falling out; Catherine chose friendship over kinship. For Catherine, an independent merchant, the experience of being in business with someone for at least twenty years seems to have weighed heavier than the relationship to a sister whom she had probably not seen for thirty-one years.⁶⁸

Far from being a peripheral actor, Catherine Nicks was an important partner of Elihu Yale, her sister, and diasporic merchants in Madras. She arrived in India seemingly without knowing anyone, but managed to create connections to important company merchants, free merchants, Armenian and Jewish traders, and Indian merchants. The close connections she created in India ultimately overtook family ties in importance. The tipping point was the raising of the children. Catherine's children were her labour of love and influenced her participation in the country trade in India. Through her

⁶³ TNA, C 108/299, Dionesia Tombs in London to Catherine Nicks at Fort St George, 1 February 1707.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ TNA, C 108/299, Dionesia Tombs in London to Catherine Nicks at Fort St George, 5 February 1709.

⁶⁶ TNA, C 108/299, Catherine Nicks at Fort St George to Elihu Yale in London, 6 February 1705.

⁶⁷ TNA, C 108/299, The will of Catherine Nicks, 15 November 1709.

⁶⁸ During the eighteenth century, business networks began to change and there was an increasing tendency to employ friends and business partners over kin when conducting long-distance trade; see Albane Forestier, "Risk, Kinship and Personal Relationships in Late Eighteenth-Century West Indian Trade: The Commercial Network of Tobin & Pinney," *Business History* 52:6 (2010): 912–31, 917.

vigorous investing in voyages around Asia and her connections to multiple captains, she was inadvertently important in expanding the East India Company's network across Asia, which ultimately furthered the company's agenda.

As trading companies like the EIC expanded further and further, they employed more people and more women came to hold central positions in global economic networks through their intimate knowledge of their family's business. In Catherine's case it was the other way around, but this too required high levels of knowledge about commerce. If Catherine did not initially know how to challenge the company, she obtained the necessary connections over the course of almost thirty years to guide her. Moreover, even though she appears to have had a dubious reputation in certain circles due to her working against the company, important and skilled merchants held her in high esteem and gladly invested alongside her. Catherine chose her own network, grew it intimately and passionately, and became an entrepreneur in her own right.

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