Minding their own business? Firms and activists in the making of private labour regulation

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“Hello? This is Luc speaking.”
“Luc, hi, it’s me. Can I ask you a quick question? You’re studying Corporate Responsibility for clothing production right?”
“Yes, that’s right.”
“OK, it’s like this: I’m with my boyfriend in the Kalverstraat, and he needs new jeans and I want it to be ethically produced, you know, no labour abuse, no child labour. At what shop should we buy it?”
“Ermm…geeze. It’s not that I can give you a list of shops where I can guarantee you ethically produced clothes. I can give you some hints though of companies that are doing a lot. Company X for instance, or Company Y.
“Is Company Z also among them? That would really be helpful because we already found a nice pair in their shop. I don’t like Company Y and I don’t think we will find anything his size at Company X.”
“No, Company Z is not among them. I wouldn’t say that their approach is state of the art.”
“Well… can you maybe say that there is…well, something positive about their activities anyway? We don’t have all day for shopping you know…”
[sigh] “If you put it like that…No, Company Z is not the worst of the worst in terms of Corporate Responsibility policy.”
“Thanks, that’s all we needed to hear. We’ll buy their jeans then. Bye bye.”
[Click]

Over the past years this research endeavour has benefited from the encouragement I received from a large group of people taking an interest in its topic and in me as a person. I have often rejoiced over the fact that Corporate Social Responsibility provokes so many different responses in discussion: curiosity, enthusiasm, aggravation, skepticism. This has decidedly inspired me to define and answer the research questions that form the basis of this study. Five years after starting my research I want to thank here the people who I most vividly remember to have made a major contribution to the successful finishing of my PhD trajectory.

I became academically interested in globalization, governance and Global Justice issues during my undergraduate studies through the teaching of Gerd Junne and Jos de Beus at the University of Amsterdam and of Ronen Palan and Kees van der Pijl at the University of Sussex.
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Gerd subsequently acted as supervisor to this thesis after I was fortunate enough to obtain a position as AiO at the Amsterdam School for Social science Research (ASSR). I thank him very much for his substantial advice and help, his generosity, constant encouragement and countless hints for references. As an observant reader, a quick communicator and a nice person he has always managed to boost faith in my endeavours.

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During this research period, my grandmother Riek Siebum-Ter Bogt passed away. As a young girl she worked in the ateliers of the East Dutch clothing industry. To relieve boredom while sewing, she and her colleagues would teach each other songs. Because of this, she was later able to humour her grandchildren by showing she had a fitting song for almost every occasion in life. This dissertation is dedicated to her loving memory.

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