The making of Dutch flower culture: Auctions, networks, and aesthetics
Gebhardt, A.C.

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Introduction

Children trap bees
for their flowers
the world traps people
for itself

Gu Cheng
Growing tulip bulbs on the moon, and a tulip shaped island in the North Sea. Frederick Ruysch’s *Wunderkammer* and contemporary *bloemencorsos*. A Dutch-Chinese billionaire, aka the Orchid King, recreates a ‘Dutch’ town in northeast China complete with a replica of Amsterdam’s central station and the International Court of Justice. A retired grower recalls a life in flowers, from the Second World War to the European Union. Dutch development policies in Ethiopia today and its former civilizing mission in Java. Auctions, cooperatives, networking, commodity culture, what might be called Dutch masculinity, and globalization. These are some of the imaginaries, themes, curious details, and perspectives you will encounter in this thesis. All of them pivot around Dutch horticulture, and directly or indirectly link to Aalsmeer’s flower auction, the world’s largest, located not far from Amsterdam. Because of such disparate elements, an explanation of the scope and approach of the thesis seems appropriate.

First, what it is not: a traditional ethnography of a local institution; a sociological mapping of the network of Dutch horticulturalists; a theoretical treatise on globalization, masculinity, or Dutch national identity; a complete historical account of Dutch horticulture from the seventeenth century to the present. Nevertheless, there are elements of all these approaches, amounting to a sort of hybrid that, like all hybrids, foregrounds some qualities and sketches others. What follows in this introduction explains something about the research as it suggests ways of framing this text, including a few words about my own scholarly background and influences in writing this dissertation. The subsequent prologue grounds the thesis’ main themes in a range of scholarly literature, and suggests how these themes are relevant to many topical concerns.

I should begin by noting two things to help present this text. The first aspect of this work involves my approach, reflecting much contemporary ethnographic writing, where some of the connections and associations are undoubtedly idiosyncratic and perhaps impressionistic. The other part is grounded in historical and sociological sources, social theory, and a range of literature. The breadth and assemblage of evidence might seem somewhat unusual for a dissertation in the social sciences, setting dialogue with informants alongside quotes from theorists of commodity culture and the global system, historians, sociologists, as well as trade journals and references to popular culture in the Netherlands. This may make it atypical, but given the range of scholarship today, it’s far from radical. The choices of material and juxtapositions of evidence emerged both from my admiration for a panorama of scholarly work inside and outside the academy as well as from my training as a writer. Prior to starting my Ph.D, I dedicated twenty years to creative writing, mostly poetry. I studied formally, as both an undergraduate and graduate student, earning a Master of Fine Arts degree at New York University, where I was a New York Times fellow. And I have been awarded other scholarships and grants, which have enabled me to dedicate myself to poetry for long
stretches of time, and have been equally fortunate in receiving tutelage from many generous, talented, and highly accomplished senior writers. I have published a scattering of poems and translations and have several unpublished manuscripts. Like many poets I admire (ranging from Walt Whitman to Katha Pollitt, among the North Americans), in addition to poetry I write journalism and non-fiction. In fact, I think that my training and experience with non-fiction prose bears more directly on this composition. I also hold a Master’s degree in cultural reporting, have published essays and articles, and have taught essay writing to university students.

I find long form journalism very attractive, and see many similarities with ethnographic writing. But oddly, when I was studying long form journalism and making my first attempts at writing it, that thought never occurred to me, despite the strong resemblance in how research is conducted. As in much ethnographic work, the research for long form journalism involves embedding oneself in a particular community for extended periods with the ambition of sharing with the wider world what these individuals and this community do, and how they think. Telling details, letting subjects speak for themselves in their own words, providing context and background, being honest and direct about one’s relationship with the subjects and one’s own hopes and values: both forms share these characteristics. Good long form journalism is full of fresh, rich perspectives that would seem to adhere to Geertz’s injunction for thick description, which explains behavior and social phenomena in context, and takes for granted that writing is a craft, whether it is ethnography, history, or fiction. Given this guiding value, writing in this genre also helped me to see what good ethnography might aspire to, and in fact, that is the standard I applied to myself.

Several models deserve mention. Beginning as an article in The New Yorker, Susan Orlean’s The Orchid Thief follows an eccentric orchid dealer and a community of Seminoles in south Florida, which combines cultural reporting, political investigation, and historical evidence. Michael Pollan’s The Botany of Desire: A Plant’s-Eye View of the World uses reporting, scholarship, and reflection, and in addition to his clarity and originality, his long chapters (around 40 pages) made up of short sections (of 2-5 pages) served as an inspiration for how to structure this book. Lawrence Weschler’s Everything That Rises: A Book of Convergences also influenced my thinking here, and for its wild associations and unexpected connections, belongs on the shelf with the work of writerly anthropologists like Hugh Raffles and Michael Taussig. Inspired by an observation of John Berger about the astonishing connection between Rembrandt’s The Anatomy Lesson and that famous photo of Che Guevara’s corpse splayed out for public display and surrounded by military figures, Weschler goes on to make many “similarly uncanny moments of convergence, bizarre associations, eerie rhymes, whispered recollections—sometimes in the weirdest places” (2007: 1).
In addition to this sort of work by journalists, sociologists like Immanuel Wallerstein and Charles Smith, along with popular historians such as Geert Mak and Anna Pavord influenced not only content (as generous references to their books attest), but provided encouragement through their ambition to openness, challenging conventions, following leads, and producing clear and compelling sentences. Likewise, many fine and original writers in anthropology provided exciting examples of fresh writing that is both scholarly and intellectually rigorous. Clifford Geertz had a literary sensibility I found persuasive and powerful, and his language shows he valued concision as well as an egalitarian approach to both subjects and readers. Theodore Bestor’s *Tsukiji: The Fish Market at the Center of the World* also inspired me in many senses, including the way he integrated commodity chain analysis with ethnography, reflection, and history. Finally, Nathaniel Tarn stands out for me as an emblem of possibility, as someone highly accomplished as both a poet and ethnographer. He began as a self described third rate surrealist connected to André Breton in Paris, and went on to study with Robert Redfield at the University of Chicago; now in his eighties, his translations and writing in several genres continues to address a wide sweep of subjects and places, and is deeply humane, creative, and unique.

These brief notes on my background and exemplary models are intended as a quick reader’s guide. I should add that, idiosyncracies notwithstanding, I have found this mode of associating to be present in both history and anthropology, where calls for interdisciplinary and multi-sited approaches are heard ever more often. This seems worth exploring.

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Historical connections and parallels appear throughout this dissertation, and while I describe these as echoes, suggestive of continuity, and the like, I would like to emphasize here what I hope is self evident. Namely, that between the past and the present, there is no equals sign. In noticing, citing, and articulating associations, roots, and similar practices, I am not asserting an ahistorical mirroring nor suggesting an unbroken chain between the Dutch past and the present. Nor do I make original claims about the past or consult primary documents; instead I rely on the work of eminent historians who worked on Dutch history and the origins of commodity culture, such as Simon Schama (1987), Harold Cook (2007), Hal Foster (1993), and Anne Goldgar (2007).

Though I hope my arguments and writing exemplify a new mode of reporting on Dutch horticulture, the ‘eclecticism’ performed in this thesis – using secondary sources, pondering interviews and ethnographical observations made in different localities, making comparisons – is similar to a lot of interdisciplinary work. In an essay called “History and Anthropology”, E.P. Thompson describes how his then unconventional
approach began when attempting to account for the sale of wives in eighteenth and
nineteenth century England, something that seemed to be equally classifiable as
economic history and as ritual, partly since these were public events (auctions often
followed by celebrations). In teasing out how he used his sources, Thompson confessed
a certain trepidation to extrapolating from others’ research different evidence for his
new context (1994: 216-217), since he was placing a different emphasis than in the
original, a hesitation I share with my use of different fields and secondary sources.
Thompson resolved his conflict by saying that first, the crossing of disciplinary
boundaries was unavoidable, as the subject fell on the borders of several disciplines, but
more than being simply inevitable, the multidisciplinary approach deepened and
enriched his observations, interpretations, and conclusions. Without comparing my
achievement to Thompson’s, nor claiming that my work belongs to the exact same
genre, I like to think my use of different literatures and sources similarly enhances this
dissertation. My goal was not to attain the comprehensiveness of an encyclopedia but
rather to illustrate the breadth and depth of horticulture in contemporary Dutch policies,
planning, and national outlook as well as in the formative period of the Dutch Republic,
where flowers were associated with trade, science, gardening, and a number of
prominent institutions and individuals.

My approach to compare elements of Dutch history with the present resembles
the way that anthropologists compare tribes and cultures. Links highlight similar traits,
features, and practices as well as differences, and thus allow for a better understanding
of what is shared and what is particular to the entities that are being compared. Instead
of asserting some linear or inevitable connection between the time of the Dutch
Republic and the present day, comparing these periods function as rhymes; one form is
like another, so the inquiry becomes, what does that likeness tell us or suggest? What
brings rhyming words together in verse is a formal quality, namely the placement and
organization of sound, and without going into the complexities of how rhyming works
in different languages, or even only in English, it is possible to make some useful
observations. Words that sound alike or similar chime together, and as they do, invite
comparison; since one echoes the other, a conceptual link also arises. Whether the
pattern of vowels, consonants, or accents is nearly exact, slanted, or partial, the
structured parallels evoke often surprising similarities, and as with metaphor, the richest
comparisons come from finding a kinship between things apparently quite unalike. It is

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1 This point is convincingly made by Anton Blok when he discusses Wittgenstein’s notion of
‘family resemblances’. Wittgenstein’s view was that things seemingly connected by one
essential common feature may in fact be more loosely associated by a series of overlapping
similarities. Blok used this to argue that instead of a rigid taxonomy, ‘shamanism’ is a category
where all members are not identical but similar across a range of contexts and individuals, and
that grouping them as such fosters insight.
in these direct or implied comparisons that creative friction as well as understanding occurs. What makes rhyme interesting is exactly that this relatively contingent quality of sound may bring words together that would not appear in the same context, and thus break open unexpected insights.

Yet the idea that my way of comparing resembles rhyme should probably not be taken too far. After all, the connections I will discuss are not merely fanciful or capricious, but emerged from an attempt to account for complex systems and patterns in Dutch horticulture and FloraHolland Aalsmeer, as well as with these institutions’ relationship with abstract notions like the market and globalization. Narrow questions, methodologies, or the conventions of a single discipline were just not sufficient in accounting for the breadth, diversity, and complexity I encountered both in the literature and in my field research. Moreover, significant overlap and associations between people, practices, and organizations made some comparisons difficult to avoid. For instance, in discussing early tulip culture in the Dutch Republic, many of the same wealthy figures who were involved in buying tulips also purchased floral still life paintings, fraternized in pleasure gardens, and invested in commercial projects like the VOC and the Beemster, which were also part of technological and scientific innovations of the time. Social values and practices, commercial institutions, and social networks were thus closely intertwined. In contemporary Dutch horticulture, I argue, one finds a similar relation among people involved in horticulture, and other sectors and institutions related to spacial planning, foreign policies, science, and commerce. Far from suggesting that today’s horticulture is merely a contemporary version of the past, I seek to highlight a sort of family resemblance between that period and our own, a likeness that seems both striking and provocative, and explore how the specificity of both cases is thrown into relief due to the comparison.

That’s one way of framing the relationship between history and ethnography here. To continue, as Comaroff and Comaroff note, “Ethnography [itself]... is a historically situated mode of understanding historically situated contexts, each with its own, perhaps radically different, kinds of subjects and subjectivities, objects and objectivities” (1992: 10). In studying societies, comparisons are never exact, but that doesn’t mean we can not learn from patterns and practices within and between countries, populations, and time periods. Back in 1963, Levi Strauss made a similar exhortation. “Both history and ethnography are concerned with societies other than the one in which we live. Whether this otherness is due to remoteness in time...or to remoteness in space, or even to cultural heterogeneity, is of secondary importance compared to the basic similarity of perspective...[I]n both cases we are dealing with systems of representation which differ from the representations of the investigator. The best ethnographic study will never make the reader a native. ...All that the historian or ethnographer can do, and all that we can expect of them, is to enlarge a specific
experience to the dimensions of a more general one” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992: 7 [Levi Strauss 1963: 16-17]). Or to put part of this point more succinctly, in the frequently cited words of British novelist L.P. Hartley: ‘the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there’. What Levi-Strauss mentions about subjectivity is also worth highlighting, and I’ll have more to say about it below, because it is highly relevant to one’s choices as a writer.

But here I want to mention that the comparisons underlying this text also have another basis, which is multi-sited ethnography. In fact, the ideas and techniques of multi-sited ethnography led me not only to explore the past but to consider a gamut of activities, themes, ideas, and practices going on in or connected to FloraHolland Aalsmeer today. As the thesis describes and investigates in detail, FloraHolland Aalsmeer is the largest horticultural auction in the world. It was founded and is run by growers in a cooperative structure, and thousands of people are involved in the enterprise, from breeders to florists, manual laborers to investors, non-profit organizations to government institutions. My ambition was to account for the embeddedness of the institution in Dutch society as well as in ‘the market’ and ‘the world system’, to suggest its ambit and influence, and to offer a broad view of how the institution and the industry work. This came about for pragmatic as well as theoretical reasons. The auction rooms take place in a giant commercial building where all sorts of activities and people gather; traders range from corner florists to those working for international companies; this is a Dutch growers’ institution, but growers don’t often participate in the selling, and increasingly, many of these growers produce their flowers and plants outside the Netherlands in places like Ethiopia. In addition to my desire to account for these very practical issues, the literature on world systems, discussions of local-global developments, and commodity chains all convinced me that conceptually as well, I needed a broad scope. This may be characterized as multi-sited ethnography.

George Marcus articulated some of the reasons for such an open-ended, flexible approach. He wrote that multi-sited ethnography

moves out from the single sites and local situations of conventional ethnographic research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space. This mode defines for itself an object of study that cannot be accounted for ethnographically by remaining focused on a single site of intensive investigation. It develops instead a strategy or design of research that acknowledges macrotheoretical concepts and narratives of the world system but does not rely on them for the contextual architecture framing a set of subjects. This mobile ethnography takes unexpected trajectories in tracing a cultural formation across and within
multiple sites of activity that destabilize the distinction, for example, between lifeworld and system, by which much ethnography has been conceived. Just as this mode investigates and ethnographically constructs the lifeworlds of variously situated subjects, it also ethnographically constructs aspects of the system itself through the associations and connections it suggests among sites. (Marcus 1995: 96).

Multi-sited ethnography is not just another sort of controlled comparison, long a part of anthropological practice, which involves several sites, and is conceived on a linear spatial plane, whether the context is a region, a broader culture area, or the world system, and the comparisons are generated for narrowly characterized conceptual units such as tribes or locations. ‘Sites’, in the sense that Marcus was describing twenty years ago based on work emerging in the 1980s, may or may not refer to literal places, but also encompasses archives, particular texts, and more. As Marcus put it, “comparative dimensions develop as a function of the fractured, discontinuous plane of movement and discovery among sites as one maps an object of study and needs to posit logics of relationship, translation, and association among these sites” (1995: 102). Among other themes and objects of study, anthropologists have found this very well suited to examining commodities, and commodity chains (Blair 2009, Foster 2008, Gereffi and Korzeniewics 1994); I too found it useful in exploring Dutch flower production, culture, and business practices. Clearly, this approach appeals to scholars in several fields. It seems compatible with Wallerstein’s work on commodities and the world system, which is also interdisciplinary and which I rely on in this thesis, as well as to Appadurai’s conception in *The Social Life of Things* of commodities having biographies. A commodity’s biography extends the idea of what is relevant to know about a thing from the material facts of its production and market value to understanding its period and culture, as well as how things are adapted to new contexts, and how people understand and consume them.

I should add that my approach to FloraHolland Aalsmeer and to examining flowers as commodities emerged less from this sort of literature than from firsthand experience and some reflection. For instance, as I hung out in the auction and spoke with traders and other participants, I found that lots of florists bought at the auction, and of course, they had valuable insights about floral beauty, Dutch horticulture, and the workings of the auction from the perspective of small players. And they, along with Dutch horticultural auctions, participate in *bloemencorsos* as well as a catalogue of trade fairs and organizations promoting the industry. It would have been inaccurate to parse any of these elements too strictly. Furthermore, as I attended events and meetings, spoke with people, examined newsletters, ads, and other contemporary industry literature along with academic literature on the Netherlands and still life painting, I was struck by the many parallels and overlaps with Dutch history that I describe in this thesis.
In addition, I found many examples in the industry and contemporary society of mobilizing images and ideas about the past to promote contemporary agendas in both commerce and politics. I believe that drawing attention to this enriches our understanding of Dutch horticulture, though it does not imply that this is the only or even the best way to view it. This work seems consistent with Marcus’s argument that “[m]ulti-sited research is designed around chains, paths, threads, conjunctions, or juxtapositions of locations in which the ethnographer establishes some form of literal, physical presence, with an explicit, posited logic of association or connection among sites that in fact defines the argument of the ethnography....[These techniques of multi-sited ethnography] might be understood as practices of construction through (preplanned or opportunistic) movement and of tracing within different settings of a complex cultural phenomenon given an initial, baseline conceptual identity that turns out to be contingent and malleable as one traces it” (1995: 105-6). As a shorthand way to explain this open ended ‘tracing’, the approach has been framed colloquially as ‘follow the people, the thing, the life, biography, or conflict’; ‘follow the metaphor, the plot, story, or allegory’.

A body of literature within ethnography carries these sorts of pursuits much further, where the comparisons and connections are more unexpected, associative, and imaginative. Work by Michael Taussig and Hugh Raffles illustrates the sort of scholarship informed by surprising and sometimes quite speculative links, and structured by logic that seems more literary or essay-like than ethnographic or social scientific. In The Nervous System, for instance, Taussig builds on Walter Benjamin’s ideas of history and ‘mimetic faculty’, using the nervous system as a metaphor and thematic axis. He explores motifs of control, hierarchy, and intelligence and loops together such disparate sites, concepts, and histories as cane toads, Dadaism, Colombia, Australia, and state fetishism, noting in the introduction the essays’ “distaste for the straight line, testimony to the unsteadiness characteristic of the nervous system” (Taussig 1992: 4). In another work, a long essay called “The Language of Flowers” which I discuss in chapter 4, Taussig meditates on the work of Colombian visual artist Juan Manuel Echevarria, connecting the aesthetics of flowers with botanical classification, colonial brutality, the Inquisition, and the political violence in Latin America of the last decades of the twentieth century. In My Cocaine Museum, he makes thematic connections that are grounded in both ethnography and a spectrum of scholarship. Based on a reflection that the Colombian Gold Museum that explores the history of gold but “is silent about the fact that it was gold that determined the political economy of the colony,” Taussig argues “it is cocaine—rather than the U.S. prohibition of it—that shapes the country today” (2004: XI). Gold and cocaine, he contends, are also connected “by art, sex, magic, and mythology, no less than by chemistry” (Taussig 2004: XV). In other words, he says, they’re fetishes, and correspondingly, he hopes that
the language of his book “runs along the seam where matter and myth connect and disconnect continuously” (Taussig 2004: XVIII). And ultimately, he hopes, “My Cocaine Museum belongs to the sense of the ornament as something base like the foot of a saint or a hustler with a golden wrist, something that allows the thingness of things to glow in the dark” (Taussig 2004: X).

This seems an ambitious epistemology that not only argues for an interdisciplinary approach and honors intuitive modes of knowing but seeks to embody these qualities. My thesis might be said to make some similarly associative leaps, but in contrast with Taussig’s “incantatory spells of mimetic realism” (1992: 6) or works such as Hugh Raffles’s Insectopedia, my links seem rather uncontroversial or even prosaic. Nothing strays too far from the Aalsmeer auction, though the auction is presented a sort of organizing principal as well as an actual place in a way that bears some resemblance to work by Taussig and Raffles.

In John Law’s creative review of or homage to Hugh Raffles’ Insectopedia, he reflects on the organization of the book, saying “whatever it’s covering, it doesn’t pretend to completeness, and its entries are heterogenous. The ethnographies include beautifully researched accounts” of various interactions between people and insects ranging from gamblers and cricket fighters in Shanghai to sexual fantasies involving crushing insects, with forays into Nazi views of Jews regarding lice and public health, and paintings of deformed leaf bugs (Law 2011: 492). These vignettes are thematically and alphabetically arranged, reflecting “an experiment in juxtaposition” and a diversity of “knowledge practices” (Law 2011: 492-493). In “Ex Libris, Exempla”, a chapter of this abecedarian book, Raffles offers a sort of metacommentary on his own project in the form of a story about the relationship between André Breton and Roger Caillois, two of the founders of the College de Sociologie. In 1934 they met in a Paris café and got into an argument over two Mexican jumping beans. “Caillois described the dispute as between poetry and science. But his science was distinctly poetic even then... developing his idea of ‘diagonal science’, ‘the science of what exceeds knowledge’, a science that would encompass ‘what science doesn’t want to know’. He was in search of an order that will allow disorder itself to enter into the order of things” (Raffles 2010: 232). Beyond noting that unconventional and interdisciplinary approaches to knowledge production are increasingly common (“the standard forms are starting to fray around the edges” [Law 2011: 494]), the more useful observations for framing this thesis have to do not merely with the permission to do something different, but with what is gained by it. In my case, I hope that in addition to readability, what’s gained by pursuing such links and associations is insight into a range of practices, times, and locations relating to horticulture, spacial planning, male networks, development and foreign policies, and the overlap of science and aesthetics (contextualized in the proceeding prologue). Law says of Raffles’ book that although “this book belongs to anthropology” it’s also in the
tradition of long form journalism that you might encounter in “The New Yorker or The London Review of Books”; readers are “invited...to peer into the cases of Raffle’s curiosities” (Law 2011: 495). “Raffles is located in the intersections between a range of academic practices and a U.S. version of the ‘grande publique’” (Law 2011: 499). In fact, this sort of reception was already anticipated in the diverse publications where parts of the book first appeared, in literary venues such as Granta as well as the academic Public Culture.

What this suggests and what I’ve been pointing toward so far relate to style, an aspect of the thesis which relates to both form and content. I have described some of the connections made in this dissertation as rhymes, and would like to elaborate a little. In deciding what to include, what to cut, and how to present my evidence, whether it was ethnographic, historical, or from another field, I had several things in mind. The first consideration was accuracy and truth, both to the many people I spoke with and to the historical record; another was if the information said something important or insightful about Dutch horticulture, FloraHolland Aalsmeer, or one of my recurring themes and central questions. These were the main criteria, but there was another, more writerly, allegiance that had to do with the rhythm and balance of composition. For instance, I was often struck by how much flowers meant to people in the industry; growers, traders, and even people working on the floor in Aalsmeer clearly had an affinity for flowers, an appreciation of their beauty and delicacy, maybe, or a sense of pleasure that went beyond what one might expect from people accustomed to working with a commodity. One Dutch flower grower told me a poignant story of how, during the Nazi occupation when his family was forced to grow food for the invading army, they nevertheless surreptitiously cultivated flowers. He explained that this was because beauty has a special value, especially during wartime. Later, a Gazan farmer speaking about how his business suffered through the Israeli siege of 2009 and the ongoing blockade used almost the same words as the Dutch grower to celebrate the special beauty of flowers and their connection to peace. These quotes follow a thread or motif that runs through the thesis, and are an example of what I mean when I refer to rhymes. These are more associative leaps similar to the sort of connective logic in Raffles’ or Taussig’s work. In my case, these rhymes or parallels emerged from my sense of craft, composition, and how to construct an argument. In the end, the issue of style is unavoidable for any written work, but all the more so for texts that cross boundaries or in some way challenge the conventions of a genre. All writers must select their words, they must decide what to include or exclude, what to emphasize or place in the background, how to frame issues and organize the material, where to begin and end. Many of these sorts of choices are not neutral, and all of them contribute to style as much as to content.
With that said, I hope readers will be challenged, surprised, and rewarded by what they find here. The following prologue identifies and explores this dissertation’s themes and inquiries, further situates the research in the literature of several disciplines, and describes its methodology in more detail. But here I focus on the structure of my argument. Each chapter is organized around a question, and below I lay out their scheme along with a summary of the material and arguments they cover.

**Chapter 1: Early Dutch Horticulture.** *How did flowers become integrated commercially and culturally in the Netherlands?* This chapter argues that modern flower culture really begins with the tulip. It is with tulip production that science and aesthetics first came together in ways familiar to us today, where people begin in earnest to study, refine, and learn from each generation of flower. The tulip entered the Netherlands through a single figure, the Flemish botanist Carolus Clusius. The tulip is significant for the ways it evolves through the history of the country, becoming a national symbol, a marker of greed and economic excess, and as a profitable and important part of the contemporary flower business. Today tulips and tulips bulbs are a big business (over 70 percent ‘have a dutch passport’ as is said in the industry), and tulips are a classic marker of distinction. But more than the tulip itself, aspects of the Dutch Golden Age spawned characteristics whose legacies are felt today in the social and economic practices of the flower industry. Early botany and ornamental gardening overlapped with and were made possible by scientific discoveries, inventive economic practices, and expanding commerce, as well as spacial planning, and an aesthetic consumer culture. These were cemented by social practices (male networks, shared outlook, and cooperative enterprises that distribute risk). Not until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries would today’s flower industry take shape and take off. But when it did, it was through male networks coming together to create their own institutions that distribute risk. As in its foundational era, the industry was characterized by the overlap of science, business acumen, and a keen aesthetic sense. Also as in the seventeenth century, the state provided essential financial and infrastructural support.

**Chapter 2: The Rise of Aalsmeer’s Cooperative Grower’s Association.** *How did a small town named for eel fishing come to organize the first flower auctions, and then rise to be the center of the world market?* This chapter uses the history of twentieth century development of the flower auction to further demonstrate the centrality of state support, male networks, planning, and social policy in the creation and maintenance of commercial horticulture. The ethnographic focus is on growers. Growers associations have determined the way the industry has developed—with an emphasis on cooperation over competition, and by separating growing from selling, each sector could specialize and advance rapidly. In explaining this, the chapter describes the horticultural value chain, and the intricate web of private, quasi-private, and state organizations that form Dutch horticultural networks. As in the seventeenth century, technical and financial
innovation grow out of cooperative structures as well as state support. One place you see state support is in Greenports policy. Greenports are about devising and building advanced efficient infrastructure for agriculture and horticulture, transportation and logistics; it’s explicit government policy to make private industry successful. Industry successes, like the flowers themselves, become export products. One big example was the proposed Greenports Shanghai project—to do a Dutch style Greenport in China, with dense transportation networks, horticulture and agriculture and auctions all in one place. As during the seventeenth century, what happens locally in the Netherlands takes place very much in a global context.

Chapter 3: The Dutch Horticultural Auction: Traders. Why are flowers sold at auction—and for that matter, why are U.S. Treasury bonds, high art, or anything else sold in that manner? How do Dutch horticultural auctions work? This chapter explores ideas about markets and development and shows both the general social laws that underly all auctions and explains the nitty-gritty daily operations of Dutch horticultural auctions. The ethnographic focus is on traders and on the auction itself as a place, what goes on there as well as its position in Dutch horticulture and broader culture. It’s a male dominated environment, and I argue that masculinity helps to cement social bonds and ensure the smooth running of business both in the auction as well as throughout the industry. I also argue that cooperation, historical patterns, personal camaraderie and networks define practice—not commonly accepted ideas about market principles.

In auctions both the value and identity of things are arrived at not by ‘purely’ economic calculus like the laws of supply and demand, but instead by what buyers agree on. Auctions determine the price and ownership of things by communal agreement. Auctions are social institutions with many outcomes, only one of which is economic. A universal and fundamental characteristic of all auctions is the ‘auction community.’ The auction community is important both locally, for what happens in Aalsmeer’s auctions, but also globally, since what happens in Aalsmeer affects prices and practices around the world. The Dutch horticultural auction community is one male network within a larger network. The discourse of cooperation is very powerful and normalized, though perhaps unexpected, given commonly accepted notions about individual competition in a capitalist economic arena and ideas about male behavior in markets. But here masculinity and machismo aren’t really absent but take other forms—a cultural logic of male norms and male dominance underpins economic success, and helps to characterize the Dutch horticultural industry. The Aalsmeer auction is an important space not just conceptually (for its place in the chain, as an incubator of values and ideas) but literally, as an arena of social-economic practices, practices that emerge from a structure of male networks, where local and national ideologies take shape in evolving traditions. The auction also constitutes the pivotal moment in the flower’s trajectory through the value chain.
Chapter 4: Horticultural Aesthetics. What do flowers look like as commodities, and what has the Netherlands contributed to inventing, producing, and marketing these commodities? The answer involves a look at the contemporary industry and a glance back to the Dutch Golden Age. Still life painting produced in the seventeenth century helped to create early modern commodity culture—a new way of looking at objects (particularly perishable commodities, including flowers) that both reflected and helped to create the new kinds of human relationships emerging in this nascent market/capitalist environment. Still life functioned partly as advertisement, fomenting popular enthusiasm and values for cut flowers. Commercial and aesthetic passions overlapped in male networks, fostering a particular kind of masculine, profit-driven, aesthetic circuit and value system.

This chapter argues that aesthetics evolve and are sustained through certain traditions and social infrastructure, and describes how that happens in Dutch horticulture. It looks at the work of breeders and florists, and at institutions ranging from trade events to the Keukenhof and bloemencorsos (flower parades). The first century of the Dutch flower auction system has produced or encouraged a number of activities and traditions that self consciously invoke an imagined past, and promote a sense of distinction. As in the past, the science and social aspects of the creation of aesthetics, of the floral commodity, occurs very much in an international context, with Dutch networks at the center.

Chapter 5: Planet of Flowers (the Dutch flower industry on the world stage). Why are more and more of the flowers sold in Aalsmeer grown in other parts of the world? And as international growing increases, how does the Netherlands maintain itself at the center of an increasingly global industry? Also, Aalsmeer’s auctions were founded by growers to protect grower’s interests, but what happens to them as the cooperative institution expands internationally, incorporating more and more grower-members from abroad? How do those abroad understand and relate to the industry’s heart in the Netherlands?

To answer these questions I focus on one flower, the rose, and on one extranational region, Ethiopia. But since Aalsmeer’s auctions sell flowers grown in more than 30 countries, I also illustrate the global character of the flower trade with other nations (Brazil, Ecuador, Colombia, Kenya, and China), since each highlights significant aspects of the answer to the questions, and ties together with ongoing themes and arguments of thesis.

Expansion abroad occurs in a very deliberate and controlled way—via male networks, Dutch cultural practices/business style, state and quasi-state funding, the auction community all contribute to international growing, and especially to link that production to the Netherlands, through auction sales, and more. Though these practices
are grounded specifically in contemporary characteristics of the horticultural industry, they’re clearly related to the legacy of older colonial practices, notably nineteenth and twentieth century Indonesia. (The first Dutch commercial and agricultural venture in Ethiopia was a sugar company transplanted from Indonesia.) Ethiopia is also a good place to look at Dutch horticultural expansion: a decade ago the industry did not exist, but now is the world’s third largest rose producer, thanks to Ethiopian policy, plus resources and labor combined with Dutch capital and expertise. This has spawned growth and investment in Ethiopia and the horticultural industry has been a high priority for the Ethiopian government. But success is mixed for both Ethiopia and the Netherlands. For Ethiopia, environmental costs may be great and much of the vaunted profits may not much benefit the local and national economy. For Holland, rose growers may suffer, unable to compete—plentiful inexpensive foreign roses drive down price. The rose is by far the top selling flower around the world. It’s the Aalsmeer auction’s founding flower. Ethiopian rose growth (and international expansion generally) is in the best interest of the institution and the Dutch industry as a whole, but in doing so many of Aalsmeer’s founding members go out of business or are forced to grow something else besides roses—an unstable situation.