

**“Opening Remarks,” from *(Dis)Entangling Global Early Modernities, 1300-1800*  
A Conference at Harvard University, March 24, 2016**

**Organized by Michael Tworek (Harvard University), Stuart McManus (University of Chicago) and Devin Fitzgerald (Harvard University)**

Good morning, everyone. My name is Michael Tworek. I, along with my co-organizers Stuart McManus, Devin Fitzgerald, and Anja Goeing would like to welcome you to *(Dis)entangling Global Early Modernities, 1300-1800*. When we first began to plan this conference a year ago, we could not have imagined how much the world would have changed in the meantime. Globalization and globality, once the darlings of politicians and university presidents alike, have lost their innocence. The dreams of an ever more integrated world that many of us wrapped around ourselves like a quilt at a New England fireside have faded. The fire itself no longer flickers so brightly. You might even say the roof has even fallen in. In short, there is a collective realization that we might have fallen for what in 1943 US-congresswoman Clare Boothe Luce called “globaloney.”

Formerly the golden child of scholars and a favorite buzzword in cover letters, global history offered the historiographical and methodological counterpart to this public discourse on globalization. Embeddedness, connections, comparisons, and integration served as the thematic hallmarks of this trend. Yet, like free trade among the G20, global history too has lost its charm. Numerous articles and listserv discussions on *H-Net* and elsewhere have all but proclaimed the death of global history in wake of the recent developments. We could not have predicted the events of the recent past, but we are certain that global history has not had its day. Global history is dead. Long live global history!

How should we move forward with its successor? Is there a better way to do global history? There are a number of possible paths, all of which share certain common features, but there is one that is currently on everyone’s lips. As Jeremy Adelman put it in a recent article in *Aeon*: “we need narratives of global life that reckon with disintegration as well as integration, the costs and not just the bounty of interdependence.”<sup>1</sup> This, quite by chance, is precisely what we had had in mind for this conference.

Even before we decided to put together this conference, each of us had been exploring such avenues in our own research. Stuart had traced the uneven global diffusion of classical rhetoric from Mexico City to Nagasaki. Devin was investigating the asymmetrical global impact of the Manchu Conquest of China. I was figuring out if Poles and Poland could go global at all. As a result, although we too burrowed into the quilt of global history, it became clear to us that the weave of the early modern world did not form a single fabric, but many shifting versions of many potential fabrics. This reminded us of the shroud of Laertes woven, unpicked and rewoven by Penelope in the *Odyssey* as a means to fend off her unwanted suitors. The early modern world may have tended

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<sup>1</sup> <https://aeon.co/essays/is-global-history-still-possible-or-has-it-had-its-moment>

towards overall integration, but there were incomplete patterns, loose threads and numerous moments of unraveling.

This metaphor allowed us to express our dissatisfaction with much of how early modern global history was practiced. In particular, it proved an antidote for the overpowering drive methodologically and perhaps ideologically to find integration and connections at all costs for all periods and places. No scholarly cloth, we agreed, is ever truly free of loose, misaligned, or partially hidden threads and even spaces. Upon closer examination, these threads may reveal more knots, holes and tangles behind what may have look like a seamless robe. How do we make sense of these odd threads and spaces? Why do they lie hidden away? To answer these questions, the historian often has to start with a single thread and from there attempt to understand its place in the larger whole. As Sanjay Subrahmanyam reminds us, “disentangling a congeries of assent and projects that have become thoroughly entwined” is no simple matter. Frequently, it is in the process of separation “that one learns of the true nature of the marriage,” or in our words, the cloth.<sup>2</sup>

The aim of this conference is to bring together historians working on every corner of the early modern world to discuss its spatial and chronological contours. To do this, we are going to take a long hard look at that quilt that we used to wrap rather thoughtlessly around ourselves. In order to do this, we thus propose the concept of *(dis)entanglement*.

*(Dis)entanglement* entails following the threads of the early modern world, pulling on each in turn to reveal the length of the thread and whether or not it pulls on other parts of the wider fabric. We view *(dis)entanglement* not as a proscriptive or definitive methodology. Rather, we see it as a heuristic devise that will, we hope, inspire a range of new approaches, beginning today at this conference. Specifically, it encourages greater attention to historical fidelity and meaning through the constant questioning of the units of analysis. It questions the permanence of any set of relationships between sets of actors or phenomena. In short, *(dis)entanglement* is a healthy form of skepticism with a critical yet constructive aim.

Today, our dynamic group of panelists, respondents, chairs, roundtable members and audience members will explore the potential contribution of *(dis)entanglement* for our understanding of the intellectual and cultural history of the early modern world, between roughly 1300 and 1800. This focus on intellectual and cultural history is purposeful, and meant to offset the dominance of economic and social history in shaping and defining what was “global” in early modernity. The chronology, 1300 to 1800, is also a deliberative choice that acts as a flexible loom for us to (dis)entangle narratives of the late medieval and early modern world.

In more concrete terms, this conference brings together scholars working on large parts of the early modern world to ascertain whether such a thing existed, and, if not, to consider alternative meta-geographies. We suspect that most will agree that no one model is applicable to every historical problem/phenomenon. But are there stronger arguments for one over another, and when? We also

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<sup>2</sup> Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Holding the World in Balance: The Connected Histories of the Iberian Overseas Empires, 1500–1640,” *Am Hist Rev* 2007; 112 (5): 1359-1385. doi: 10.1086/ahr.112.5.1359

wish to consider the presence of the “nonglobal” in the form of disconnections from global regimes of knowledge present across time, space, and place. Thus, each panel will look for “loose threads” in the form of ideas, texts, and practices, each of which will be treated in turn across the day, followed by a roundtable discussion.

With the range of our papers today on *(dis)entanglement*, our major intervention will be to enrich the meaning of the adjective “global” in the early modern context with connotations of both integration and disintegration, connection and disconnection, and entanglement and disentanglement. We look forward to hearing from you all, participants and attendees alike, as historical inquiry, we firmly believe, is a collective endeavor.

Before we begin, we must acknowledge our debts of gratitude, which are many. This conference could not have taken place without the financial support of Harvard Asia Center, Harvard Colloquium for Intellectual History, Harvard Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard Center for African Studies, Harvard History Department, Harvard Early Modern History Workshop, Harvard Medieval Studies Committee, Harvard Center for History and Economics, Andrew W. Mellon Fellowship of Scholars in Critical Bibliography at Rare Book School, and the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs.

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So without further ado, let the fun begin!

*Michael Tworek, Stuart McManus and Devin Fitzgerald*