Building on prior workshops held in Cambridge (2014), Amsterdam (2015), and London (2016), the 4th international workshop of the Commodity Frontiers Initiative (CFI) hosted and organized by the Zayed University in Dubai on 6-7 December 2017. The workshop aimed at developing a global and comparative approach to understanding the dynamics both of commodity frontiers and the historical trajectories within their frontier zones, with particular interest in the differences/similarities between commodity frontiers which in one way or another have had an impact on land and nature, and people’s relationships to land and nature.

The two-day workshop was structured around six different panels. The opening panel focused on mining frontiers. Robrecht Declercq (Ghent University) talked about the global copper mining frontier and the activities of large-scale mining companies in Latin America and Central Africa in the first half of the twentieth century; whereas Hanne Cottyn (Ghent University) elaborated on the ‘survival’ of communal land rights in the Altiplano mining frontier. The content of both papers triggered a vivid discussion about local dynamics in commodity frontiers set against the transformative power of global capitalism. The second panel focused on the desert as a commodity frontier, with emphasis on how deserts as ecosystems underwent the impact of commodity frontier expansion. Brigitte Howard (Zayed University) and Yilmaz Daduk (Elard, Abud Dhabi) talked about the scarcity of land, and the (social) challenges that originated from a policy of “protected areas” in the Dubai emirate. Garry Brown (Rostock University) then talked about the impact of commodity frontier expansion and the environmental degradation of desert ecosystems. Brown pointed to the fact that increased human population and a need to decrease oil-related incomes turned deserts into new zones of expansion (urbanization, tourism, agriculture etc). The last panel of the first day then dealt with oil frontiers. Stefan Huebner (National University of Singapore) talked about oceans as zones of expansion. His paper approached the often highly futuristic projects of oceanic urbanization, so-called floating cities. Such projects were of course inspired by offshore oil drilling techniques, that expanded enormously after World War II. Troy Vettese (New York University, USA) discussed the political ecology of pipeline construction, controlled by the new business of winning oil out of tar sand. The transportation of tar sand oil (dilbit) is however very risky in comparison to the substance gained by traditional oil wells, and spills occur frequently when pipelines travers through the fragile ecosystems of Alberta. The session was concluded by Deborah Delgado (Pontificia Universidad Catolica del Peru) focusing on similar problems of pollution produced by oil spills in the Amazonian oil frontiers and how local villages were affected by these forms of pollution.

The second day of the workshop focused on agricultural frontiers and the commodification of nature and wildlife. In panel 4, David Ross Olanya (Gulu University Uganda) talked about the development of Murchison Falls National Park in Northern Uganda and explained that this was a result of negotiations. The paper of Niccolo Pianciola (Lingnan University, Hong Kong) addressed the development of Aral Sea fisheries in Central Asia between 1870 and 1920, focusing on the formation of a large-scale colonial fish frontier and the negative impact on existing local livelihoods. The last two panels were oriented towards agricultural commodities. In panel 5, Prakash Kumar (Pennsylvania State) discussed US’s technical aid in India’s agricultural expansion, demonstrating how the American “Midwestern” ideal of agricultural intensification for enhancing food production found a place in Indian agriculture. Adrian Zarrilli (National University of Quilmes) talked about the Argentine countryside and showed how commodification of the countryside (deforestation) results in environmental conflicts and politicization of peasants. Sven Van Melkebeke (Ghent University) discussed the development of coffee production in the Lake Kivu region and explained how the mobilization of land and labor differed on both sides of the lake. Karen Miller (LaGuardia Community College, USA) discussed the promotion and transformation of the Koronadal Valley in the Philippines as an agricultural settler frontier by the Philippine colonial state. The last panel of the workshop, “commodity booms and the political economy of frontier zones” focused the impact of rapid “booms” on labour and environment in commodity frontiers. Louise Cardoso de Mello’s (Universidad Pablo de Olavide) delivered a paper on the coercive and often violent mobilization and commodification of rural labor in the Southwest Amazonia during the rubber boom (1860s -1910s). Rachel Steely (Harvard University) and Richard Evan Wells (University of Wisconsin-Madison) both discussed the soybean frontier in Asia. Steely detailed on the emergence of global trade networks in the trade of soybeans; whereas Wells discussed the activities of the Japanese-controlled South Manchuria Railway Company (Mantetsu) in the transformation of Manchuria in a frontier of soybean production.