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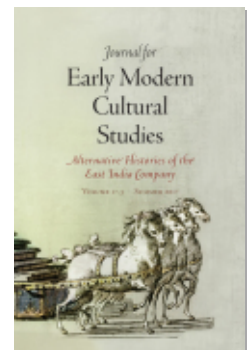
Writing East India Company History after the Cultural Turn:
Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Seventeenth-Century
East India Company and Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie

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Writing East India Company History after the Cultural Turn:

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GUIDO VAN MEERSBERGEN

ABSTRACT

While empire and travel writing have provided fertile terrain for explorations of race, gender, and the colonial archive, analytical approaches associated with the cultural turn have only marginally impacted the writing of seventeenth-century English and Dutch East India Company histories. A more sustained interdisciplinary approach to the early East India Company (1600–1857) and Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie (1602–1799) can enrich the field of company studies and connect it more fully to the latest debates in the field of global history. This article comprises a historiographical survey followed by a discussion of the rich potential that the archives of the East India companies hold for cultural analysis. It asserts that scrutiny of the ethnographic content of English and Dutch company writing serves both as a means to investigate the mental worlds of company agents and to comprehend the social worlds they inhabited. Such analysis brings out the discursive borrowings between different colonial formations and helps us understand how texts produced in one location shaped ideas and perceptions in others. The article argues that it is this cultural component, largely overlooked in the existing literature, that should be taken into account when writing the histories of the seventeenth-century East India companies.



Company Studies and the Cultural Turn

Given the host of recent historiographical “turns”—such as the spatial, global, and material turns—it might seem outdated to call to mind an earlier trend in historical writing, particularly one which, some critics have ar-

gued, has by now largely run its course.¹ On the contrary, while analytical approaches associated with the “cultural turn” have never been fully embraced in scholarship on the seventeenth and early eighteenth-century English and Dutch East India companies, there are compelling reasons to suggest that related perspectives continue to hold strong potential for diversifying and enriching the field of “Company studies.”² This article aims to do two things. First, by looking back on the past half-century of writing on the East India Company (1600–1857) and *Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (1602–1799), it highlights how the increased attention to language, culture, and representation that swept the humanities and social sciences from the 1970s onwards has only marginally reshaped the ways in which the first century and a half of East India Company history are researched and recounted. Secondly, it proposes that a more sustained interdisciplinary approach to the study of the early EIC and VOC is called for in order to better comprehend the multiple entanglements between the discourses and practices of the English and Dutch companies and to link seventeenth-century East India Company history more fully to recent debates in the field of global history.³

As recent syntheses show, company studies continue to deal primarily with economic, political, and institutional aspects.⁴ While an increasing number of recent case studies have focused on cultural exchange, questions regarding the discursive construction of ethnic, racial, class, gender, and religious difference in company archives and its role in shaping English and Dutch overseas enterprises are still awaiting methodical treatment.⁵ This situation contrasts sharply with the profound rethinking of *modern* colonialism that occurred during the past twenty-odd years. Influenced by Cultural and Post-colonial Studies, practitioners of the “New Imperial History” turned their focus towards discursive formations, the roles and agency of women and cultural “Others,” and the interdependence of overseas and domestic narratives.⁶ British India after the Battle of Plassey (1757) and the nineteenth-century Dutch East Indies (*Nederlands-Indië*) have provided particularly fertile terrain for novel explorations of race, gender, and the logic of the colonial archive.⁷ Analogous impulses are likewise able to enrich and invigorate the study of East India Company history during the period conventionally labelled as the “Age of Commerce” (Reid).⁸ Greater sensitivity to discursive continuities between the early modern and modern eras would serve to further problematize deep-rooted distinctions between “trading” and “imperial” phases in the history of Asian-European encounters, while a focus on language-use and writing

practices opens avenues for researching global networks and trans-imperial connections.⁹

At least part of the reason for the slow uptake of cultural approaches in scholarship on the seventeenth-century EIC and VOC is that historians on the one hand, and literary and cultural critics on the other, have engaged with different sets of materials and posed different questions, hence reducing opportunities for interdisciplinary dialogue. This special issue of *JEMCS* is appropriate for exploring how insights and approaches generated by the cultural turn may be more fully incorporated into the latest archive-oriented research and scholarly writing on the early modern chartered companies. The English corporation is discussed alongside its Dutch counterpart in order to highlight the commonalities which existed between two parallel organizations that are still more often than not studied in isolation. EIC history can be advanced through closer interaction with the historiography on the VOC in the same way that scholars working on the Dutch Company would benefit from taking up analytical perspectives developed by historians and literary critics in relation to its English competitor. Although excluded from consideration here, the same argument applies to closer engagement with the historiographies on other European enterprises in early modern Asia, particularly the Portuguese *Estado da Índia*.¹⁰

After surveying the state of the field, this article zooms in on the extraordinary potential that the archives of the East India companies hold for cultural analysis. It argues that scrutiny of the ethnographic discourses produced by the EIC and VOC can serve both as a method to investigate what one might call the mental worlds of Company agents, and as a means to better comprehend the social worlds they inhabited. This approach seeks to capture the complex coexistence of seemingly opposing tendencies in Company approaches to the Asian trading world, most prominently the concurrence of accommodative stances towards cultural difference and cross-cultural partnerships with marked ethnic prejudice and recurrent violence. If pragmatism and willingness to adapt to pre-existing structures guided the English and Dutch Indian Ocean ventures overall, the persistent undercurrent of negative ethnographic stereotyping in EIC and VOC sources points to a parallel narrative that helps us explain why certain violent actions or discriminating policies gained traction when and where they did. As the closing section will briefly discuss, the circulation and preservation of cultural tropes in the “paper world[s]” (Worden, “Cape Slaves” 24) created by EIC and VOC administrators resulted from the

logic of what I term “company writing,” referring both to a set of institutional writing practices and to the total sum of documents produced by agents of the East India companies, including instructions, letters, reports, decrees, ordinances, consultation minutes, journals and factory diaries.¹¹ Considerations of space prevent me from developing a case study of company writing here, but I hope that the suggestions raised in this article will provide sufficient starting points for broadening our perspectives on the seventeenth-century EIC and VOC.

Historiographical Appraisal

In a wide-ranging discussion of new directions in English East India Company studies published in 2009, Philip Stern argues that “we are now able to interrogate the pre-Plassey Company not just with economic questions but a range of political, social, cultural, and intellectual concerns in mind” (“History and Historiography” 1153). While Stern was unquestionably right to stress that scholarly work on the EIC has flourished over the past couple of decades, he did acknowledge that the many examples available to him related almost exclusively to the period from the mid-eighteenth century onwards.¹² In the light of this imbalance, Stern’s statement that “the vibrancy in early modern studies in general seems to imply that this situation will not endure” should be read above all as an indication of as yet unrealized aspiration, which remains today (“History and Historiography” 1161). In keeping with scholarship on the EIC, research on the VOC has similarly enjoyed a period of particular vibrancy, aided in no small part by new digitization projects, archival guides, and a thriving scholarship programme hosted by Leiden University.¹³ Nonetheless, among the stream of new publications on the Dutch Company, it remains relatively rare to encounter the “postmodern sensibilities about hybridity . . . and interdisciplinarity” which Stern identified in studies of the eighteenth-century EIC (“History and Historiography” 1160). Before proceeding to discuss one intervention in detail, it will be useful to trace the longer-term trends in the historical literature on both companies.

From the 1950s through to the 1980s, the predominant perspective in research on the Dutch and English East India companies was firmly rooted in economic history. Starting with Kristof Glamann’s analysis of Dutch-Asiatic trade, scholars examined the companies first and foremost with regard to their role in the early modern expansion of intercontinental commerce. Seminal

studies by K. N. Chaudhuri, Niels Steensgaard, Holden Furber and others focused on organisational and institutional aspects, strategic and financial management, private trade, and the overall structure of commerce in Monsoon Asia.¹⁴ A second set of publications during this period consisted of works that dealt with the commercial operations and settlement policies of the companies in specific regions, often related to the VOC in South Asia.¹⁵ Finally, a third group of historians mined the archives of the EIC and VOC as a source for writing the social and economic history of Asian societies, an approach that was particularly fruitful among practitioners of the emerging field of Indian Ocean studies during the 1980s and beyond.¹⁶ Whether intent on mapping the commercial networks and practices of the joint-stock corporations or on reconstructing autonomous Asian histories, scholars have traditionally read EIC and VOC archives in order to obtain quantitative and qualitative data about concrete realities. Primarily concerned with understanding the world outside the sources, none of these three strands of research offered sustained reflection on the cultural categories through which company agents perceived the foreign environments in which they operated or the textual practices by which they represented them.

By the 1990s this situation had begun to change. As part of the wider turn towards the study of culture that included the investigation of mental geographies, representations, and images of “Others”—and responding in various ways to Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978)—scholars of various stripes launched into the analysis of travel writing and cross-cultural encounters. Inevitably, this vogue for the critical rereading of the writings of (predominantly) travelling European men generated new interest in the East India companies, which after all represented the bulk of people making the journey from Europe to Asia during the early modern period.¹⁷ However, compared to the sheer volume of extant documents, the corpus of company sources studied through a cultural lens remained small and the coverage of texts uneven. By and large, existing analyses of global interactions and their accompanying discourses have bypassed published primary materials in collections such as the *English Factories in India* (Foster and Fawcett) and the *Dagh-Register gehouden int Casteel Batavia* (Van der Chijs et al.) as well as the mass of manuscript sources available in VOC and EIC archives in Europe and Asia. These analyses instead favored a smaller set of printed accounts composed by a number of notable figures who often consciously wrote with an eye to publication. For instance, in one of the principal early studies to apply discourse analysis to seventeenth-

century EIC materials, Jyotsna Singh turned her lens chiefly to the published accounts of the English ambassador Sir Thomas Roe, his chaplain Edward Terry, and the Anglican minister Henry Lord.¹⁸

Although it represents a valuable widening of perspective compared to the standard economic histories of the trading companies, the cultural turn's impact on company studies has on the whole been limited. In Anglophone scholarship, most collective analytical energy converged on a single text, the diary kept by Sir Thomas Roe during his stay at the Mughal court of Jahangir in 1615–18.¹⁹ Recounting his impressions of Mughal India as a diplomatic agent of the EIC and the English crown, Roe's account has been read to stress cultural incommensurability as well as mutual understanding, and to demonstrate latent English imperialism as well as England's marginality in its first phase of global expansion.²⁰ Sidestepping the irony that the EIC representative whose views and experiences are most commonly made to stand for the early Anglo-Indian encounter in general was neither a merchant nor a Company servant in the conventional sense, an obvious limitation to this over-concentration on Roe is that it encouraged the construction of far-reaching claims on the basis of a slim and internally inconsistent set of materials.²¹ In order to satisfactorily address how English Company agents perceived their host environment and how their responses to various "Others" manifested themselves in their writings, it will be necessary to apply the questions that have already been raised in scholarly works on travel, Orientalism, and colonial encounters to a broader and more representative sample of EIC records.

In relation to the VOC, the state of the field is somewhat more complex. On the one hand, the distinctly colonial character of the Company's presence in South Africa, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, and parts of Southeast Asia induced historians to reflect on Dutch relations with local populations early on. On the other hand, the strong empiricist bent that characterises VOC historiography has tended to favour social histories that largely eschew cultural analysis. In his classic *The Dutch Seaborne Empire* (1965), Charles Boxer included a chapter on "Assimilation and Apartheid" that discussed Dutch cultural attitudes, yet his account was predicated upon a now outdated notion of race.²² Nearly two decades later, in 1982, Jurrien van Goor published a first brief assessment of VOC agents' assumptions *vis-à-vis* Asian societies, as part of a larger argument about the continuities between the VOC period and that of the Dutch East Indies.²³ In a concurrent shift away from the predominant economic history perspective, Jean Gelman Taylor and Leonard Blussé did important work in

writing women, Eurasians, Asian settlers, and slaves back into VOC history, while between the late 1970s and mid-1990s, Van Goor and others significantly expanded our grasp of the Company's policies in the spheres of religion, education, and colonial governance.²⁴ However, in their discussion of social, ethnic, and gender categories, these authors devoted comparatively little thought to the discursive practices through which the various markers of difference were constituted. Hence, apart from the occasional salutary warning not to take the categorizations in Company records at face value, 1980s social histories of the VOC featured arguments for instance about the (non)existence of "social distance between the races" which largely presupposed that notions such as "race" had stable meanings (Knaap, "Europeans" 99).²⁵

During the 1990s the first handful of publications appeared that explicitly highlighted the cultural representations embedded in VOC sources. Bearing testimony to the influence of the "New Cultural History" (Hunt, *The New Cultural History*), Sanjay Subrahmanyam in *The Political Economy of Commerce* (1990) proclaimed that "[a]ny exercise in using European documentation from the 'Age of Expansion' is . . . of necessity an exercise in the history of mentalities" (8). Case studies by Subrahmanyam, James Tracy, and Markus Vink broke important ground by investigating how cultural ideas and mental images were bound up with encounters, yet these pioneering attempts have received little follow-up.²⁶ Indeed, explicit engagement with the *histoire des mentalités*—an approach to the study of worldviews or collective attitudes first developed in France by historians associated with the *Annales* school—has been largely absent in scholarship on either of the two companies.²⁷ Recent interest in a so-called VOC-mentality essentially left this situation unaltered, given that it was concerned with defining the (commercial, colonial, or military) nature of VOC enterprise and its public image in the twenty-first century, not with an interpretative approach to sources associated with doing "history in the ethnographic grain" (Darnton 3). As I seek to illustrate in the latter part of this article, an analysis of the ways in which company agents made sense of the world around them and conceptualized it in writing can help to explain the sentiments and motivations driving VOC and EIC operations.

Scholarship on the East India companies has boomed since the turn of the century, in part triggered by the quatercentenaries of the EIC and VOC in 2000 and 2002, respectively.²⁸ Apart from a proliferation of regional case studies of Asian societies based on company archives, reinterpretations emerged of traditional subject areas such as shipping, maritime violence, (private) trade,

colonial governance, and the Euro-Asian balance of technological, political, and military power.²⁹ Moreover, a myriad of specialist works appeared over the last decade or so on previously underexplored topics such as life on board, lascars, ship surgeons, diplomatic exchange, and slavery.³⁰ An important new methodological strand is one that approaches the EIC and VOC through the prism of networks, whether of business contacts, knowledge, the circulation of art, objects, and material culture, global actors, or forced migration.³¹ Furthermore, Stern's analysis of the EIC as an early modern corporation has once more foregrounded the role of the East India companies as political bodies exercising authority over the people under their jurisdiction, and opened new lines of enquiry concerning the companies' constitutional character.³² The manifest significance of this combined body of work notwithstanding, to gain insight into the role of "corporate discourses" in shaping Company activities, one needs to turn elsewhere (Barbour, *Third Voyage* 3).

Company Writing, Mentalities, and Ethnographic Discourse

In *Indian Ink* (2007), the historical geographer Miles Ogborn argues compellingly that writing played a formative role not just in describing but in constituting EIC activities.³³ Focusing on the materiality of texts and the role they played as cultural artefacts travelling within and between Europe and Asia, Ogborn puts writing right at the heart of the production of global trading links. His emphasis on form over content allows for various important insights, yet it also leaves important aspects out. This becomes clear when comparing *Indian Ink* to another recent study of Company writing practices, Adrien Delmas's *Les voyages de l'écrit* (2013). As Delmas demonstrates, the VOC's corporate practice of daily writing sustained the Company's territorial claims and colonial administration in South Africa and elsewhere and served as a repository for detailed ethnographic information.³⁴ Combining analysis of writing's representational function with that of its technical function as a tool of communication, this approach situates close readings of texts within the global and connected histories they helped to shape.³⁵ An added benefit of attending to writing's discursive content is that it puts individual actors and their ideas and attitudes at the center of analyses of cross-cultural engagements. As such, it complements macro-analyses of global exchange as well as the constitutional perspective that centers on corporate entities as the key players structuring early modern Euro-Asian commerce.³⁶

A number of recent case studies—the contributions to this issue by Julia Schleck and Amrita Sen included—demonstrate that scholars have now begun to examine how the first generation of EIC officials constructed ethnic, class, and gender difference in their writings.³⁷ The focus in these studies is confined to specific moments during the early seventeenth century, and hence it follows that much work remains to be done on EIC writing, particularly from the 1620s onwards—not to mention the even larger corpus of Dutch Company writing. A productive way forward is through engagement with the notion of “implicit ethnographies,” a concept introduced in the mid-1990s by Stuart B. Schwartz. As Schwartz explained, implicit ethnographies refers to the often “unstated or assumed” understandings which individuals held about themselves and others, which “did not have to be articulated or codified but that permeated the way in which people thought and acted” (2–3). He clarified that such understandings concern “the underlying ideas and understandings that governed the actual encounter,” even if they “seem to have little overtly to do with the study of other peoples” (Schwartz 3). They comprise the “concepts and categories” based on “previous experience, ideology, and cosmology” through which individuals make sense of the unfamiliar, and that shape the manner in which they view others and respond to them (Schwartz 3). In short, they are about mentalities.

With the exception of Markus Vink, no historian of the VOC or EIC followed up on Schwartz’s call to investigate implicit ethnographies.³⁸ Yet its focus on *assumed* understandings, not necessarily related to the *systematic study* of other peoples, is highly productive for thinking about the ethnographic discourses embedded in company writing. My use of the term “ethnographic discourse” covers the totality of statements purporting to describe the shared character of people labeled as belonging to the same group, and allows for the inclusion of the quotidian and often unreflective use of adjectives and epithets. Coupled with attentiveness to the role of emotions, analysis of the ethnographic content of company writing opens possibilities for a far richer understanding of the attitudes and activities of EIC and VOC agents than existing literature has offered so far.³⁹ While operating within the parameters set by the commercial, political, financial, and military priorities, capacities, and constraints of the various players within a given context, company agents’ actions were crucially shaped by the convictions and assumptions that formed their mental baggage, their emotive responses to the specific circumstances of encounter, and the ways both were communicated in writing. By taking seriously the anxieties and preconceptions which underpinned the approaches of EIC

and VOC agents to their host environment, we are able to move on from one-sided portrayals of these men as either daring adventurers or “rational, calculating entrepreneur[s]” towards a more rounded and realistic assessment (Steensgaard 15). This also means taking seriously the power of Asian actors to shape encounters. As Adam Clulow reminds us, company agents were frequently outplayed not because of their own lack of cultural competence, but by “the sophistication of the people . . . they found around them” (“Commemorating Failure” 227).

If mentalities have been absent from discussions concerning the EIC, the concept of *VOC-mentaliteit* has enjoyed a great deal of notoriety after being coined by former Dutch Prime Minister Jan-Peter Balkenende in an address to the *Tweede Kamer* (House of Representatives) in 2006. The Christian-Democratic leader envisaged such a mindset in bright terms: it was about dynamism, visionary entrepreneurship, and a collective belief in the ability of the Netherlands to play a significant role on the global stage.⁴⁰ Historians and members of the public responded to this triumphalist portrayal by emphasising the exploitative character of VOC enterprise, especially its violent imposition of monopoly policies on spice-producing regions and its central role in the Indian Ocean slave trade. Reflecting on the issue in 2014, Gerrit Knaap argued that the *VOC-mentaliteit* needed to be described in terms of the Company’s imperialistic stance, as the mindset of soldiers and statesmen rather than that of merchants.⁴¹ Most recently, addressing the question from the perspective of the VOC’s multi-ethnic workforce, Matthias van Rossum has posited that the Company’s mentality was characterised by “a pragmatic multiculturalism” (*Werkers* 377). According to this view, the Euro-Asian underclass of maritime labourers worked side-by-side under roughly comparable conditions without significant mutual divisions or conflict.⁴² It envisions the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a pre-racial phase in which European views of “Others” were relatively open and not profoundly marked by ethnic prejudice—a position which resonates with Alison Games’ notion of cosmopolitanism as the defining stance of seventeenth-century English merchants and colonists.⁴³

And there is much to say for such a perspective. The history of Asian-European encounters is filled with examples of cultural curiosity, accommodation, and cross-cultural relations of all sorts. Indeed, forms of cultural commensurability almost certainly characterised the majority of dealings between Asian officials and traders and company representatives.⁴⁴ However, as Francesca Trivellato has observed, “protracted commercial relations” across

cultural lines “did not invariably generate more benevolent attitudes,” and the persistent undercurrent of pejorative ethnographic statements in the writings of company administrators forms a classic case in point (22–23). Some of their responses were elicited by the very fact that extensive cultural crossings defined the reality of early modern Asian-European exchanges, as a means to discursively reify borders which were fluid in practice. Hence close and fairly amicable cross-cultural interactions coincided with hostile rhetoric, distrust, and cultural prejudice, which came to the surface with particular vehemence in situations of real or perceived danger, frustrated ambition, or outright clashes.

The antagonistic mindsets displayed in company sources were both cause and effect of what Sanjay Subrahmanyam has described as “a world permeated, in its language and images, as indeed in its actions, by violence” (*Political Economy* 254). Even though the scale at which violence occurred remained contained by the “finely tuned balance” between the territorial power of Asian states and European ascendancy at sea that existed in many parts of the Indian Ocean world, this was a “fragile equilibrium” that was frequently upset by limited outbursts of conflict (Prakash *European* 139; Subrahmanyam, “Forcing the Doors,” 137). As much as it is necessary to remind ourselves that “the logic of violence is bound to affect the logic of political ethnography,” it is also important to recognise how hostile Othering served to vindicate aggressive action and hence made violence more likely to occur (Subrahmanyam, “Forcing the Doors,” 137). A typical example are the predations which the VOC and EIC carried out against Indian shipping in the Red Sea during the 1620s, which had been preceded by a series of ethnographic justifications of strong-arm methods consisting of variations on the idea that “[n]othing but fear keeps a Moor in awe” (Sainsbury 106).⁴⁵

Violent encounters accompanied Dutch and English eastward expansion from the time of their first ventures around the Cape of Good Hope, undertaken in the 1590s. Commenting on the hit-and-run tactics employed by some of the earliest EIC captains, Richmond Barbour suggested that “[a]t a deep level, they were still thinking like privateers” (“Corporate Praxis” 23). As is well-known, the East India companies commenced their operations against the backdrop of intra-European warfare and rivalry, which were at the root of much belligerent action undertaken by the Dutch and English against their European and Asian competitors. Yet the manner in which the earlier culture of privateering shaded into company trading operations also left its mark on the ethnographic assumptions espoused by men such as James Lancaster, sea-

soned privateer and general of the EIC's first fleet, which sailed in 1601.⁴⁶ Preparing to depart from Bantam in February 1603, Lancaster instructed the master of a vessel which was to sail to the Moluccas to always be on his guard and anticipate native treachery: "wheresoever you be come, trust none of the Indians, for their bodies and soules be whollie treason, and yt will be very daungerous to touch in any unknowne place, therefore avoied yt" (Foster, *Voyages* 161). In their commission for the third voyage, issued in 1607, the Court of Committees of the EIC similarly imagined maritime Asians as capricious and menacing. They ordered William Keeling to ensure that his men "behave themselves peaceable & Civillie" towards any local people they might come across, yet added that he must "take heede you come not within their daunger, still expecting & feareing evill though there be noe cause" (Stevens and Birdwood 117). Such promotion of distrustful attitudes at an institutional level inevitably influenced the ways in which individual agents made sense of cross-cultural encounters, routinely perceiving evil-doing even when there was little apparent cause indeed.

James D. Tracy coined the phrase "psychology of an interloper" to characterize the outlook of Europeans during the early stages of colonial expansion in Asia ("Introduction" 9). While recognizing that competition from Asian merchants and power-holders was tough, Tracy argues that VOC and EIC agents "enveloped these commercial rivalries with anxieties that were proportional to the fragility of their own position in a vast and alien world" ("Introduction" 13). As is well-known, sea voyages themselves were fraught with danger and frequently characterised by high mortality rates, facts that were widely recounted in popular literature.⁴⁷ And while in Asia, not a few Europeans felt ill at ease as a result of their weakness in numbers, lack of means, and limited grasp of local cultures and languages. The stress in recent studies on European vulnerability and relative insignificance in early modern contact zones has provided an important corrective against an older view which projected later European dominance back onto these first interactions.⁴⁸ Yet to speak of "anxieties that were proportional to the fragility" of Europeans' actual position is to imply another progressive narrative, one that assumes a lessening of anxiety—and, by extension, of distrust and prejudice—as the companies became more firmly entrenched in Asia and their agents more familiarized to their new surroundings (Tracy, "Introduction" 13).

Such a general progressive development towards greater feelings of trust, security, and cultural understanding corresponding to the companies' increased

knowledge of, and longer-term residence in, Asia is far from unequivocally supported by the sources. Once the VOC and EIC had assumed a position of colonial authority in a select number of locations, the attitudes and assumptions associated with the psychology of the interloper would find new expression in a pervasive “siege mentality” underpinning policies of fortification, ethno-spatial segregation, and colonial government (Vink, *Encounters* 15).⁴⁹ As suggested by a recent study on seventeenth-century Dutch travel writing, the deployment of specific ethnic labels and cultural categories by VOC agents may even have been directly linked to the development of distinct models of colonization.⁵⁰ Policy guidance frequently hinged on the familiar ethnographic trope of Asian treachery. We may cite just two examples from a barrage of similar statements: in 1642 the English factors in newly-built Fort St. George (Madras) posited that the EIC required fortified places under its own jurisdiction “in regard the Moores and Gentues [Gentiles, here: Hindus] are false and not to be trusted” (Love 1: 45), while in 1648 the Dutch Councilor of the Indies, Carel Reijniersz, argued against reducing the size of Batavia’s garrison by stressing that “we are here surrounded by heathenish infidel nations, whom, as any informed person knows, are very little to be trusted” (NA: Aanwinsten 69). These are only a few of the indications that point towards the need to pay closer attention to the intricate links between the mentalities, discourses, and practices of seventeenth-century company agents as well as to their combined afterlives.

Concluding Thoughts

This article has argued that scholarship on the seventeenth-century EIC and VOC stands to gain from incorporating critical perspectives and methodologies developed since the cultural turn in analysis of global connections and interactions. As the productive engagement with cultural categories such as race and gender in work on modern empires and travel writing appears to suggest, our understanding of the early stages of Dutch and English expansion in Asia can be advanced by integrating interdisciplinary perspectives more fully into economic and institutional narratives. As I hope to have shown, a fruitful way of creating a constructive dialogue between historians and literary critics is through a focus on the companies’ “paper empires” (Worden, “Cape Slaves”). Such a dialogue pairs assessment of writing as the technology through which company activities were constituted with careful textual analysis of its discursive contents. Let me briefly sketch three interrelated suggestions.

First, a promising new mode of reading company writing is represented by the history of emotions. Focusing on the roles of “affective rhetoric” and “affective practices” in VOC encounters with Australasians, Susan Broomhall presents a model for analysing how Company agents responded to cross-cultural contacts, interpreted the responses of others, and developed their policies as a consequence of both (351; 359). A second means of expanding our understanding of the role played by implicit ethnographies in shaping Asian-European relations consists of a more systematic analysis of available indigenous sources and readings of European archives against the grain, in order to reconstruct non-European views and responses.⁵¹ Thirdly, the nearly complete lack of critical engagement with VOC sources from a literary angle should be addressed.⁵² It is here that the still substantial gap between theoretically bent critics dissecting printed accounts and empirically minded historians working in archives is most conspicuous. Tellingly, the one early modern Dutch text on Asia which did invite extensive critical analysis is the translated *Itinerario (Discours of Voyages)* by Jan Huygen van Linschoten, originally published in Dutch in 1596 and hence pre-dating the establishment of the VOC by several years.⁵³ Future work will need to establish how a variety of ideas, tropes, and assumptions concerning company operations, the spaces in which they unfolded, and the people involved in them, circulated between documents produced for internal consumption and texts that appeared in print.⁵⁴

This means moving beyond the critical study of literary works and published travel accounts and tapping into the incredibly rich potential for discourse analysis represented by the records left by the English and Dutch companies. Such an investigation has the benefit of cutting across conventional linguistic, regional, and temporal boundaries. It promises to bring out the discursive borrowings between different colonial formations and to throw light on discursive continuities, highlighting the linkages between different stages in the history of European expansion. The VOC and EIC archives can be read as important repositories of commentary on the lived experience of travel and stay in Asia of what constituted the largest group of Europeans making the passage in the early modern period. A sense of being outnumbered and out of place was central to the so-called psychology of the interloper manifested at the time of the earliest English and Dutch commercial ventures to Asia, as well as to the siege mentality displayed by administrators of early company settlements. While these mindsets reflected Europeans’ relative weakness *vis-à-vis*

Asian states, vulnerability alone cannot explain the sheer intensity of European responses in many situations. Once pejorative discourses about Others had taken root, distrust and prejudice spilled over into contexts where they cannot satisfactorily be described as “proportional to the fragility” of the companies’ actual position, nor (in most cases) as deriving solely from other situational factors. The key to a more compelling explanation lies in the logic of corporate discourse.

This logic was linked to the reality of managing overseas enterprises stretching over vast distances. EIC and VOC agents operated as nodes in wider commercial networks spanning much of the Indian Ocean world and extending to Europe, which were tied together through the medium of written communication. Consequently, as I will seek to demonstrate in a forthcoming monograph, company writing also developed as part of wider discursive grids, with texts produced in one location shaping ideas and perceptions in others. Concepts, categories, and designations used to convey local meaning quickly assumed context-transcending qualities, facilitating the ascription of a broad set of stereotypes to generic identity labels such as “Moor” or “Indian.” Put differently, while ethnographic descriptions would have originally responded to a specific incident, situational circumstance, or personal point of view, the very discursive tools available to authors to describe their experiences led to the development of a more streamlined and narrower set of tropes and assumptions. Once they were inscribed in corporate discourse, views about “Others” gained afterlives which took them far beyond their original context, shaping EIC and VOC approaches to cross-cultural encounters in a wide range of commercial and colonial settings. It is this cultural component, largely overlooked in the existing literature, which we should take into account when writing the histories of the seventeenth-century East India companies.

NOTES

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1. On these various turns, see Withers; Conrad; Potter and Saha; Gerritsen and Rillo. On the rise and fall of cultural theories, see Hunt *Writing History* 26–43.

2. On analytical approaches associated with the “cultural turn,” see Bonner and Hunt. On enriching “Company studies” see Stern, “History and Historiography.”

3. On examining VOC or EIC histories within the broader narrative of global history, see Parker; Clulow, “Commemorating Failure.” On new directions in global history, see Berg.

4. See Gaastra, *The Dutch East India Company*; Stern *The Company-State*; Erikson.

5. Regarding the lack of attention to the construction of difference in the archive, the recent historiography on the Cape colony forms an exception. See Worden, “New Approaches”; Worden, “Cape Slaves”; Romney. Interest in cultural exchange is particularly strong with regard to the English factory in Japan. See: Massarella; Lewis; Screech; Kaislaniemi; Ryu. Regarding India, see Pettigrew and Gopalan.

6. On the “New Imperial History,” see Wilson. For examples of these studies, see Daunton and Halpern; Burton; Wilson; and Levine. Works which engage with such themes in relation to the early companies are: Fisher, *Counterflows*; Bosma and Raben; Jones; Ketelaars. The “New Imperial History” has taken root especially in research on the British Empire. About its lukewarm reception among scholars of Dutch imperial history, see Raben, “A New Dutch Imperial History?”

7. See Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge*; Joseph; Nechtman; Finn; Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*; Sramek; Raman.

8. The character of this pre-imperial stage remains hotly debated. To my mind the period is best characterized by the concept of an “Age of Contained Conflict” (Subrahmanyam, *Political Economy* chap. 5).

9. On challenging divisions between “trading” and “imperial” phases, see Stern, *The Company-State* 6–7. On writing practices see Ogborn; Delmas.

10. Such an integrative perspective is found in Holden Furber’s classic *Rival Empires of Trade* (1976) as well as in Prakash, *European Commercial Enterprise*. A recent collection offering wide coverage is Berg et al., *Goods from the East*.

11. I discuss these materials at length in Van Meersbergen, “Ethnography and Encounter.” The arguments presented in this article draw on primary source analysis carried out in the context of my doctoral research.

12. See “History and Historiography” 1161.

13. For the original “Toward a New Age of Partnership” project, see: <http://www.tanap.net/>. Digitization projects are currently being carried out by the Arsip Nasional Republik Indonesia (ANRI) (<http://www.sejarah-nusantara.anri.go.id/>) and the Nationaal Archief, The Hague. A particularly valuable run of archival guides is the ongoing *Dutch Sources on South Asia* series (Bes, Gommans, and Kruijtzter).

14. For organisational and institutional aspects, see Chaudhuri, *English*; Steensgaard; Furber; Blussé and Gaastra. For strategic and financial management, see Gaastra, *Bewind*. On private trade, see Marshall. On the overall structure of commerce, see Van Leur; Meilink-Roelofs; Chaudhuri, *Trading*.

15. See Arasaratnam, *Dutch Power*; Raychaudhuri; Van Santen; Prakash, *Dutch East India Company*.

16. See Das Gupta, *Decline*; Arasaratnam *Merchants*; Subrahmanyam, *Political Economy*; Barendse; Pearson; Prakash, *Bullion*.

17. Between 1602 and 1795, the VOC transported nearly one million people to maritime Asia, more than the number of people making the passage on ships by all other European organizations combined during the same period. For a detailed study see Bruijn, Gaastra, and Schöffner.

18. Singh 17–39. See also Sapra.

19. See Foster, *The Embassy*.

20. On Roe and cultural incommensurability, see Teltscher 21–22; Cohn 18–19. On mutual understanding, see Pinch 401–07; Das 121–26. For imperialism, see Singh 21. On England's marginality, see Barbour, *Before Orientalism* 146–47. For commentary on these analyses, see also: Subrahmanyam, "Frank Submissions," 71–79; Ogborn 28–30.

21. About the multiple voices in Roe's account, see Mishra.

22. See Boxer chap. 8.

23. See Van Goor, *Kooplieden*. See also Van Goor, *Prelude*.

24. On women, Eurasians and Asian settlers, see Taylor; Blussé, *Strange Company*; Blussé, *Bitters Bruid*. On religion, education and colonial governance, see Van Goor, *Jan Kompenie*; Knaap, *Kruidnagelen*; Wagenaar; Niemeijer, *Calvinisme*.

25. For an example of questioning categorizations, see Das Gupta, "Western Indian Ocean," 485–88; for a later example, see Raben, "Round about Batavia."

26. Hence the observation that "the deconstruction of [VOC] discourse still remains very much in its infancy" holds true today as it did a decade ago (Gommans and Kuijper 385). See, for exceptions: Raben, "Batavia and Colombo"; Kruijtzter; Vink, *Mission to Madurai*; Vink, *Encounters*. For the early case studies, see Subrahmanyam, "Slaves and Tyrants"; Subrahmanyam, "Forcing the Doors"; Tracy, "Introduction"; Tracy, "Asian Despotism?"; Vink, "Images and Ideologies."

27. Useful entry points into the literature on the *histoire des mentalités* are: Chartier, chap. 1; Burke, chap. 11; Burguière, chaps. 3 and 9.

28. On the EIC, see Bowen, Lincoln, and Rigby. On the VOC, see Knaap and Teitler.

29. Many of the archive-based regional case studies appeared as part of the sixteen-volume *TANAP Monographs on the History of Asian-European Interaction*; see, for example, Ruangsilp; Hsin-hui; Nadri; Mailaparambil. On shipping, see Parthesius. On maritime violence, see Borschberg; Smith. For trade, see Jacobs; Nierstrasz, *Shadow*; Nierstrasz, *Rivalry*. On colonial governance, see Schutte; Mentz; Niemeijer, *Batavia*. On balance of power, see Andrade; Clulow, *Company*.

30. For studies of life on board, see Van Gelder and Roeper; Barbour, "Multinational." On lascars, see Fisher, "Indian Ghat Sarangs"; Van Rossum, *Werkers*. On ship surgeons, see Iris Diane Rosemary Bruijn. For studies of diplomatic exchange, see Blussé, *Geveinsde Vrienden*; Locher-Scholten and Rietbergen; Subrahmanyam, "Frank Submissions"; Vink, *Mission*; Fisher, "Diplomacy in India"; Mishra; Viallé. On slavery see Vink, "The World's Oldest Trade"; Van Rossum, *Kleurrijke Tragiek*; Worden, "Indian Ocean Slaves."

31. On networks of business contacts, see Davies. On knowledge networks, see Huijen, De Jong, and Kolfin; Winterbottom. On the circulation of art, objects, and material culture, see DaCosta Kaufmann and North; Berg et al. For networks of global actors, see Antunes and Gommans. On forced migration, see Ward.

32. On companies as political bodies, see Stern, *The Company-State*; Veevers; Weststeijn. On their constitutional nature, see Pettigrew.

33. See 26.

34. See 170–71.

35. See Delmas 246, 252.

36. For a constitutional perspective, see Pettigrew.

37. See also Barbour, *Third Voyage*; Barbour, "Corporate Praxis"; Ryu.

38. See Vink, “Images and Ideologies.” Vink notes that his article “will set out to make implicit ethnographies explicit,” that is, to “describe the underlying images and ideologies (*mentalités*) that governed the encounter between the ‘Dutch’ and the ‘Indians’” (82). Revised versions of this article have appeared in Vink, *Mission*, and Vink, *Encounters*.

39. On the role of emotions, see Broomhall.

40. Balkenende’s original statement ran as follows: “Laten we zeggen: Nederland kan het weer! Die VOC-mentaliteit. Over grenzen heen kijken. Dynamiek. Toch?!” A recording can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mBN8xJby2b8>. In October 2016, Balkenende confirmed that he still “believes in the VOC-mentality” (Groenendijk).

41. See Knaap, “De ‘Core Business’” 24.

42. See *Werkers* 377–381.

43. See Games 9–10.

44. On cultural commensurability, see Subrahmanyam, *Courtly Encounters* 1–33; Subrahmanyam, *Three Ways* 173–78.

45. I discuss this episode in van Meersbergen, “Dutch and English Approaches.”

46. About the culture of privateering, see Andrews.

47. See Guy.

48. On European vulnerability in early interactions, see Colley; Barbour, *Before Orientalism*.

49. See Raben, “Batavia and Colombo”; Nightingale; van Meersbergen, “Ethnography and Encounter.

50. See Romney.

51. For attempts, see Bes; Vink, *Encounters*, chap. 1.

52. A rare exception is Kuruppath.

53. For these analyses, see Kamps; van den Boogaart; Nocentelli; Saldanha.

54. An obvious point of departure would be a critical re-reading of the miscellaneous accounts published by the society named after the renowned sixteenth-century Dutch traveller and critic of Portuguese Asia, the *Linschoten-Vereeniging*. See <http://www.linschoten-vereeniging.nl/werken.htm> for a full list of *werken*.

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