Debate

This issue of the *Bijdragen* starts with a new feature. In this feature we highlight a recently launched book. We invite specialists in the field to comment on the book, and we invite the author to respond to their comments.

In this issue we focus on Ann Stoler's *Along the archival grain; Epistemic anxieties and colonial common sense*. Those invited to comment on the book are Frances Gouda, Remco Raben and Henk Schulte Nordholt.

Along the archival grain was published this year by Princeton University Press. A reprinting of the book is being released in January 2010 incorporating a number of corrections.

We plan to publish this feature on a regular basis in alternate issues of the *Bijdragen*.

Registered readers may participate in the debate on the internet version of this article:

<http://www.kitlv-journals.nl/index.php/btlv>

Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the archival grain; Epistemic anxieties and colonial common sense*. Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009. xiii + 314 pp.

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A race horse among work horses in Dutch archival pastures

In a recent *New York Times* review of Simon Schama's latest treatise, focusing on the American past rather than the arts and culture of the Dutch Republic, the conservative columnist David Brooks indulged in an amusing peroration about 'The Brilliant Book [...] the sort of book written by a big thinker who comes to capture the American spirit while armed only with his own brilliance'. If we were to replace 'American' with '(post)colonial spirit', the same expectations resonate with regard to Ann Stoler's newest contribution to her already substantial body of scholarship on the Dutch East Indies. *Along the archival grain* is also written by an author sustained primarily by her own thoughts and talents in producing a book that is resplendent with questions and insights. As suggested in this review's title, among the many work horses grazing in the pastures of Dutch colonial archives, Stoler has once more distinguished herself as a race horse.

In ways that are more subtle and empirically grounded than her previous work, in *Along the archival grain* Stoler revisits her long-standing fascination not only with the political origins but also the affective resonance of a 'racialized common sense about people and places' that pervaded the authorities and the settler community of the Dutch East Indies and, by implication, other European colonial regimes in Asia as well (p. 24). In fact, her direct appeal to a postcolonial and cultural studies audience beyond the specialized world of Dutch colonial scholarship is again the reason why this book's title makes no reference to its geographical situatedness in the Netherlands Indies. In this instance Stoler first trains her analytic gaze on the Dutch archival record, not simply using it as a privileged source of historical information. Instead, she treats the archives as a subject in and of itself demanding painstaking scholarly attention. She explores the manner in which a range of 'imperial dispositions' (p. 3) and alternating forms of 'epistemic uncertainty and clarity' (p. 43) are buried in archival holdings, thus constituting a 'repository of good taste and bad faith' (p. 41). When historians excavate such an untidy storehouse of documents in order to expose the hidden nooks and crannies of a European colonial ethos, Stoler underscores the necessity to read *along* the grain before trying to read *against* it, as many postcolonial scholars in recent years have

advocated. She encourages historians to enter the archives and surrender to them as a 'force field' in which a shifting vocabulary of political authority, affective knowledge and racial anxiety gives documentary voice to 'the habits of the [colonial] heart' (p. 53)

Stoler's ruminations are complex. In the first two chapters she sets up a relentless one-way conversation with a wide range of anthropologists and political scientists as well as philosophers and historians. Her purpose is to enhance our understanding of the constant shifts back and forth between epistemological confidence and existential doubt, reflected in the archival record, that troubled and occasionally disoriented colonial authorities. In *Along the archival grain*, however, she now seems to contest the notion that colonial societies like the Dutch East Indies, British India or French Indochina constituted political vanguards or 'laboratories of modernity', as proposed by anthropologists such as Gauri Vishwanathan, Paul Rabinow and Gwendolyn Wright. Indirectly, she also calibrates Bruno Latour's analysis in 1988 of the Pasteurian revolution in France, when he insisted that Europe's transformation through modern experimental science may be best understood by looking at the 'colonies' rather than the 'home country'. Rational social policies were not first tried out in what French policymakers during the Third Republic called colonial *champs d'expérience*. Echoing Peter van der Veer's apt description of the colonial state as a provisional 'nexus of projects and arrangements', in her newest book Stoler maintains that political calculus and dispassionate rationality were neither credible nor indelible 'hallmarks' of Dutch colonial rule (p. 58). Instead, the management of a vacillating spectrum of private sensations and public sensibilities concerning the Europeans' superior status, the nature of race relations, and the consequences of miscegenation constituted the core of colonial governance. She implies that the task of the historian, therefore, is first to identify and locate and then to decipher the erratic emotions anchored in 'the social relations of power' that are reconfigured in millions upon millions of words, only to be stowed away in the never-ending rows of bookshelves of archival repositories (p. 35).

The above discussion barely scratches the surface of Stoler's reflections on the political preoccupations and affective undercurrents buried in Dutch archival holdings. In contrast to earlier statements about a generic 'colonial project' in, among others, *Race and the education of desire* in 1995 – such as 'the micromanagement of sexual arrangements [...] was critical to the distinctions between ruler and ruled' – this time around she offers variations on the same theme that are solidly grounded in the particularity of the Dutch colonial record. The empirical rigour on display in *Along the archival grain* therefore presents a theoretical conundrum. In the thriving academic cottage industry of postcolonial studies, paying homage to Ann Stoler's work has become *de rigueur*. In order to establish their bona fide credentials as postcolonial crit-

ics, many feel obligated to cite her books and articles, almost on a par with acknowledging the genealogical influences of such classics as Frantz Fanon's *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952) or Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). In the process of mobilizing her meditations on the 'tense and tender ties' connecting Western imperialists to colonized subjects in Asian societies, however, the historical and geographical specificity of Dutch colonial culture in the Indonesian archipelago often falls by the wayside. As a result, the question as to how we can extrapolate from the conclusions in *Along the archival grain* to a general understanding of the nature of European colonialism in Asia appears more urgent than before.

In terms of her call to submit to the flow of the discursive 'force field' of the Dutch colonial archives, the proof of the pudding is located in Parts II and III of the book, where Stoler heeds her own injunctions by analysing a series of historical events she labels as 'non-events' because they allegedly have not previously emerged as relevant occurrences worthy of historiographical attention (p. 5). In her first exploration of such non-events she delves into the multiple implications of the political protest mounted in 1848 by *inlandsche kinderen* (literally, offspring of the Indies) – residents classified as European but born and educated in the Indonesian archipelago – against legislation that excluded them from the higher ranks of the civil service. Stoler's next chapters focus on the investigative reports issued by state-appointed Pauper Commissions in 1874 and 1901, charged with examining the material conditions and social comportment of poverty-stricken Europeans in Java. In this detailed analysis she incorporates an assessment of trial-and-error governmental efforts to establish vocational schools for poor Indo-Dutch and indigent European inhabitants. Her final chapters concentrate on the melancholy life and disrupted career of Frans Carl Valck, a civil servant stationed on the east coast of Sumatra when on 19 October 1876 a group of former plantation workers murdered and dismembered a Dutch planter's wife and his two children.

The chapters in Parts II and III reflect Stoler's creative reading of the archival record in which she exposes fascinating new angles on the ambivalent workings of a Dutch colonial state that displayed, over time, constantly changing ragged edges. She enhances our understanding of the racial disquiet – or the multi-layered and often incongruous imaginaries – of a Dutch settler community long since organically intertwined with the native population of Southeast Asia through interracial reproduction. By focusing her historian's lens on 'the affective knowledge that was at the core of political rationality' (p. 98), she scrambles the one-dimensional picture of the European colonial project in Asia that sometimes inflects the work of historians employing a postcolonial perspective. In this instance, Stoler implies that the Netherlands Indies society was not moulded by iron-clad racial hierarchies in which

putatively white-skinned Europeans functioned automatically as lords and masters while the native and mixed-race masses were summarily relegated to positions of subservience. The overall impression left by Stoler's newest book mirrors the recent findings of Ulbe Bosma and Remco Raben in *Being 'Dutch' in the Indies: A history of creolisation and empire, 1500-1920* (2008; first published in Dutch in 2003). These authors also conclude, on the basis of equally wide-ranging research in Dutch and other national archives, that this 'attractively simple image of colonial society [...] is false'.

Given the breadth of her scholarly references, it is startling that so little engagement with the work of contemporary Dutch historians is evident in Stoler's lengthy footnotes dangling at the bottom of every page. Her reliance on I.J. Brugmans' *De arbeidende klasse in Nederland in de 19de eeuw* (1929) is curious, for instance, because during the past 40 years social historians in the Netherlands, guided either by a liberal or neo-marxist model or by a sociogenetic approach inspired by Norbert Elias, have written a plethora of dissertations and books on nineteenth-century class relations, labour history, and the industrialization of the Netherlands. It is also regrettable that Stoler does not more fully interrogate the prolific work on Dutch-Indonesian political and cultural interactions produced by Dutch historians since the 1970s, some of whom have also achieved the track record of a successful race horse.

It may be tempting to lament such slights or oversights. But perhaps our response to these omissions should be reframed. Why is it that Ann Laura Stoler, as the foremost expert in the Anglo-American academic world on the history of Dutch colonial culture in Southeast Asia, tends to ignore the scholarly output of historians in the Netherlands? Yet another question might be added: why is the political impact and cultural heritage of Dutch colonialism so often glossed over in contemporary transnational efforts to assess the meanings of European imperial legacies in Asia? Can this neglect of the Dutch case be attributed to linguistic obstacles, hampered further by Dutch colonial historians' apparent lack of interest, with a few notable exceptions, in participating in international debates concerning comparative colonial histories in Asia? While Stoler is not restrained by linguistic barriers, she nonetheless skips over most of the corpus of Dutch colonial historiography, as if historians in the Netherlands participate in a discursive universe that functions separately from the intellectual excitement that animates discussions about postcolonialism and transnational history currently taking place in the Anglo-American academic world.

We can only hope that *Along the archival grain*, rooted as it is in the debates of the English-language scholarly world, will contribute to the incorporation of the empirical realities of the Dutch case into the most salient transnational discussions. Just as Simon Schama accomplished in his work on the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic, Stoler has used her outsider perspective

to shed incandescent light on the meanings and implications of Dutch culture not only in Southeast Asia but also as it refracted back to the European heartland. As befitting a race horse, she has travelled with dispatch along the countless tracks of the Dutch archival colossus. She has shown that imperial governance, whether in colonial Indonesia or elsewhere in Asia, was often beholden to a precarious sense of theatricality that was rehearsed and restaged in constantly changing ways in order to perform European power as a representation of a supposedly natural order of things. The result is a provocative addition to the field, compelling (post)colonial historians in the Netherlands and elsewhere to take notice of the ways in which fluctuating policy measures as well as erratic psychic processes haunted policymakers and residents of the Dutch East Indies with a 'logos and pathos of empire' (p. 278).

References

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Ambiguities of reading and writing

There was a time when colonial historiography was performed by going to the archives, reading what colonial administrators had to say about the topic, and writing it down. Later, there was a time when perusing those same archives was an extremely suspect, if inevitable, activity that often gave rise to bitter comments on the limitations and bias of such documents. Times have changed again. In line with the view that sources tell something primarily about themselves and their makers, Ann Laura Stoler has written a captivating account about reading the colonial archives. Those who have followed her work will be acquainted with her themes, her questions, and her love of words. But never before was she so enjoyable. This is not meant as a criticism of her previous work; it only acknowledges the joy that has obviously gone into writing this book and the contagiousness of that delight for the reader.

To a large extent, Stoler revisits the themes of her previous investigations, such as the plantations of Sumatra's East Coast and the Eurasians of Java. A chapter typically focuses on a small selection of archival documents – a report,

an investigation, some private correspondence – and offers a close reading of them with an analysis of the concerns, anxieties – yes, feelings – of those who compiled them. In so doing, she uncovers, in her own terms, ‘the pulse of the archives’, which is perhaps not too far removed from what the famous Dutch historian Johan Huizinga termed a ‘historical sensation’. But ‘the pulse of the archives’ goes further: it probes the psychology of colonial authorship by trying to reconstruct the minds behind the writing *through* the writing. Stoler challenges preconceptions about the rationality of colonial governance, and stresses the morality, emotionality and inconsistencies of colonial rule. The book is a testimony to creative reading and thinking. Almost every line urges the reader to savour words, to search for the plausible, and to consider the mindset behind terminology and behind omissions and inclusions.

Along the archival grain reads as a 300-page-plus invitation to discussion and debate. It is impossible to do justice to the book, or to engage in a detailed argument with it, in these brief comments. Let me concentrate on the first part of the book, which is devoted to several moments when the fault lines within the community of Europeans in Java became manifest and led to small archival heaps in the flat landscape of colonial reporting. In one chapter, Stoler follows the reactions to the tumultuous gathering in Batavia of hundreds of ‘Europeans’, some of them born in the Netherlands and others in the Indies, on 22 May 1848. Incited by rumours of the political upheavals in Europe, they clamoured for better educational opportunities for their children, and much more. Another chapter traces proposals to turn poor Europeans into farmers and craftsmen. And in a third, Stoler deals with the commissions of inquiry into pauperism among Europeans, appointed in 1872 and 1901.

Among these fascinating excursions, several things strike the reader. One concerns Stoler’s perspective. Based on an empathic reading of official documents, her analysis mainly follows ‘official’ colonial discourses. In so doing, she perpetuates the terminology, imagery and perspective of the colonial elite that produced most of the texts she analyses. In principle, this is honourable and legitimate. But if her analysis stretches beyond the bureaucratic paperwork and colonial phraseology, which it often does, and refers to a social reality outside government offices, then it is necessary to look beyond the limits and limitations of the official mind. A discourse analysis, after all, is all the more rewarding if we can detect the zones of friction or convergence between the text and the things they refer to. Stoler certainly has the ambition to offer more than a postmodern reading of the text, and often refers to social realities. Unfortunately, the clichés used in the documents – which for so long have been the clichés of historians – often remain unchallenged. For instance, we read that the children of European men and native women were ‘often abandoned by their fathers’ (p. 105), while certainly most children in the European community, at this time, were raised in respectable, if not necessar-

ily rich, families. The archetypical Eurasian orphan is mainly the product of one group: Dutch soldiers and their wives and concubines. We also read that 'orphaned or abandoned status, economic destitution, and racial ambiguity joined to make [the *inlandsche kinderen*] objects of pity, disdain, and threat'.

Apart from these generic characterizations we come to know little about the people concerned, other than through the eyes of colonial writers. Eurasians thus remain the poor devils that some officials considered them to be. In reality, *inlandsche kinderen* did not necessarily end up in the lower rungs of European society, as Stoler suggests (p. 84), nor were they all the object of disdain and threat. The term was a fairly accurate label for all those Europeans who were born in the Indies. If indeed a majority of them filled the poorer milieus – which is perfectly understandable, given that they made up 80% of the European population – social realities were much less bleak and much less clear-cut in racial terms than Stoler suggests.

Realities remain unclear, or deceptively clear. When dealing with the decree requiring that higher positions be filled by civil servants trained at the Academy in Delft – the decree that was the main target of the May 1848 protest – Stoler argues that it 'denied careers' to the sons of *Indische* Europeans. The question here is whether Eurasians were indeed excluded from official ranks. Although Minister J.C. Baud, the architect of the plan to train civil servants in Delft, had a notoriously low opinion of Eurasians, and although the decree was indeed discriminatory, reality diverged from the rule. The governor-general and the minister for the colonies continued to massively award '*radikaal*' certificates to their protégées, many of whom were Indies-born. This, of course, makes the May 1848 protest even more intriguing. In fact, the protest demonstrated perfectly the fissures between different classes in society, which did not follow the boundaries of race.

A different reading of different archives could have told that in reality, Eurasians were found in almost all echelons, except in the army and the uppermost ranks of government. For instance, at any given time in the nineteenth century, a large proportion of the Binnenlandsch Bestuur corps was made up of Europeans born in the Indies, more often than not of partly Asian ancestry. They were not the product of illegitimate relationships, nor did they trigger colonial anxieties. Interestingly, there is little reference in the archives to their skin colour – apparently racial labels often followed class lines.

This brings us to what seems to be the heart of the matter – the issue of racial categorization, which has a long genealogy in Stoler's work. Race, as we know, is always about something else too: about the distribution of wealth, about competition for resources, about class, culture, and other markers of belonging. Racial categorizations are therefore often ambiguous, and Ann Stoler of course demonstrates how inconsistent social classifiers were in colonial times. But here again, in her account the interface between her reading

and reality remains somewhat nebulous. Stoler demonstrates a certain proclivity to see racial concerns as a paramount sentiment in the official colonial mind, even if they are not explicitly mentioned in the archives. Stoler argues, somewhat *against* the archival grain, that racial notions must therefore have been implicit (p. 36). When the Netherlands Indies government ordered an investigation into the causes and effects of poverty among European residents, race became, in her interpretation, an important marker, even if the investigations report that poverty crossed the lines between white and brown Europeans. Thus, race was 'a vital political concept' (p. 173). But maybe it was not so simple as that. On the basis of the same records one could argue that views on decency, behaviour and class were oftentimes stronger than the issue of race – closely, but not inextricably, entwined. Due to the presence of many upper-class Eurasians, both in the government and as agricultural entrepreneurs, and the fairly high degree of social mobility, the issue of race was extremely blurred in Java's colonial situation, which makes it a much more challenging issue than a simple case of dominant white racism.

A last comment concerns Stoler's secondary sources. It would appear that her reading has not been entirely up-to-date. Over the last decade, the admittedly not overly fashionable Dutch historiography has produced a number of books and articles on the colonial state and society, on colonial migration, genealogy, demography and in particular on Europeans and Indo-Europeans in the Indies, some of which cover exactly the same ground as Stoler's book. Although these works operate in a slightly different discursive field – the term 'race' for instance is much less often used in the Netherlands than in the U.S., and historical research in the Netherlands is influenced by the presence of migrants from Indies Dutch families – their inclusion or an explicit engagement with them might have produced a richer historical account.

But there is no need to end on a sour note. Reading *Along the archival grain* is extremely rewarding. Ann Stoler wields her words like a surgeon; her prose is poetic and evocative and inspires one to think thoroughly about the motivations and purposes of colonial writing. Her book will be a point of reference, and a source of new terminology ('historical negatives', 'dispositions of disregard') for years to come, and an inspiration to return to those archives and dissect the paperwork of empire to reveal the anxieties and ambiguities behind it.

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How colonial is this effort to establish a new standard for an ethnography of the archive?

Ann Stoler has left her intellectual footprint on the study of Dutch colonialism with groundbreaking studies on the politics of racism, sexuality and power of the Dutch colonial state in Indonesia. *Along the archival grain* is a logical next step in her work. It aims to explore the nature of colonial archives by using an ethnographic approach. But it is more than an ethnography because the main text rests on an almost intimidating body of footnotes which together provide an impressive intellectual context of comparative, historiographical and philosophical (Heidegger, Kant, Nietzsche, Nussbaum, Rorty) references.

Archives are no longer seen as simple repositories of historical data but are also approached as objects of research. Moreover, archives are not simply a storehouse reflecting an accumulation of state activities. Instead, we see, according to Stoler, through the archival remains, an assemblage of reports of failures and victories, the emergence of new bureaucratic categories as well as expressions of uncertainties, processes of revealing and concealing, differences of opinion, instances of conflicts, indifference, ignorance and disregard, sudden anxieties and, of course, lots of routine. Apart from reports of past events, archives also contain interesting images of the future in the guise of (sometimes aborted) plans and (sometimes illusory) projects. This implies that we can no longer speak of 'the colonial project' as a single and coherent phenomenon, as Stoler did in her earlier work. Good historians are of course familiar with these kinds of complexities. They are accustomed to encountering contestations and contradictions during archival research, but they are less often accustomed to making archives into an object of ethnographic research. *Along the archival grain* is an eloquent plea to explore this approach more seriously.

Stoler considers archives 'not just as repositories of state power, but as unquiet movements in a field of force, as restless realignments and readjustments of people and the beliefs to which they were tethered, as spaces in which the senses and the affective course through the seeming abstractions of political rationalities' (pp. 32-3). Moreover, it is Stoler's ambition to 'look for the pulse of the archive in the quiescence and quickened pace of its own production, in the steady and feverish rhythms of repeated incantations, formulae, and frames' (p. 35). I must admit that I had never looked at archives in this way. The power of Stoler's rhetoric is also a bit confusing, and I am not quite sure how to identify these 'pulses'.

As Frances Gouda remarked earlier in this discussion, theory should ulti-

mately be grounded in empirical case studies. Since Raben concentrated on Chapters 3 to 5 of Stoler's book, I focus here on Chapters 6 and 7, in which Frans Carl Valck is the main character. Valck was a colonial administrator in the 1870s who wrote disturbing reports about violent practices in the recently opened plantation belt of northern Sumatra, focusing on a murderous assault by coolies on a European family. Valck blamed planters for the violence that was inflicted upon their families by coolies who were maltreated by their masters. Stoler explores conflicting flows of information concerning this case, and makes matters even more complicated by revealing the existence of gangs of local Gayos, Malay, Chinese, and Javanese who were roaming around at the fringes of the colonial estates and refused to subordinate themselves to the colonial labour system.

This is an example of very good research, but more issues could have been explored here in detail. In the end we know very little about what motivated Valck, and that is somewhat disappointing. The role and interests of the Malay aristocracy and their relations with the gangs remain somewhat vague. It would have been useful to investigate more thoroughly the circulation of information, rumours and gossip in the colony, both through bureaucratic channels and social networks. Parallel to this, particular strategies to establish hierarchies of truth could have been examined in more detail. Stoler does indeed refer to these processes and mentions people who were part of these networks, but fails to show the extent to which the north Sumatra case was connected to similar cases elsewhere in the colony, where administrators, inspired by Multatuli's novel *Max Havelaar*, tried to protect the indigenous population against colonial exploitation. Here, an ethnography of the archive could have moved beyond the proverbial single case study in order to explore broader patterns (or pulses?) that pushed and pulled the colony. [I must admit that I am also to blame in this respect because I failed, upon Ann's request, to deliver relevant references on another conflict in north Bali in which Valck was involved before he was transferred to north Sumatra.]

Chapter 7 is based on private correspondence between Valck and his daughter from 1869 to 1892. The daughter, who spent part of her life in the Indies, was less interested in what happened around her – a typical expat *avant la lettre*. In this context Stoler launches the helpful concept of 'politics of disregard' (which is different from the politics of ignorance) to indicate how parts of the colony were deliberately deleted from further observation and omitted in private correspondence.

I admire the intellectual richness of the book, but I feel uncomfortable about two things. The first is a lack of balance between theoretical explorations and empirical case studies. Stoler wants to go further than doing an ethnography *in* the archives. Instead, she aims to set a new standard for an ethnography

of the archives (p. 45). However, to my mind the case studies are examples of good fieldwork *in* the archives, and have not yet set a new standard. It requires much more fieldwork in the archives to be able to write an ethnography of the archives.

The second point worries me even more. Why were archives in Indonesia ignored in this ethnography? I found only one reference, but anyone familiar with colonial archives knows that substantial sets of information can only be found in Indonesia and must not be ignored by a serious researcher. The Indonesian archives are part and parcel of the colonial archives and can not be omitted. I was also surprised to see that no Indonesian scholars are mentioned in the opening pages of the book. Even though the subject matter of the book is part of their history, they apparently do not belong to Stoler's circles of esteem, 'a cluster of scholars who respect each other, cite each other's work, push each other's ideas into the academic marketplace, and, occasionally, rise to each other's defense' (Cribb 2005:289). Nor do Indonesians play a meaningful role in the main part of the book. *Along the archival grain* has, therefore, despite its innovative ambitions, an unexpected colonial flavour.

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Thinking through colonial ontologies

There were times in working on *Along the archival grain* over the last some 20 years when I thought I could hear Jorge Luis Borges laughing at me. There he was smirking from within the piles of archival documents splayed across my office, squashed into file boxes, reordered in cabinets, perched on chairs, buried under my feet below my desk. Sometimes I wondered if I had unknowingly entered an imperial labyrinth he might have described, caught in its maze, attempting to trace a map of the Dutch colonial archives as dense and extensive as they were themselves. As anyone can attest who has worked through the extraordinary amount of documents that the Netherlands Indies colonial administrators wrote, cribbed, and exchanged, and through the internal and adjacent critiques and comments that spilled beyond their guarded

edges, it is not only a Sisyphean task, but as Borges (1962, 1999) reminds us, an absurd and useless one.

It has been an honour to be read so closely by three such fine scholars. I thank them for the time and care they have taken in critical engagement. I have long cherished the work of Frances Gouda and that of Henk Schulte Nordholt. I lament that Remco Raben and Ulbe Bosma's excellent book was not available in 2007 when I finally relinquished my manuscript to the press. The work of many Dutch historians on the Netherlands Indies has been a source of inspiration to me and I regret if *Along the archival grain* is unclear as to that debt. Although I think of myself more like a turtle moving through sludge than a racehorse, I thank Frances Gouda and Remco Raben for recognizing that I have tried to do something with these documents and their paper trails quite different than I and others have done before. An ethnography of the colonial archives can take many forms. Mine grew, not from reading Foucault or De Certeau, but from the troubled space that my own archival labours produced in studying the shadows cast by imperial governance, in tracking the violence of social distinctions, and in attempting to discern the muted forms of managing people's lives. Over decades, I have found myself confronted in documents by what seemed obsessive densities and jolting asides, by dissemblances and disquiets, by tremors of dissension, by palpable if subadjacent sensibilities at work in the seemingly distracted order of the archives themselves.

I agree that there is nothing comprehensive or complete about this book or the research done for it. I could have consulted more reports, journal entries, newspapers, personal and semi-official correspondence than those I read and reread over those years. But I hope that even a partial reading of my book would signal that this was neither my intent nor what I would consider a productive task. As Remco so generously notes, the book is an invitation and a provocation to read these archives in a different register than students of colonialisms have been wont to do – to linger over their repetitions and their cadence, to attend to the political undertows of affective strain, to reflect on commissions as both a genre of history writing and of rule, and not least to heed the changing temporal frames in which they were written that so often veered toward fears and forebodings lodged in the future conditional tense. It is we, historians and anthropologists, who have too often approached them in the *passé composé*. My hope was to do something useful, both generative and enabling, for students of colonialisms working in the Netherlands Indies and elsewhere, to suggest that we can gain new insights into colonial governance by attending to the content in archival forms.

The 'pulse of the archive' could be sought in the wider pulse of the Indies as a whole. Those able to wield a broader brush and more deft at working on a larger canvas should certainly do so. In my unfinished project, I have

sought that 'pulse' elsewhere; in part, by looking closely at the quixotic shifts of what constituted context for colonial agents themselves. Contexts were never givens. The choice of one rather than another could give credence to one set of truth-claims, dismiss the validity of another, or frame the parameters and thus the 'causes' sought to explain an 'event'. Choices of context imply epistemic commitments, how they are contested and change. New contexts index how people imagine they know what they do. Evaluations of 'con-text', narratives deemed suitable to go 'with' the writing, mark the grids of intelligibility in which colonial agents sought to demonstrate their mastery of local situations and their own analytic expertise. As one of the subjects of this book, it is their scramble for 'contexts' that frames these narratives.

I am thrilled that Remco Raben and Frances Gouda share my sense of how much words matter in this book. That concern drew me close to the language colonial agents used in their letters and reports (what they saw appropriate to repeat, abandon, or cross-out in midstream) to broach something more than the strictures of bureaucratic conventions. Phrases and wording sometimes adhered to protocol; sometimes they marked uncertain falterings about the suitability and proper use of received designations. Such hesitations did not necessarily alter social labels but they did unsettle the sure-footed criteria of what 'goes without saying', so central to the fictive clarities of a taxonomic state. Not least, unstable social labels were entry points for a 'breach of the self-evident'. Displaced histories are folded within the changing contours of who properly 'fit' or refused those labels. There is no colonial mindset lurking in the pen's shadow, no overarching *mentalité* floating in the ether of colonial space. My interest is in the ground lying between the resiliency and fragility of categories, in the moments when reasonings went awry, when the rubrics of 'poor whites' and 'mixed-bloods' became unhinged from their moorings because people and things were not what and where they were supposed to be.

Central to the book are the crafts of imperial governance, the contested epistemics of race, and the explicit and oblique ways of knowing on which the knowledge of social kinds relied. In wrestling with those 'habits of heart' and comportment recruited to the service of colonial governance but never wholly subsumed by it, it is that last clause, 'never wholly subsumed', that is key. I have attempted to think differently about how social ontologies (and specifically racial ones) were assembled, realigned and remade, and methodologically to explore how we might most effectively do so. One strategy I have pursued is to pause in the moments when attributes once accepted as signature features of social membership were tentatively questioned or, alternately, impatiently and emphatically reaffirmed – and to attend to what people did next. Some sought to press their queries further, others quickly recoiled from their own doubts and disregarded what they saw or heard in favour of what passed as common sense. Commitments to the commands

of common sense were not always shared, and maintaining them, as I have argued, was often an achieved state.

In trying to make sense of the uncommon sense of those positioned high and low in the corridors of colonial rule, I have been drawn to the mishaps, misunderstandings, and expressions of irony and irritation among them. Sometimes reports were filed on issues before investigations were made. I used accounts crafted in the absence of evidence to explore what might be deemed plausible to recount in its stead. Acute observations deemed 'out of place' could slip out of archival sight. Exchanges of letters and commands often criss-crossed one another, unbeknownst to their authors. Those documents that have most interested me are those from within the middling ranks of 'social engineers', not those with familiar names, perhaps not clever enough to be cited, not unusual enough to be noted, those whose hurried reports were appended as the evidence for decrees they sometimes knew little about and did not make.

What they had to say about the *inlandsche kinderen* and who they differently imagined they were is not a story about the *inlandsche kinderen*. To my mind, it is a story about epistemic politics and the tangled understandings of what constituted race. In this treatment, it is also a diacritic of another sort, of selective ways of knowing that careened between what some colonial officials imagined they knew and feared they did not. It might be useful for me to reiterate what work I attempted to do with the debates and commissions on 'needy Europeans' and the *inlandsche kinderen* and why I found this such a rich site to explore the 'epistemic worries' that congealed around uncertain assessments of the murky reality of class and racial distinctions on the ground.

Inlandsche kinderen was a mobile designation, a social relation and a political fact that never stood still. Race is never about biology and certainly cannot be reduced in the Indies or elsewhere to skin colour alone. I agree with Remco that 'ideas of decency, behaviour and class' could never be untangled from efforts to assign racial membership. These have long been fundamental to the intricate ways in which racisms distinguish and segregate human kinds, evident in so many colonial scripts and resurgent in the most current forms in which racialized policies pervade Europe today. Remco is absolutely correct in noting that many Eurasian children were indeed raised in 'respectable' families, which makes it all the more striking that so much literature, so many newspaper articles, so many internal confidential official documents worried incessantly that children were not being raised as they should be. Racialized perceptions and practices are rarely diminished or deterred by empirical evidence that would seem to undermine those claims. Understanding the complex social imaginaries that shape the emotional economies and sensory regimes by which people distinguish 'we' from 'they' remains at the heart of this book, not least because exclusions they foster operate through moral condemnations of parenting styles, domestic arrangements, comportments

and cultural competencies that blur racial and class disenfranchisements that have such deep colonial genealogies – resilient today.

I have long been struck by a racialized system in the Netherlands Indies that remained tenacious in the face of distinctions that were messy and ambiguous on the ground – by the flood of newspaper columns, ‘scientific’ articles, literature and archival documents that found sundry ways to express disdain and contempt based on ‘native’ origins, that expressed fears of what Indo (*Indische*) children could become as adults, far beyond those who were allegedly abandoned or who were the offspring of native women and common soldiers in the military barracks. Chapters 4 and 5 of *Along the archival grain* take as their subject a world that collided with the neat distinctions that officials were asked to make. ‘*Zuivere*’ full-blooded European membership was sometimes invoked, but in the social reality of the Indies it could have little place. That did not stop government commissions from trying to make another case. I have tracked these commissions so closely because they are extraordinary testimonials to the porous and unmanageable distinctions that could be made on the basis of race. Reading the baffled accounts of those who were charged to carry out the surveys, and the trenchant critiques of those who knew what was contained in the questionnaires, reveals a world both charged with racial thinking and confronted with ways of living that defied the distinctions at every turn. These are as close to the ethnographic as we can get – minutiae of the everyday, stories of people with the will to refuse the categories imposed on them. It is not representative of the Indies as a whole, but exemplary and paradigmatic in the sense that Foucault (1975:206-7) and Agamben (2008:16) both suggest, sites where the contradictions are on the surface – acute and exposed. It is one place where one can do ethnography *in* the archives but also ethnography *of* them – for this was an embattled archival space, a field of force that relegated some documents to the ‘confidential’ about social facts that many people already knew, that refused publication of others, and that produced critiques of a racial politics that successive administrations could not contain.

In nearly 30 years of working on French, Dutch, U.S. and South African racial formations and the exclusionary principles stamped within them, one thing is clear: Racisms thrive on political rationalities and affective assessments that are almost always about something else. How the intimacies of the everyday – childrearing, living arrangements, and styles of comportment and dress – were mobilized to transform difference into disparity speaks to far more than the Dutch empire. Imperial formations have long been adept at giving these discriminations other explanations and other names.

There is much more to do. I have more questions now than when I began this work decades ago, am more humbled by what I do not, and perhaps can never, know. Frans Carl Valck continues to elude me, my impetus to write

something more about him, what I call 'history in a minor key', addresses that discomforting quest and discontent. When I first read the official reports by and about him in the mid-1980s, I knew only too well that they grazed a mere slice of the world he inhabited, reconfirmed 15 years later when I first climbed the stairs to the Bureau of Genealogy above the Nationaal Archief reading room in The Hague to read what he had kept from his time in Bali and Deli, so carefully folded among letters from his distant young daughter, and then still more boxes filled with those he had sent to her. Nor was I sure how much more I really knew about his younger self from his love letters to his wife-to-be, or from the 200-page inquiry on the aborted duel for which he was reprimanded when he challenged a military officer. Nothing has seemed 'enough'. But that was never the point. I remain riveted by what it means to know and not know something at the same time, by how imperial dispositions are formed with the capacity to turn towards what one may partially know and as quickly turn away. Empire has been predicated on such dispositions of disregard. These are in the hollows of all of our political landscapes and scarred across our histories of the present.

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