THE OMNIPOTENT BEAVER IN VAN DER DONCK'S *A DESCRIPTION OF NEW NETHERLAND*
A Natural Symbol of Promise in the New World

Julie van den Hout

Dutch H196: Honors Studies in Dutch
Faculty Adviser: Jeroen Dewulf
University of California, Berkeley

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INTRODUCTION

In May of 1653, Adriaen van der Donck submitted his book, *A Description of New Netherland*, to the Directors of the West India Company (WIC) at the Chamber in Amsterdam for approval, in advance of requesting a copyright from the States General of the Dutch Republic.[1] This seemed like good politics considering Van der Donck had reaped the wrath of the West India Company directors a few years earlier when he, as a colonial delegate, formally complained in his *Remonstrance of New Netherland* to the States General about the West India Company's management of the colony. Both the West India Company and the States General approved of Van der Donck's proposed book; he was granted a fifteen-year copyright.[2] *A Description of New Netherland,* originally published in 1655, is divided into four main chapters. The first chapter, "The Country," discusses Dutch rights to the territory and the physical aspects of the country, detailing land and waterways as well as local flora and fauna. The second chapter, "Of the Manners and Extraordinary Qualities of the Original Natives of New Netherland," provides physical descriptions and details cultural traditions of the native, indigenous population. The third chapter, "Of the Nature, Amazing Ways, and Properties of the Beavers," describes the physical and social habits of beavers. The last chapter records a fictitious "Conversation between a Dutch Patriot and a New Netherlander Concerning the Condition of New Netherland."[3]

Van der Donck's *Description* has often been analyzed as an immigration tool in light of the fact that the peopling of New Netherland was a frequently expressed goal of Van der

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[1] E. B. O'Callaghan and Berthold Fernow, trans. *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York, Volume 1* (Albany, NY: Weed, Parsons and Company, 1856), 530.
[2] Ibid. 533.
[3] Adriaen Van der Donck and Charles T. Gehring, *A Description of New Netherland* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008)

Donck's.[4] Indeed, Van der Donck's book can be seen as dedicated to depicting New Netherland as an enticing destination for immigrants. If this was his goal, describing a national claim to New Netherland and the availability of land, flora and fauna in the first chapter provides a sense of security and outlines the ways in which life could be sustained in an unknown land. Introducing his audience to the indigenous peoples in the second chapter allows Van der Donck to familiarize his audience with the humanness of the Natives and serves to alleviate fears of unpredictable "savages." The fourth chapter "Conversation" equates to a present-day "Frequently Asked Questions," about life in New Netherland and the opportunities for newcomers. While the beaver in the third chapter highlights the main commodity of New Netherland, Van der Donck's detailed observations reveal his keen interest in the animal, almost to the point of admiration. His writing reflects a respect for the beaver's numerous attributes, while expressing amusement at the beaver's playful manner. There seems to be more at work in this chapter than establishing the beaver as a commercial product and source of financial security for colonists. This paper examines Van der Donck's chapter on the beavers, with a goal of discussing why Van der Donck might have chosen to write so effusively about them in his book. First, background is given on the Colony of New Netherland and Adriaen van der Donck. Next, the New Netherland beaver is introduced, followed by an analysis of the literary references in Van der Donck's beaver chapter. A discussion about the natural world contextualizes these ideas within seventeenth century thinking. More than just a commodity, the beaver in New Netherland linked the colonists to opportunity in their new land on multiple levels. This

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[4] John Easterbrook, "Cosmopolitanism and Adriaen van der Donck's A Description of New Netherland," *Early American Literature.* Volume 49, Number 1, (2014), 3.

paper argues that the beaver in Van der Donck's *Description* serves as a metaphor for all that New Netherland has to offer, and acts as a symbol of promise in the New World.

BACKGROUND

Adriaen van der Donck was a mere boy and the Dutch Republic without a firm identity of its own when the burgeoning wealth of the seventeenth century provinces provided the Dutch with the impetus to take to the open seas and join the global trade rivalry. Migration from the southern provinces, mainly Antwerp, added already highly networked trade merchants to the flourishing ship building industry that was developing in North Holland.[5] Fueled by technological advances that created larger hulled vessels, along with abundant resources of wood secured by trade agreements with Scandinavian countries, the ability to expand maritime trade fleets grew exponentially. Competition was high for a northern route to the Orient, where the English and Dutch were already trading for spices by way of the route around Cape Horn. When the Englishman Henry Hudson, in the service of the Dutch East India Company, sailed into the mouth of the Hudson Bay, he thought he had finally succeeded in finding the fabled Northwest Passage. Although the rivers Hudson explored did not lead to westward waters, he traded with the Natives for furs, and claimed the area for the Dutch Republic.

The availability of furs captured the attention of Dutch business interests. Supplies of Muscovy furs from present-day Russia were limited and import duties were heavy,[6]

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[5] Maarten Prak, *The Dutch Republic in the Seventeenth Century: The Golden Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 111-122.
[6] Thomas E. Burke, Jr., *Mohawk Frontier: The Dutch Community of Schenectady, New York, 1661-1710* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991), 3.

while the demand for beaver pelts used to make the felt hats favored by affluent Dutch merchants, was high. Possession of land in North America meant new and cheaper supplies of furs. Five years after Hudson's voyage, in 1614, a small fur trading post was established by the New Netherland Company in this new Dutch territory on Castle Island along the Dutch-named *Noord Rivier*, present-day upper Hudson River.[7] In 1621, the newly formed West India Company was granted a monopoly on fur trade along the Hudson between New France and Virginia; in 1624 the first colonists arrived in support of another small trading post at Fort Orange, in present-day Albany.[8] Despite the West India Company's maintenance of the colony solely as a business venture, the colony continued to grow. Though most of the trade continued upriver, a second bastion, Fort Amsterdam, was established on Manhattan Island, and populated by both administrators and more colonists.

Fur trade in the colony was not limited to, but was largely established by the trade in beaver pelts. The steady, abundant supply of beavers at the time, the ability to negotiate with local Native trappers, and the demand in the motherland for beaver pelts for hat making, positioned these furs as the dominant fur in New Netherland trade. In an effort to maintain the colony's trade monopoly, the West India Company began to look for ways to increase colonization to secure their investment by providing a stable presence while discouraging attacks by Natives or the nearby English.

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[7] Allen W. Trelease, *Indian Affairs in Colonial New York: The Seventeenth Century* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska, 1997), 32.

[8] Harmen Meynderts Van den Bogaert. *A Journey into Mohawk and Oneida Country 1634 – 1635.* Trans. and ed. by Charles T. Gehring and William A. Starna; *[with] Wordlist and Linguistic Notes* (1st ed. Syracuse, New York: Syracuse U, 1988), xvi.

The granting of patroonships in 1631 allowed the establishment of private trading colonies under the umbrella of the West India Company network. One of the first patroons to take advantage of the West India Company manorial land grants was the former founder and director of the West India Company, Kiliaen van Rensselaer. Van Rensselaer was given a patent for a colony approximately 200 km north of New Amsterdam,[9] near present-day Albany. He governed his patroonship, Rensselaerswijck, from *patria*, communicating generously and often on all aspects of the colony's management. The colony's administration included a director and a secretary, but needed someone to protect the patroon's business interests as *schout,* to function as area sheriff and prosecutor.

In 1641, Adriaen van der Donck was just out of law school in Leiden and looking for a way to go abroad. He had already applied to another patroonship when he approached van Rensselaer about a position in Rensselaerswijck.[10] After several months of correspondence, Van Rensselaer, satisfied with Van der Donck as "a young man of education,"[11] commissioned him as "schout of Rensselaerswijck."[12] On May 17, 1641, Van der Donck left the Dutch Republic on the ship, *Den Eyckenboom,* bound for New Netherland along with animals and plants destined for the colony, and with strict instructions from Van Rensselaer for protecting the interests of his patroon.[13]

Van der Donck spent much of his time in the following three years roaming the Catskills in the area around Rensselaerswijck getting to know the land and the Native

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[9] Ada L. Van Gastel, "Adriaen van der Donck als woordvoerder van de Nieuw-Nederlandse bevolking." *Jaarboek van het Central Bureau voor Genealogie* (Den Haag: Central Bureau voor Genealogie, 1996), 89.
[10] A.J.F. Van Laer, *Van Rensselaer Bowier Manuscripts: Being the Letters of Kiliaen Van Rensselaer, 1630-1643, and Other Documents Relating to the Colony of Rensselaerswyck* (Albany: U of the State of New York, 1908), 527.
[11] Ibid., 549.
[12] Ibid., 703.
[13] Ibid., 577.

people. During peace negotiations between the Natives and New Netherland director Willem Kieft, Van der Donck was called upon to act as interpreter because of his knowledge of Native languages. More critically, van der Donck knew the importance of reciprocal gift exchange in Native customs, and was able to facilitate this process for Kieft, who was otherwise unprepared for such an encounter. When Van der Donck's house later burned in a fire, he moved with his new wife, Mary Doughty, onto land near New Amsterdam that he was granted by Kieft as a reward for his help in the earlier peace negotiations.[14]

From his new home, named Colendonck, Van der Donck worked as a lawyer representing various legal actions, and became involved in local politics. In December 1648, he was appointed to the advisory Council of Nine Men, under the new WIC Director Petrus Stuyvesant.[15] The original intent of the council was to advise and arbitrate on matters between the new director and the colonists. In this capacity, the council proceeded with an informal house-to-house poll, collecting grievances under the assumed sanction of the administration. On the contrary, Stuyvesant interpreted this action as a betrayal, seized Van der Donck's notebook and imprisoned him for high treason. After a nine-day incarceration, Van der Donck was released but forbidden to attend Council meetings.[16] Instead, he began preparing his *Remonstrance of New Netherland*, a protest about the handling of the colony that he would present to the States General of the Dutch Republic.

The *Remonstrance* took the form of a formal complaint against the West India Company, its policies, and administration. It consisted of three parts, a description of the

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[14] Charles Gehring, trans. and ed. *Correspondence, 1647-1653.* New Netherland Document Series (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 213.
[15] Van Gastel, "Adriaen van der Donck als woordvoerder," 96.
[16] Adriaen van der Donck, *Remonstrance of New Netherland, and the Occurrences There*. Ed. E. B. O'Callaghan (Albany: Weed, Parsons, 1856), 48.

Natives and the physical features of the country, a narrative of the events connected with its initial settlement and the administration of public affairs, and a formal remonstrance against the policy and acts of the West India Company and its government in New Netherland.[17] The Council signed the Remonstrance in July 1649 and elected three delegates to represent the colonists to the States General.[18] As a delegate, Van der Donck left New Netherland the following month for the Dutch Republic. As spokesperson for the delegation, Van der Donck presented his Remonstrance in October 1649, preceded by a *Petition of the Commonality*, outlining three requests. The document first asked to "supply New Netherland with sufficient populations" to protect the colonial interests. Next, the petition requested "permanent Privileges and Exemptions" with which to promote trade. Thirdly, it asked for the "establishment of boundaries of the country, north and south," in settlement with bordering, neighboring colonies.[19]

Submitting the Remonstrance directly to the States General put the West India Company in a bad light. A commission from the Dutch Republic was assigned to investigate the allegations but the West India Company asked for more documentation from the delegates, calling on Director Stuyvesant to answer the charges. At the conclusion of the investigation, the States General agreed to extend a municipal charter to New Amsterdam, which would establish a city government within New Netherland. Adriaen van der Donck remained in the Dutch Republic to assist with the transition while the two other delegates returned to New Netherland. In May 1652, as Van der Donck readied to return to New Netherland with his wife, mother, sister, brother, servants, and goods, he alone was refused

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[17] O'Callaghan and Fernow, *Documents Relative*, 421.
[18] Ibid., 318.
[19] Ibid., 395.

passage by the West India Company ship captains.[20] Subsequently, the West India Company managed to bounce his petitions for dismissal from committee to committee so that he was forced to remain in the motherland until the summer of 1653, when he was finally granted permission to leave.[21]

Van der Donck did not sit idle during this period but re-registered at Leiden University, passed a secondary law exam, remained in contact with the States General and the WIC, and set to work on his second publication, *A Description of New Netherland*. While Van der Donck's earlier *Remonstrance*, like his *Description,* includes a physical description of New Netherland, its flora, fauna, and boundaries, and also describes the physical appearance and customs of the Natives, the *Remonstrance* contains only four small references to the beaver. Clearly the idea of writing about the beaver as a large part of *A Description of New Netherland* had come to Van der Donck with this new publication in mind, and while he was separated from his adopted homeland. More than just an immigration device, *A Description of New Netherland* reads like the longing for a faraway love. New Netherland awaited him, in all of its splendor. For Van der Donck, the beavers represented an integral part of life in New Netherland, as consequential as the land and the people.

THE BEAVERS

Early in his *Description*, Van der Donck discloses his plan to write specifically about the beaver. As if a highly anticipated moment has finally arrived with the beaver chapter, he begins this section, "to relate in detail the nature and unusual habits of the beavers" as

[20] Ibid., 477.
[21] Ibid., 486.

the "time to keep [his] promise…"[22] This chapter on the beaver includes an assertion by Van der Donck of himself as qualified to report on the beavers. He declares his expertise by way of personal experience and through the accounts of other reliable observers. He offers this claim when he writes, "[w]e shall now truthfully present the real nature of the beaver as we personally have found it to be and have been informed by unimpeachable witnesses." As a lawyer, Van der Donck knew the importance of establishing credibility. He submits additional proof of his level of experience interacting with beavers by adding, "[a]nd that none may think that we, too, treat of a matter unknown to us, we beg the reader to note that in New Netherland and adjacent districts, some eighty-thousand beavers are put down every year, that we, during the nine years we were there, often made a meal of beaver meat, also kept them from a young age, and handled many thousands of beaver skins."

Beavers abounded in the area of New Netherland in the 1600's. They grounded the colony of New Netherland and were its driving force and basic sustenance. Van der Donck writes, "the beaver is the main reason and the source of the means for the initial settlement of this fine country by Europeans."[23] No one would argue this statement. The potential for profits through the trade in beaver furs drew the Dutch back to New Netherland after Hudson's first voyage. The first Dutch trading post in North America situated itself on the upper Hudson River where furs were most abundant and the Natives had already been introduced to the fur trade with Europeans via New France to the north.

Of the furs that were traded, the beaver was the most plentiful. Various estimates of the number of beaver pelts harvested annually exist, up to the 14,000 that were reported

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[22] Van der Donck, *Description*, 115.
[23] Ibid.

lost in the shipwreck of the *Princess Amelia*.[24] At one point, Van der Donck estimated the number of possible beaver pelts annually to be 80,000.[25] Even while this number, along with other calculations of beaver trappings, have been labeled overestimations,[26] these numbers are indicative of the hope and potential that the trade in beaver furs offered the colony. As the numbers of colonists grew, trust in a prosperous future was bound to the idea that the beaver would continue to support the local population as the foundation of the workings within the colony.

Fort Amsterdam was opened on the southern tip of Manhattan Island in 1625, strategically placed to protect the entrance to the rivers from encroachments by sea, and as a port for receiving incoming trading ships. New Amsterdam became the center for administration of the colony, while providing support for the beaver fur trade that was centered two hundred kilometers north in Beverwijk, present-day Albany, near Fort Orange. Furs were brought by boat down the river and loaded onto outgoing ships. Here, duties were assessed on the furs, bills of lading were drawn up, and invoices were recorded. Goods coming into the colony via the port at New Amsterdam were also processed here. Many of these European goods such as tools, housewares, and cloth, were used directly for trading with the Natives for beaver furs in Beverwijk. The prudent positioning of Fort Amsterdam not only functioned to safeguard entry to the colony via the inland waterways, but also protected the colony's livelihood by controlling access to beavers.

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[24] Russell Shorto, *The Island at the Center of the World: The Epic Story of Dutch Manhattan and the Forgotten Colony That Shaped America* (New York: Vintage, 2005), 179. This number has also been reported as 14,000 *pounds* of furs in an article about the *Princess Amelia* shipwreck in Simon Groenveld, "New Light on a Drowned Princess," de Halve Maen (Summer 2001).
[25] Van der Donck, *Description*, 117.
[26] Burke, *Mohawk Frontier*, 7.

The beaver's significance to the colony is demonstrated by the proposed designs for the Coats of Arms for New Amsterdam and New Netherland. In 1630, three drawings were presented for approval to the Lords Nineteen of the West India Company. All three included the beaver. One design offered two protectively stationed beavers guarding a shield, reminiscent of the lions flanking the shield in the Coat of Arms for Amsterdam.[27] Both the proposed Coat of Arms for New Amsterdam and that of New Netherland featured the beaver on or atop the shield, prominently positioned as part of the fundamental identity of the colony.

The beaver as sustenance

Beavers supported the colonists economically as beaver furs were the main source of income for the colony. The furs were used as currency within the colony, as well as sold for money in Europe. Beaver pelts, as *beverstuivers*, were also backed by *sewant* or wampum, an originally Native currency consisting of strings of beads made of whelk shells or quahog clams.[28] Beaver furs backed by *sewant* within the colony did not always hold the same value against the Dutch guilder in Europe.[29] Much has been written about the economics of the beaver furs as currency. Prices fluctuated during the history of the colony through factors such as supply and demand, wars between Native tribes, black-market interference, and overhunting toward the end of the colony. As the colony grew, income was derived from other sources, such as farmed grain and tobacco. But the beaver remained the principal source of income for the colonists, and was the basis and

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[27] Jaap Jacobs, *The Colony of New Netherland: A Dutch Settlement in Seventeenth-century America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell UP, 2009), 106.
[28] Eric Jay Dolin, *Fur, Fortune, and Empire: The Epic History of the Fur Trade in America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 28.
[29] Jacobs, *The Colony of New Netherland*, 109.

cornerstone of the colony's economic structure. When trade in beaver furs was opened up to private traders, the colony still benefitted by way of price controls by the WIC. Furs traded by non-Company colonists were required to sell their pelts to the WIC at set prices, assuring income to the colony via profits beyond the WIC trade monopoly. But this overarching economic foundation was not the only way that the beaver provided support to the colonists.

Beyond economic support, the beaver sustained the colonists in other ways, such as by way of provisions. The beaver represented nourishment for the colonists as a means of food. Van der Donck indicates this when he relates that, "we, during the nine years we were there, often made a meal of beaver meat."[30] He qualifies this as beyond mere necessity with an air of exclusivity by adding that "[t]he meat excels all other meat of land or water animals."[31] Van der Donck explains why, though beaver meat is readily available, it has not become a staple in New Netherland. He offers, "the Indians, who for little recompense gladly share their food-stuffs and meals with us, seldom part with beaver meat, so that most of the Christians of New Netherland have never tasted it."[32] Not only was the beaver a potential source of rations for the colony, Van der Donck describes beaver meat as that of exceptional quality, as a delicacy of fine cuisine fit for royalty when he asserts, "[t]he tail, like all of the beaver, is a delicate food, and that is why in Germany beavers are always reserved for the emperor's table on the rare occasions they are caught."[33] He specifically elevates the meat of the beaver tail as, "the very finest and best part of all the beaver… which the Indians will not lightly give up, other than as an exceptional treat or gift for

[30] Van der Donck, *Description*, 117.
[31] Ibid., 123.
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid., 88.

someone."[34] As if to conjure up images of tasty and familiar products from domestic livestock, Van der Donck likens beaver meat to "flesh layered between fatty tissue in the lard, as in fattened hogs."[35]

Alongside providing nourishment, the beaver offered the colonists another basic necessity, protection from the elements in the way of wearables. Both coats and hats were fashioned from beaver furs,[36] as well as trim for other clothing, such as collars, cuffs, and boots.[37] Beavers trapped in the winter had the thickest undercoats. Superior in their warmth, beaver skins are cast by Van der Donck as sturdy and impenetrable when he writes, "[t]he beaver pelt, or skin, is thick and is densely covered all over with very fine fur."[38] The beaver fur surface also has an unusual barbed structure, which allows it to mat naturally into felt. This quality makes it an excellent medium for shaped hats.[39]

Beaver skins were used for clothing in Europe in a range of modes. Van der Donck describes pelts used for their plush fur when he writes, "[i]f the skins are first to go from here to Muscovy, however, as is usual and happens regularly, the shiny hair is what makes them sought after."[40] But the skins for making hats required preparation in a complex and labor-intensive process. The outer coat of guard hairs first had to be stripped, often by boiling, and then the smooth pelt underneath was treated. Furs worn by the Native trappers as coats had already lost much of the guard hairs, and so were more valuable.

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[34] Ibid., 123.
[35] Ibid., 126.
[36] Van den Bogaert, *Journey*, 15.
[37] Alan Axelrod, *A Savage Empire: Trappers, Traders, Tribes, and the Wars That Made America* (New York: St. Martin's, 2011), 7.
[38] Van der Donck, *Description*, 118.
[39] Axelrod, *Savage Empire*, 8.
[40] Van der Donck, *Description*, 118.

Sweat and body oils in contact with the furs break down the outer layer of protein and work to promote felting.[41] Van der Donck attempts to explain this when he points out that, "unless beaver fur is dirty, soiled and greasy, it will not felt. Therefore, the worn pelts are much in demand."[42] These coats, he points out, "made dirty from sweat and greasiness, work well and yield good hats."

Hats made from beaver skins were prized in New Netherland and in Europe for their soft, velvety texture, and warmth. Van der Donck notes, "[t]he fur is made into the best hats that are worn, named beavers or castors for the material they are made of and by now well known throughout Europe."[43] But beyond fashion or status, the naturally waterproof beaver felt hat was a pragmatic item of clothing that provided warmth and protection from weather.

Besides being able to feed and clothe the colonists, the beaver offered the colonists medicinal healing by a variety of uses. For an inventory of these processes, Van der Donck, in his text, defers to the "ancient naturalists and physicians" who had previously written on the medicinal properties of the beavers' "flesh and members."[44] Though Van der Donck stops short of attesting to the effects he reports, his deference does not dispel their validity. "Therefore," he begins, "we insert here a summary of what they considered to be the medicinal properties of the beaver."[45] Among the reported medicinal properties afforded by castoreum obtained from the beaver glands is the ability to wake a person from a sound

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[41] Axelrod, *Savage Empire*, 9.
[42] Van der Donck, *Description*, 119.
[43] Ibid., 118.
[44] Ibid., 116.
[45] Ibid.

sleep, the restoration of sleep to those who are unable to sleep, and even the treatment of lunatics. Castoreum can "[bring] on the menses in women and expel the afterbirth."[46] According to these medical readings, the castoreum from beavers "is good for dizziness, trembling, gout, paralysis, constipation, bellyache, and poisoning."[47] It can be used to treat toothache, ringing in the ears, and to promote sharp vision. The yellowish material removed from beaver teeth and ingested "is thought to be a sovereign remedy for jaundice."[48] Shoes and boots made from beaver skins could be known to treat "podagra" (gout). Even beaver urine can be "effective against various poisons."[49] In essence, Van der Donck portrays the beaver as a creature capable of becoming a "magic cure-all" for all that could possibly ail the colonists of New Netherland.

The healing prowess of the beaver by the medicinal qualities of its parts could offer another way, besides through fur trading, for the beaver to provide support to the colonists. Van der Donck, in a search of the true beaver glands noted as the source of medicinal castoreum, reports to "have taken great pains to come to a correct understanding of the matter; to that end I not only closely questioned many Indians whom I considered to be the most experienced, but also with my own hands opened up and carefully examined several beavers."[50] Whether Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*,[51] painted in 1632 in the Physicians College at Leiden University just six years before Van der Donck enrolled at the University's School of Law, influenced Van der Donck to dissect

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[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Ibid., 122.
[49] Ibid., 116.
[50] Ibid., 124.
[51] Rembrandt van Rijn. *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp.* (Mauritshuis, Den Haag, 1632).

beavers, is unknown. What is clear, however, is his objective of identifying the "true" beaver glands that would yield the healing oils. He reports having heard of shipments of beaver glands that were believed to have been the correct ones, "but on arrival in Holland, they could not do much with it and were told that these were not the right kind."[52] Because of unreliable shipments such as these, the market for beaver glands for medicinal purposes had fallen "out of favor."[53] Van der Donck's academic approach to finding the "true" beaver glands, while satisfying his curiosity, also holds out hope for a renewed interest in the market for beaver glands as additional potential economic support of the colony. His persistence pays off as he reports, "[e]ventually I saw one of an elongated shape like a candied pear, wrinkled and somewhat mucous, and this I showed to an experienced physician resident in New Netherland. I understood from him that this was of the right kind and as they ought to be."[54]

Confidence in the future of wealth through beaver trade was not unreasonable. There was no reason to believe that plentiful seventeenth century North American beavers were anything other than a renewable, inexhaustible resource. Van der Donck presumes to allay any doubts about this by describing the reproductive proficiency of beavers. As if the beavers are in service to the colonists to reproduce, he reports that, "[b]eavers, like hogs, have a gestation period of sixteen weeks and see to it that they litter once a year during summer, some earlier than others. They always give birth to four young at a time, unless it is the first litter, when only two or three may be born."[55] That beavers multiply themselves

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[52] Van der Donck, *Description*, 125.
[53] Ibid., 124.
[54] Ibid., 125.
[55] Ibid., 123.

by a factor of one- to two beavers each year implies the mathematical impossibility that the beavers could ever die out.

The beaver as a link to the land and the people

The beaver provided a social connection between the colonists and the Native peoples of New Netherland. Van der Donck learned much of what he knew of Native customs while exploring the land and the people of the Catskills near Rensselaerswijck, and had "seen and spoken with hundreds of beaver trappers…"[56] The colonists' relationship with the Natives of New Netherland was formed almost wholly through interactions involving the beaver. Connections made over the trade in beaver pelts led not only to an intertwined economy of pelts and wampum, but also to the exchange of Native and European goods and cultures. The connection to the beaver underpinned these inter-dependencies and secured life in New Netherland, with the Natives as trappers and the colonists as traders.

By reliance on the beaver as the basis for their interactions, the beaver grounded the colonists to the land and the people of New Netherland. Trapping beavers became a way of life for the Natives, while trading for beaver pelts was the way of life for the colonists. In a sense, this was a symbiotic relationship. The colonists needed the Natives to obtain the beavers, which improved the colonists' standing. The Natives needed the colonists in order to obtain western goods, which in turn, improved the Natives' standing.[57] But beyond

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[56] Ibid., 120.
[57] Burke, *Mohawk Frontier*, 26.

economics, the exchange of furs helped affirm partnerships between Natives and colonists. "[F]or the Indian the exchange represented a statement about friendship."[58]

These reliances did not mean that the relationships between the colonists and the Natives were always stable. Partnerships were sometimes put to the test, as when trade allegiances were questioned. The Dutch tried to stay out of clashes between tribes. It benefitted the Dutch to maintain good relations for trade with area trappers, both the Mahicans and later, the westerly Mohawks.[59] While inter-tribal conflicts could affect the flow of pelts to the colonists, disputes between colonists and Natives were negotiated in order to preserve trade ties. Incidents would occur and treaties would be made.[60] Both the colonists and the Natives recognized their dependence on one another.

As all things in New Netherland were good according to Van der Donck, he makes an effort to present the beavers of New Netherland in a positive light. He first aims to defend the beaver against past falsehoods, avowing to report factually about beavers and to set the record of past wrongs straight. He begins, "it will be appropriate… first to record the views that ancient and later authors expressed about the animal. It will then appear from the subsequent account of the plain and simple truth how far all of them strayed from the facts."[61] He begins by describing a history of what has been written in the past, and what he assumes to be considered common knowledge. As if to bolster his attempt to discredit previous accounts about the beaver, Van der Donck chooses as an example that borders on ridiculous. He describes, "[t]he great naturalist Pliny, in the third chapter of his thirty-

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[58] William Cronon in Dolin, *Fur, Fortune, and Empire*, 31.
[59] Burke, *Mohawk Frontier*, 27.
[60] Trelease, *Indian Affairs*, 87.
[61] Van der Donck, *Description*, 115.

second book, states that the beaver's members, by which he means the testes, have many medicinal uses, and that the beavers, knowing that trappers pursue them for that reason, bite off those parts with their teeth, and as a last resort, rise up and show them to the trappers so that they may be rid of the prize they are hunted for."[62] Other ancient naturalists wrote that beavers "have sharp teeth with which they can fell trees as though cut down with an ax."[63] Van der Donck especially seems to try to dispel myths about the beaver as a dangerous creature when he notes, "[a]ll of them thought that beavers had long and fishlike tails, that they bit people fiercely if they could reach them, and more of such things, some of which had a semblance of truth and others none at all."[64] He uses the opportunity to fortify his own authority by contrasting these descriptions to his own as he points out, "[f]rom this it may be inferred and believed that none of them had ever seen a beaver but depended on the loose talk of ordinary inexperienced persons, which is unreliable."[65] Van der Donck aspires to validate the beaver's good nature.

Van der Donck paints a picture of the beaver as an animal in harmony with its natural purpose as he continues from the perspective of one who has observed the beaver intently. He begins by depicting the beaver body, which seems to aptly equip the beaver's activities. For moving on land, for instance, "[b]eavers have very short and, so to speak, no legs or shanks. When they walk, one can see hardly any semblance or shape of legs on them; they seem to move on no more than small paws that are closely attached to the

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[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid., 115-116.
[64] Ibid., 116.
[65] Ibid.

body."[66] On water, as well as on land, the beaver is modeled precisely for surviving in its environment. Van der Donck further describes the beaver as a graceful, [semi-]aquatic animal with paws made for swimming. "The claws or paws are hairless, blackish in color, and have strong brown nails at the toes, which are joined by thick skin, thus resembling swans' feet, though not as broad."[67] The beaver's compatibility with its environment allows it to thrive.

The land of New Netherland supports the beaver with food conveniently and readily available within its natural habitat. Van der Donck explains that the beavers "eat the bark of various trees and roots, grass, rushes, and greens growing on the watersides and in the bushes and fields thereabouts."[68] He points to diverse choices for beaver diets when he notes, "[t]he bark is mostly that of willows, osiers, and aspen growing by the waterside."[69] He adds to the picture of the beaver as self-sufficient and able to sustain itself completely within the landscape provided when he writes that the beavers "get most of their food on land—the tree bark and small plants they eat," while, "[u]nderwater they find for their sustenance little more than the bark of some roots that protrude from the banks of running streams and rushes growing here and there."[70] Here again, the land provides for the beaver what it needs to live.

New Netherland protects the beaver by providing the natural surroundings of land and water within which they can safely construct their homes. Van der Donck describes a

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[66] Ibid., 119.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Ibid., 117.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Ibid., 117-118.

supportive environment for beavers as he points out that, "they have their lodges in the water… which they can go by water to a retreat that they always have nearby: a cave or burrow underwater in the side of the stream in which their dwelling is situated."[71] He summons up the idea of being able to withdraw to the confines of security when he adds, "[i]nto this they retire and stay in time of need, feeling that inside they are so well protected that no one can harm them."[72]

The beaver as a natural guide and ally

Beavers are acutely clever animals. This is "shown by the building of their dwellings and the rearing of their young,"[73] Van der Donck explains. The beavers provide robust homes for their offspring as they build their lodges "of wood and always in running water… so ingenious and curious that it is impressive and striking to see owing to all those compartments and levels."[74] To protect from the elements, "[t]hey close up the top with clay, wood, and grass tightly enough to keep out most of the rain." This makes for a sound and sufficient living space, he adds, conducive to raising families, as, "[t]here they live, all or part of a generation together, and break away like bees accordingly after multiplying."[75]

The beavers' astuteness aids in their self-sufficiency as evidenced "by the continual watch they keep to avoid being surprised and caught."[76] Van der Donck continues, "I am told that they keep watch, and take regular turns at doing so, at every lodge, which usually houses a family of six or seven or more living together." He also points out the beavers'

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[71] Ibid., 118.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid., 120.
[74] Ibid., 121.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Ibid., 120.

cleverness in making sure that their access routes do not freeze over when he explains, "[i]t is a fact that when it is freezing hard, as it often does where the most and the best beavers live, one of them will always be sitting close to running water… to keep it open by slapping its tail on the water's surface."[77]

The beaver is industrious and resourceful in procuring everything it needs to build a home in New Netherland. Van der Donck describes the abundance of soft woods with which beavers construct their dams, "such as aspen, pine, tulip tree, or the like that they find lying about near the water's edge."[78] He describes the skillful way that beavers find and fell trees for their lodges. "A beaver wishing to cut down a tree selects one of about a foot and a half around and whose bark is not bad tasting to it. It then starts gnawing at the tree with its front incisors."[79] He creates the image of a beaver as having an imposing purpose as he describes in detail the manner in which beavers fell trees for building. "The beaver gnaws a groove a hand's breadth or six inches wide, depending on the girth of the tree, works right around and up and down until the cut reaches the center and goes through it, and the tree falls. Van der Donck depicts the process as a strategic game when he writes, "[t]he two sides of the cut look as though turned in the shape of big tops—such as children spin with a whip—set against each other with the points touching."[80]

Although Van der Donck's account of how beavers transport wood was later discounted,[81] his description of this undertaking elicits visions of teamwork. He describes

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[77] Ibid., 120.
[78] Ibid., 121.
[79] Ibid., 122.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Note 7 in Van der Donck, *Description*, 169.

the task as a cooperative family affair when he writes, "[a]s regards moving the wood to the building site… the beavers cut sections [of the tree trunk] with their teeth to the length and weight of the one that is to carry it, then the female places herself underneath, and the kits and the male guide and support [the piece of wood] lest it fall off, and so it goes until they have enough."[82]

Van der Donck maintains that the beaver is a nimble and capable animal in that beavers can walk "with singular quickness," even though "the whole of the heavy, thickset body touches the ground and seems to overwhelm the short little legs. Far from it," he argues, "beavers are very alert, well endowed with sinews and muscles, and, therefore, tremendously strong."[83] Because of this, Van der Donck adds, "[t]hey are agile and can run amazingly fast."[84] He describes beavers again as excellent swimmers when he writes, "[i]n water as well, they can rapidly get to where they want to be as if they were actually fish."[85] Their acute senses, such as "a keen sense of smell and sharp hearing," help them avoid predators, as they "keep to dense bush near water and wetlands, away from human beings."[86] Van der Donck describes the beaver as a timid animal, but one that does not hesitate to defend itself as necessary as he points out, "[w]hen set upon and bitten by dogs, however, they defend themselves fiercely and can put an average dog out of action if they get hold of it with their front teeth."[87]

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[82] Van der Donck, *Description*, 122.
[83] Ibid., 119.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid.
[86] Ibid., 120.
[87] Ibid.

Van der Donck's portrayal of the beaver as clever, industrious, and capable, culminates in a personification of the animal. He compares beaver kits to children when he relates, "[a]s soon as the young beavers come into the world, they cry like newborn children, so that a person coming to where there is a young beaver, and not being forewarned, may think that a small child is near."[88] In describing the way the beaver mother feeds her kits, he matches the beaver mother to the image of a human mother when he explains, "[b]etween their forepaws, which are set close to the head, but far enough apart, the beaver has two teats as women have." He adds, "[t]he mother then raises herself like a human being sitting up and gives a teat to each of the kits, who lean against the mother's body like children who stand and suck."[89] Van der Donck also describes beaver vocalizations using human references when he writes, "[m]eanwhile, the others lie in the nest as though they lay crying, and so they carry on in turns."[90]

If not almost human, Van der Donck infers that the beaver could function as part of the family, or at least as a family-oriented, fondly kept pet. He suggests, "[a] young beaver is a gentle creature and can be easily kept, reared, and domesticated like a dog."[91] He describes the caring for young beavers much like caring for children when he describes, "[w]hen quite young they need to be fed on milk, which they quickly learn to suck through a strip of cloth or a horn."[92] Van der Donck alludes to joyfulness provided by the beaver when he adds, [a]s they grow a little older, the young beavers like to get down to the water for a wash every day, and there they tumble and play in the stream. They are so playful and

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[88] Ibid., 123.
[89] Ibid.
[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid., 123-124.
[92] Ibid., 124.

lively that it is a pleasure to watch them."[93] In affirming the beavers' good nature, he asserts, "[t]hey can be made as docile as a pup and never bite or get cross, however much one teases them."[94]

Van der Donck reserves a kind of spiritual reverence for the beaver upon relating the story of what was likely a rare albino beaver, found in the colony. He begins, "[b]eavers are all of the same color, with some a little browner and others a little redder," then shares his extraordinary encounter when he reveals, "[o]nce only have I seen a snow white beaver, and as far as can be ascertained, the same is true of all who have ever handled beavers."[95] Van der Donck adds an intriguing detail in describing the white beaver as one "whose guard hair on the back had a slight golden gleam,"[96] elevating the status of the already mysterious being.

NATURAL WORLD CONTEXTS

The idea of the beaver as a symbolic being aligns with Native lore that includes a spiritual connection with animals and often involves a divine reverence. For example, in Lakota culture, the white bison (American buffalo) is considered sacred and holds spiritual significance.[97] More generally, the bison has symbolic meaning for the entire existence of plains Natives.[98] Like the beaver in Van der Donck's *Description*, for the plains Natives, the buffalo encompasses provision, abundance, consistency, strength, stability, and prosperity. Though the Natives of New Netherland did not impart this same symbolism to their beaver,

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[93] Ibid.
[94] Ibid.
[95] Ibid., 126.
[96] Ibid.
[97] Winona Laduke, *Pte Oyate: Buffalo Nations, Buffalo People*, (St. Paul, Honor the Earth, 1998)
[98] Ibid.

the beaver did hold some spiritual significance for them, in the way of superstition. Van der Donck explains that, while the Natives would use most of the beaver for food, "beaver bones they burn and will not let their dogs eat, lest the latter become unlucky in the hunt, as they believe."[99] While emotional and symbolic connections to animals are often ambiguous, other Native accounts describe the eating of an animal's heart after capture so as to acquire some of the animal's qualities, such as courage and strength, and possibly the animal's spirit and virtue.[100] "In a far more general context, clothing made of leather or fur connects the wearer to the natural world."[101] Historically, fur has been associated with warriors, conquerors, and kings. Any relationship that might be presumed between the animal itself and the wearing of its fur could be extended to representing power in a cultural and economic sense. For seventeenth century European men, "a fine beaver hat was both token and mojo, symbolic of as well as productive of social and economic stature above the ordinary."[102]

That the beaver might be understood as a natural connection to New World aspirations, including social and economic prosperity, is a reasonable idea in light of early seventeenth century European thinking about the natural world. "People who labored with soil, crops, and animals, with wood, metal, and cloth knew what they knew through their senses."[103] As Christianity taught that God's nature was universal, it was accepted that

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[99] Van der Donck, *Description*, 126.
[100] Alan Axelrod, *A Savage Empire: Trappers, Traders, Tribes, and the Wars That Made America* (New York: St. Martin's, 2011), 25.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Ibid., 26.
[103] Sara Gronim, *Everyday Nature: Knowledge of the Natural World in Colonial New York* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers UP, 2007), 199.

nature everywhere obeyed the same rules.[104] Immigrants could rely on the familiar realm of the everyday world in New Netherland, to which they "brought with them their own understanding of how the natural world worked that they believed to be universal."[105]

This familiar framework of the natural world overlaid many domains. One early design for society even looked to the natural world for a model of social organization. The idea of the beehive was a recurring metaphor in imagining an ideal colony and served as an example where each member of society was tasked in a role toward the common good of the community.[106] The hierarchical structure of the beehive provided a template for a colony with its monarch, guards and workers.[107] Another area of the natural world explored in the seventeenth century was that of alchemy. In contrast to later associations of alchemy with the occult, early seventeenth century experimentation with this natural chemistry included the idea that "God intended alchemical knowledge to be the province of pious practitioners who would be dedicated to using the fruits of their quest for godly ends."[108] The natural world was a tried and true arena. As such, innovations that meant choosing between competing assertions about nature, elevating one idea over another and, by extension, questioning God, were not always welcomed. "For people in the early modern world, innovations in ideas and practices in the natural world had implications beyond the practical, for the natural world was a realm of God, a model for human society, a theater for

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[104] Ibid., 202.
[105] Ibid., 37.
[106] Karen Kupperman, *America in European Consciousness, 1493-1750* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Va. by the U of North Carolina, 1995), 272-3.
[107] Ibid., 275.
[108] Woodward, Walter William. *Prospero's America: John Winthrop, Jr., Alchemy, and the Creation of New England Culture, 1606 - 1676* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: U of North Carolina, 2010), 12.

the demonstration of social allegiances, and a site for the performance of political power."[109] In this sphere, the beaver, as Van der Donck portrayed it, characterized a benign and benevolent natural representation of New Netherland features.

Van der Donck faced a daunting task in communicating his ideas to potential immigrants. Imagining the New World presented a challenge to seventeenth century Europeans. The flow of information was gradual and subject to interpretation; "[t]he process of building a picture was at best imperfect."[110] As accounts trickled in about new flora and fauna, those who were actually reporting as eyewitnesses were often not the ones qualified to report, and vice versa.[111] This disconnect between "witness-authors" and the "dominant lines of editing and publication" slowed the transfer of information.[112] "Europeans who sought to communicate their impressions of unknown cultures, whether they emphasized their familiarity or their strangeness, were forced to adopt a wide variety of rhetorical strategies."[113] Van der Donck's *A Description of New Netherland* was a way to get the word out by publication from a direct eyewitness observer. Appealing to potential colonists by communicating about the natural world, framed by references to the beaver, constituted a way of presenting New Netherland in a commonplace context. For early modern people, "[i]nnovations in understandings and practices that could be

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[109] Gronim, *Everyday Nature*, 7.
[110] Kupperman, *America*, 11.
[111] Henry Lowood, "The New World and the European Catalog of Nature," in *America in European Consciousness, 1493-1750* (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Va. by the U of North Carolina, 1995), 295.
[112] Ibid., 316.
[113] Kupperman, *America*, 3.

incorporated into familiar social relations and familiar material practices stood a good chance of being accepted."[114]

In a skillful assimilation of the natural qualities of the beaver, Van der Donck's third chapter presents the beaver as a powerful model of essential desired elements to be found in New Netherland, the natural world embodiment of an omnipotent being, able to do anything. As the overarching reason for the colony, the beaver grounds the colony in a way of life and sense of purpose, and represents sustenance for the colonists by forming the basis of the colony's economy as a trade commodity. By underwriting and driving a new form of currency in wampum, it demonstrates a potential for prosperity, even riches. The beaver, as Van der Donck presents it, symbolizes the provision of basic necessities requisite for survival, such as a potential abundant food source, along with the idea of protection from the elements as material warmth. Medicinal properties derived from the beaver parts and members offer cures for any ills that may arise. These medicines as potential exports, in addition to the perceived renewability and sustainability of beavers as a resource for furs, illustrate economic security for the future of the colonists in New Netherland.

The social attributes represented by the beaver are intangible but key qualities that act to bond both the people and the land of New Netherland through livelihoods intertwined. By its agreeable nature, the beaver is a natural New World diplomat, exemplifying all that is good. Typifying the beaver as clever, capable, and compatible with its natural habitat, Van der Donck invokes the concept of self-sufficiency for potential colonists with the expectation of being able to assimilate into their new environment. A

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[114] Gronim, *Everyday Nature*, 7.

connection could be presumed between the resourceful and industrious beaver and the values and work ethic dictated by Christian ideology, qualities and virtues already well known to seventeenth century Dutch Christians. New Netherland beckons as a prospective ally as personification of the beaver in Van der Donck's description of the mother beaver and kits calls up a mental association with the beaver as nurturing and family-oriented. The same potential is seen in Van der Donck's characterization of the beaver as a domesticated "pup." The playful, good-natured beaver represents faithful and congenial allegiance in New Netherland. Lastly, the beaver offers the notion of adventure. Like the slight "golden gleam" of the white beaver's guard hairs, nothing spells "promise of the New World" more than visions of gold. As a metaphor for an omnipotent New World, the beaver represents the opportunity that lies ahead in New Netherland.

The incentives that drew people from the seventeenth century Dutch Republic to the New World varied widely.[115] While colonists were "attracted by the prospect of improving their lives" they also "sought to transform the landscape into something like the one they had left behind."[116] Initially, the acclaimed efflorescence of the Dutch Golden Age made it difficult to attract immigrants with good job prospects to New Netherland. Later, the second half of the seventeenth century witnessed a changed labor market and a rise in unemployment.[117] Even while the economy remained stable, inequities persisted between the social classes, and the cities were overpopulated. Immigrants to New Netherland included soldiers, merchants, traders, craftsmen, farmhands, and servants.[118] The

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[115] Jacobs, *The Colony of New Netherland*, 34.
[116] Gronim, *Everyday Nature*, 15.
[117] Jacobs, *The Colony of New Netherland*, 33.
[118] Ibid., 32-51.

availability of land attracted farmers, especially from the less populated inland provinces.[119] Generally, for colonists, "America was blank territory in which they could create a new, more perfect Europe without interference from either Old or New World complications."[120]

CONCLUSION

In writing about the beaver in his Description of New Netherland**,** Adriaen van der Donck appears to have been trying to introduce his audience to an integral part of life in New Netherland. As a commodity, the surface qualities of the beaver are quite evident, but its potential significance goes much deeper. That New Netherland abounded in these all-encompassing and delightful creatures created a fortuitous opportunity in Van der Donck's appeal to potential colonists. His presentation of the beaver provided a natural world model that conveyed what New Netherland had to offer in an intelligible way, one that made sense in the context of seventeenth century thinking about how the world worked.

A Description of New Netherland was reprinted for the second time a year after it was first published. Even before his book was written, Van der Donck managed to generate enough interest in New Netherland that in March 1650, he, along with the other colonial delegates, requested permission to charter a WIC ship for the purpose of carrying two hundred colonists to New Netherland.[121] The directors of the WIC were surprised by this response. In February of that same year, they had written in a letter to Stuyvesant that, "[f]ormerly New Netherland was never spoken of and now heaven and earth seem to be

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[119] Ibid., 50.
[120] Kupperman, *America*, 22.
[121] O'Callaghan and Fernow, *Documents Relative*, 379.

stirred up by it."[122] When in 1653, the WIC finally granted permission for Van der Donck to set sail for home, he had been away from New Netherland for more than three years. Permission to return was granted on the condition that Van der Donck agreed to "accept no office whatever it may be, but rather to live in private peacefully and quietly as a common inhabitant, submitting to the orders and commands of the Company or those enacted by its director."[123] Van der Donck requested access to New Netherland documents for the purpose of writing a history of the colony. The WIC did not disapprove, but referred his request to Director Stuyvesant for consideration, with the recommendation to "take care… that the Company's own weapons are not turned upon itself, and that it is not drawn into new troubles and difficulties in the process."[124] Van der Donck returned to New Netherland in the summer of 1653 and proceeded to go about the business of tending his own colony of Colendonck, present-day Yonkers. In September of 1655 an attack by non-local Natives in the area of Van der Donck's home resulted in twenty-eight boweries burned, one hundred hostages taken, and forty Christians massacred. Although there is no official record of Adriaen van der Donck's death in this event, a symbol of two crosses follows his name in a loosely related report the following January;[125] court records that same month show a reference to his wife as his widow.[126]

Losses also came for the beavers in New Netherland. The trade in beaver pelts likely reached a high point in the mid 1650's but only a few years later, in the late 1650's, the number of available furs declined. This rapid change in trade activity was principally due to

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[122] Gehring, Correspondence, 86.
[123] Ibid., 211.
[124] Ibid., 220.
[125] Gehring, *Council Minutes, 1655-1656.* Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1995, 204.
[126] Fernow, B. *The Records of New Amsterdam, 1656-1658*. vol 2. New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1897, 8.

the overhunting of beavers, and secondarily, to inter-tribal wars that kept Native trappers away from the hunt.[127] In contrast, it has been estimated that in the early 1600's, a mere fifty years earlier, each of the major stream networks on Manhattan Island had at least one resident beaver family. "Not surprisingly the distribution of beavers four hundred years ago closely follows the former distribution of freshwater streams and ponds."[128] Like valuable veins of ore, the beavers were an essential part of this lifeblood network of the colony.

The dream of an omnipotent New World, like Van der Donck's snow white beaver, slipped through the fingers of the Dutch colony when the English took the colony in 1664 without a single shot being fired. Re-named for the Duke of York, the colony's predominant economic industry by this time was agriculture. But the beaver maintains a place at the heart of New York's history. Two beavers still grace the seal of the City of New York in recognition of its significance to the city. The beaver has remained a part of the city seal on and off since the Dutch period. The first seal of New Netherland held a beaver diagonally across a shield, surrounded by a string of wampum; the beaver re-appeared on the city seals of 1686 and 1784. The official corporate seal of the City of New York featuring two beavers on the center Coat of Arms was adopted in 1915 and added to the state flag.[129] In 1975, the beaver was recognized again when it was approved as the state animal of New York. In the most contemporary example of New York's connection to the beaver, a beaver was sighted building a dam on a freshwater river in the Bronx in 2007; a second beaver

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[127] Thomas Burke, "The New Netherland Fur Trade, 1657-1661: Response to Crisis." *Selected Rensselaerswijck Seminar Papers* (Albany, N.Y.: New Netherland Publishing), 286.
[128] Eric W. Sanderson, *Mannahatta: A Natural History of New York City* (New York: Abrams, 2009), 203.
[129] *Annual Report of the American Scenic and Historic Preservation Society to the Legislature of the State of New York* (Volume 20, 1915), accessed April 15, 2015.

appeared in 2010.[130] The sensation that this created reveals a collective sentiment about the place of the beaver in the lasting New York landscape. These are the first beavers to return to the City in more than two centuries, four hundred years after leaving an indelible imprint on the shores of the Hudson River.

Van der Donck appears to attempt to provide an accurate representation of the beaver in *A Description of New Netherland.* For the most part his account seems to be objective, though some of what he writes stretches the imagination. Whether he intended to embellish the meaning of the beaver to appeal to potential colonists when he wrote "Of the Nature, Amazing Ways, and Properties of the Beaver" is unknown. Something about the beaver honestly fascinated Van der Donck, and for this reason alone, conceivably defied an ordinary explanation. The beaver, as he described it, shaped an intuitive connection to the idea of an omnipotent New World. Much later, engineer Hiram Chittenden, author of *The American Fur Trade of the Far West,* wrote that, "every stream of the West was as rich [in beaver] as if sands of gold covered its bottoms."[131] Chittenden was not the first person to see the beaver as gold in the riverbeds. But the beaver in *A Description of New Netherland* represents much more than money. Van der Donck's beaver is a symbol of an omnipotent land in all that it has to offer. One cannot help but feel drawn to the promise of the New World through Adriaen van der Donck's description of the beaver.

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[130] Anahad O'Connor, "After 200 Years, a Beaver is Back in New York City," The New York Times (22 Feb. 2007), accessed April 8, 2015.
[131] Axelrod, *A Savage Empire*, 16.

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