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Essay

Pastoral entrapment and the idyllic-carceral continuum

Agrilogistics, a frame of mind and a set of behaviours that consider the environment as existing outside of humans and as inherently pliable to utilitarian and economic purposes, has determined human engagement with the countryside for centuries without second guessing the logics of its approach. Why are such agrilogistics maintained despite proving toxic to humans and other lifeforms? This essay argues that the genre of the *pastoral*, although based on ambivalence towards the dispossession and exclusion that structures it, forms a linchpin in sustaining agrilogistics' feedback loops between the imaginary, the material, and the social, thereby determining who does and does not gain access to the rural idyll's promise of 'the good life'. Such incorporated pastoral attitudes, I argue, are caught between idyllic habits of signification and the carceral effects and experiences that these idyllic habits effect on others. The essay offers the concept of pastoral entrapment to capture the ubiquity of carceral structures in the rural while indicating the persistence with which we remain tethered to idyllic renditions that actively cover such structures up. After bringing into view the historical imbrications between the countryside as we know it today and the confinement of people, livestock, and ecosystems in general, the essay proceeds to suggest that the rise of domestic colonisation in the Netherlands in the nineteenth century was heavily invested in rural idylls and could be approached as an agrilogistic enterprise that, despite its charitable overtones, encouraged harmful feedback loops between the exploitation of colonised populations (both impoverished and racialised), the depletion of the environment, and a drive for profit. Finally, such an agrilogistic mindset can only be undone by recognising how we remain tethered to pastoral models of thought and what such pastoral entrapment really means for those at the receiving end of it.

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Bart Molenkamp, who was one of the wardens of the domed prison in Breda, the Netherlands, said about its outdated and problematic panoptic design that it would be better to demolish all prisons every twenty-five years or so because the buildings otherwise start to dictate prison policies and regimes rather than the other way around.[1] From a practical point of view, surely, such a comment is a little heretical, but Molenkamp has a point. As Katherine Hayles has argued in relation to the feedback loops that intimately connect materiality with discursive practices, people engage with their surroundings by actively incorporating them. These embodied responses initially are improvised and 'tied to the circumstance of [their] instantiation', but in time, the situated knowledge is 'deeply sedimented into the body'.[2] The knowledge becomes habitual, and in that process, gains the power to 'determine the boundaries within which conscious thought takes place'.[3] In other words, when one tears down an infrastructure, one does not automatically change the habits, opinions, or ideologies that are tied up with it. There are lingering attachments. Attachments that turn into frames of reference and keep familiar feedback loops between humans and their environment in place.

A particular feedback loop that has proven incredibly difficult to break down when it comes to the relation between the countryside, colonisation, and carcerality is *agrilogistics*. Agrilogistics arose along with the shift from the diversified life forms of hunter-gatherers to those of settled agriculture and the domestication of animals in the Fertile Crescent around 12,000 years ago.[4] In this logic, which spreads beyond agriculture into cultural praxis in general, the environment is persistently thought of as existing outside of humans and as inherently pliable. A field, for instance, is seen as an empty slate to be inscribed with production, not as an already active assemblage of plants, creatures, and atmospheres. According to Timothy Morton, who coined the term, agrilogistics as a frame of mind and a set of behaviours cannot deal with the field as assemblage and, thus, constantly seeks to reassert its own logic through three axioms: 'eliminate contradiction and anomaly, establish boundaries between the human and the nonhuman, maximise existence over and above any quality of existing'.[5] Agrilogistics has been so successful that it should be seen as one of the driving forces behind the Anthropocene, a logistics so viral that it eventually required 'steam engines and industry to feed its proliferation'.[6]

With agrilogistics, notions of the settled ownership of land and private property emerged, leading to patriarchal feedback loops between human and more-than-human life forms that deplete soils and induce epidemics wherever agrilogistics happens to settle down.[7] It is incredibly pernicious precisely because it is a logistics, offering a 'technical, planned, and perfectly logical approach to built space', which then 'proceeds without stepping back and rethinking the logic' of what it is trying to achieve.[8] In this sense, agrilogistics is an infrastructural orientation that appears to promise people helpful relations to their environment while actually more closely resembling a programme that runs for its own sake, perfecting and universalising a logic of claustrophobic utility. As James C. Scott asks about the rise of this form of agriculture: Why

did we settle for one place around which to centre all our activities, neatly fencing it off from the outside world so that our cattle could not wander off and raiders could not get in? He adds,

> How were we [like our grains and animals] also domesticated by th[is] domus, by our confinement, by crowding, by our different patterns of physical activity and social organization?[9]

How, indeed? And why? Why are agrilogistics maintained despite proving 'toxic from the beginning to humans and other lifeforms'?[10] And why do we, like coded sheep, mistakenly conflate the maintenance of the relations agrilogistics dictates with 'the repair of what wasn't working' in the first place?[11]

As a profoundly embodied form of knowledge production, the imagination plays a crucial role in the feedback loops one maintains with one's surroundings. In its most performative incarnations, imagination can introduce newness into the world by generating unfamiliar interpretations of familiar events that may then circulate beyond their direct context in politically or conceptually relevant ways. However, the imagination also has a mimetic side, which pretends to mirror rather than mix with the world and which often functions as a fixed frame of reference for how new situations, questions, or fellow creatures are approached. The literary genre of the pastoral has provided, through the ages, the most sustained aesthetic and emotional engagement with rural spaces and life in the countryside, creating 'an affective expectation of the experience of watching something unfold, whether that thing is in life or in art'.[12]

Pastorals are known for their difficult politics. To give one early, but incredibly influential and telling example, Virgil's *The Eclogues* (c. 42–39 BCE) and *The Georgics* (c. 39–29 BCE) were conceived in a context of land expropriation, right at a moment when Octavian, who would eventually become emperor Augustus after defeating Mark Antony at Actium in 31 BCE, needed to find the necessary land on which to retire discharged soldiers. This move went hand in hand with the dispossession of farmers as a matter of policy and took place when small-scale farming was already put under pressure by the emergence of large estates worked by slaves.[13] Virgil actually opens *The Eclogues* by addressing the ambiguity of this situation through the figure of Tityrus, a dispossessed farmer granted compensation for his plight by a 'god' in Rome — who is of course none other than the new Augustus himself.[14]

As Virgil's influence tumbled down the ages, pastorals continued to struggle with their roots of dispossession, placing in their stead the double legacy of maintaining the reveries of Virgil's *The Eclogues* while trying to live up to the

moral diligence endowed on manual agricultural labour by *The Georgics.* Pastorals tend to glorify agricultural labour as wholesome and socially meaningful while positing natural wilderness as a sublime space of mystery and exploration. In this process, they decontextualise the land and its inhabitants by separating ecosystems from their historical and material surroundings. Rob Nixon calls this a 'screening out of colonial spaces and histories' that leaves 'open the theoretical problems of the [pastoral's] representational systems' around labour, race, and gender.[15]

Yet, in the face of these occlusions, the idylls that seek to filter the central tensions of the pastoral out continue to enthral us and stubbornly persist in cultural representations and the social realm.[16] Idylls freeze engagement with the countryside in romanticisations of said agricultural labour, of the wilderness as both sublime and to be domesticated, of the country as a garden of Eden that miraculously delivers meals, and of being part of harmonious and safe, close-knit communities.[17] As Raymond Williams has suggested in his tracing of the idyllic aspects of pastorals in the British cultural imaginary, every generation actually harbours both nostalgic longings for such rural pleasantness as always about to be lost *as well as* escapist dreams of the rural as a space ready for the taking. Here, one can peacefully enjoy one's pension or get away temporarily from the ills of urbanised modernity.[18] Today, idylls still direct attention away from the present, obscuring 'crucial aspects of 21st century rural life, from depopulation, poverty, and land grabbing to the emergence of mega farms and increasing environmental pollution'.[19] Of course, in such idylls, there is always a figurative serpent in the garden[20] and the concept of the garden itself can only ever be maintained by closing it off from the outside world. In this sense, idyllic promises are materially, imaginatively, and emotionally structured by the politics of enclosure.

The lingering attachments to the idyllic side of the pastoral are so incorporated that they repeat themselves across generations and come to function as a 'quarantine of the imagination'.[21] In pastorals, as I suggest above, this imagination is caught between idyllic habits of signification and the carceral effects and experiences that these idyllic habits effect on others. I use carceral here not just to refer to the material traits of rural spatial organisation itself, but more generally to denote how experiences of or feelings about such rural spaces can be carceral, that is, as 'relating to, or suggesting a jail or prison'.[22] Following the conceptualisation of the carceral by Dominique Moran, Jennifer Turner, and Anna Schliehe, the carceral may primarily denote physical confinement in a restricted space but can also refer to the way in which technologies of surveillance and the growth of legal, state-sanctioned punitive systems increasingly 'enable a carceral "fix" to operate beyond conventional carceral spaces'[23] (Fig. 1).

Figure 1.
'There was a moment when, straddling the fence, his trousers hooked on a barb, he was an easy shot against the silver-blue sky; then he unpicked himself and was away, tiptoeing across ground surprisingly like the ground inside the fence'. J. M. Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K* (London: Vintage Books, 2004), p. 98, first publ. in 1983. Fence at Loskop farm, Limpopo, South Africa, photographed by Hanneke H. Stuit, 2022.

My use of the carceral in relation to the rural is not intended to broaden the concept beyond recognition, but rather serves to bring into view the historical imbrications between the countryside as we know it today and the enclosure of people, animals, and ecosystems in general, the surveillance and exclusion of racialised and gendered others, and the depletion of soils and natural resources. Within the pastoral models that have dominated human engagement with the rural for centuries, one person's idyll is often realised through another person's emotional, political, or physical prison. I offer the concept of pastoral entrapment as a way to capture the ubiquity of these structures, experiences, and imaginaries of carcerality *and* to indicate the persistence with which we remain attached to idyllic renditions that actively cover such structures up. As writer Jamaica Kincaid reminds us while she admires a

cotton plant in Kew Gardens: 'perhaps every good thing that stands before us comes at a great cost to someone else'.[24]

As an important component of the feedback loops between humans and their environment, the pastoral thus resides in what I call an idyllic-carceral continuum that is fuelled by the romanticisation of spatial seclusion. As Monika Fludernik has shown, carceral imageries in general contain a central tension between the prison and homeliness, in which the prison comes to stand for the disruption of destroyed family idylls and of thwarted access to picturesque landscapes, but also for enclosures that serve as refuges.[25] In her reading of the metaphoric slippage between the factory, slavery, and the prison in sentimental Victorian literature, for instance, Fludernik notes how the false opposition between the country and the city gets mapped unto a juxtaposition of factory work as reprehensible with rural, often manual, labour as wholesome, communal, and good. Although these metaphorical slippages made visible the confinement of workers in appalling working conditions in urban factories, the usage of anti-slavery discourse also contrasted free Brits with African slaves in ways that shrouded Britain's colonial imbrications in the issue. This shrouding leads one to home in, first of all, on whom pastorals seek to leave out of the frame and, secondly, raises questions as to what kind of perspectives on rural spaces this procedure of disavowal requires.

Pastorals usually end up privileging specific infrastructures over others. This works in ways similar to how current understandings of surveillance remain based on (variants of) the model of the panopticon while, as Simone Browne convincingly argues in *Dark Matters*, these understandings should be complemented with consideration of slave ships and the management of plantations as surveillance technologies. Designed at the same time as the panopticon, these models offer direly needed frames of reference for understanding the imbrications between surveillance, carcerality, and race.[26] In pastorals, we generally see the homeliness of the farmhouse, the lushness of the orchards, or the little lambs being born in the barn, but not the plantations where the actual labour takes place, the slave ships that brought people to these plantations, or the worker's compounds where many slaves and indentured labourers lived. Reading the rural through these 'inverse' spaces crystalises how colonial pastorals are propped up, not just by the exclusion of racialised others, but by explicitly carceral traits, which it subsequently seeks to idealise, justify, or even obscure. Pastoral entrapment is a wolf in sheep's clothing,[27] even in its most so-called benevolent versions.

Domestic colonisation is often seen as such a 'benevolent' version of coloniality/carcerality; the forced labour performed in it presumed to be wholesome because it takes place amongst walls of trees and on picturesque farms.[28] These Colonies begun as a utopic experiment in 1818, consisting

of seven agricultural colonies in Drenthe, Overijssel, and Flanders that were intended to uplift the idle urban poor through agricultural labour. Their establishment, however, actually meant disrupting local forms of subsistence farming on communally used land, radically transforming existing landscapes and ecologies to suit production needs and removing thousands of vagrants and orphans to the countryside — amounting to one of the largest internal migrations in Dutch history.[29] As Albert Schrauwers points out, the distinction between 'free' colonies (within which colonists lived on small farms and could move around) and 'unfree' ones (which incrementally functioned as prisons) does not change the fact that both forms were 'marked by […] social segregation, confinement, constant supervision, and systems of punitive measures and fines'.[30]

The Dutch system, conceived by colonial officer Johannes van den Bosch, was emulated throughout Europe.[31] Van den Bosch had experimented with plantation projects in Surinam and the Dutch Indies before, and he would later, in turn, bring his experiences from The Colonies of Benevolence to bear on colonial policy in the Dutch Indies in the infamous *cultuur systeem* [cultivation system].[32] In this sense, the Colonies of Benevolence, rather than just sitting 'uneasily' in the Enlightenment tradition of the 'activating welfare state' because people found it shameful to be sent there, in fact played a crucial role in 'perfecting' Dutch plantation systems.[33] It turned both land and people who would otherwise be 'wasted' into productive assets to the engine of modernisation. However, it became clear early on that the Colonies were financially unsustainable. Harvests were disappointing due to a lack of knowledge about the soil and most colonists proved unable to cover the debts through which they were meant to pay for their upkeep and education.[34] An increasingly punitive system formed an imagined solution for a population that refused to be properly domesticated.[35] The Colonies kept going, however, coming up with more and more technological innovations to boost productivity. In this sense, they were profoundly agrilogistic because they created utility for utility's sake and encouraged cruelly optimistic feedback loops between the exploitation of impoverished populations, the depletion of the environment, and a drive for profit. The people and land once seen as going to waste and in need of recuperation were, in this process, laid waste to themselves if they failed to serve the modernisation of the Dutch nation state.

Barbara Arneil has rightfully argued about domestic colonisation in general that agricultural labour is one of its defining principles that cannot be overlooked. Her claim, however, that this oversight obscures the fact 'that colonization could [also] be characterized as non-punitive, agrarian and domestic in form rather than as exclusively carceral, punitive and external',[36] could be enhanced through nuance once we take the idyllic-carceral continuum of pastoral entrapment seriously. That perspective not only makes clear that the pedagogic, non-punitive aspects of agricultural colonial labour cannot be regarded as separate from the 'programs and practices of incarceration' by which they were 'continually "contaminated"'.[37] It also helps us see that such supposedly

binary distinctions between non-punitive and punitive, agrarian and carceral, domestic and external colonisation are based on a habituated, incorporated, and ultimately problematic association of the rural with the idyllic. As I have tried to suggest, idylls are deeply implicated in the extractive attitudes that make up rural infrastructures and landscapes, entrapping populations in the forced labour this extraction requires to this day.

The pastoral relation between the idyllic and the carceral is fraught and complex, but can also be mobilised to rethink the feedback loops between the imaginary, psychological, affective, social, material, and economic aspects of what only seems a closed circuit of signification about the countryside. Rethinking the idyllic-carceral continuum could also redefine who does and does not gain access to the rural as idyllic. Perhaps if I had cathected my argument through this side of the pastoral equation, my considerations would have been more hopeful. But, even if more bleak, my focus on the carceral imaginaries and experiences that underpin such idylls aims to offer a crucial register of modesty in which the idyll's social, emotional, and material legacies are made visible and, to some extent, denaturalised. As I hope to have shown, the principle of pastoral entrapment makes clear that notions of private property and enclosure, of extraction and confinement, serve nothing but necropolitical ends. Idylls do not exist to promise a good life; they only alleviate that good life's structural violence. Only a countryside that frees itself from pastoral entrapment by acknowledging this violence inherent to the idyllic-carceral continuum can be imagined differently and actualise more appropriate feedback loops for belonging to each other and to the land.

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