UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM

UvA-DARE (Digital Academic Repository)

The Carceral Idyll: Rural Retreats and Dreams of Order in the Colonies of Benevolence

Stuit, H.

Publication date
2020
Document Version
Final published version
Published in
Collateral

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Stuit, H. (2020). The Carceral Idyll: Rural Retreats and Dreams of Order in the Colonies of Benevolence. *Collateral* , *23*, Article c. http://www.collateral-journal.com/index.php?cluster=23

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, P.O. Box 19185, 1000 GD Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.

UvA-DARE is a service provided by the library of the University of Amsterdam (https://dare.uva.nl)

Download date:08 Nov 2026

C

clustered | unclustered

The Carceral Idyll: Rural Retreats and Dreams of Order in the Colonies of Benevolence[1]

Hanneke Stuit

In *Domestic Colonies: The Turn Inward to Colony*, Barbara Arneil draws attention to the need to see external and domestic colonization in conjunction. Both forms of colonization are part of a transnational network of ideas and practices that profoundly influenced the course of history on domestic and foreign soil. One of the material starting points of the spread of domestic colonies, Arneil makes clear, needs to be pinpointed in Drenthe, a rural area in the Northeast of the Netherlands, where the Society of Benevolence opened Frederiksoord, its first trial colony, in 1818.[2] For Arneil, agricultural labor is a defining principle of domestic colonization that is often overlooked, obscuring "that colonization could be characterized as non-punitive, agrarian and domestic in form rather than as exclusively carceral, punitive and external."[3] Colonization and the countryside are indeed joined at the hip, and not just in domestic cases. As Raymond Williams has argued, imperialism is one of the "latest models of 'city and country'" in which, in the case of industrial Britain, "distant lands became the [new] rural areas" feeding the "home" country.[4] However, as Ann Stoler points out, the pedagogic, non-punitive aspects of agricultural colonial labor cannot be regarded as separate from the "programs and practices of incarceration" by which they were "continually 'contaminated.'"[5]

Arneil's insistence on the link between agriculture and colonization is extremely relevant in this matrix of pedagogy and punishment, especially in the case of the Colonies of Benevolence. As the following close reading of visual renditions of Frederiksoord makes clear, the consideration of the role of agrarian aspects in colonial imaginaries should, in fact, be extended to include the symbolic and ideological effects of colonization's reliance on the rural idyll. Without taking account of the rural idyll, I argue, the Colonies' dreams of social order – which persisted much longer than the Society's continuous financial floundering[6] would lead one to expect – cannot be properly understood. I will show how the rural idyll and these nineteenth-century dreams of social control together formed what I call a carceral idyll. In this carceral idyll, rural

order equals “good” discipline, and the exile of thousands of vagrants and orphans to the countryside – amounting to the largest internal migration in Dutch history[7] – is posited as picturesque.

Carceral Idylls

What most idylls – whether carceral, rural, pastoral or provincial – have in common is that they revolve around a restorative desire for a “unitary, cyclical, pre-capitalist form of folkloric time that binds a small community to a fixed, familiar, isolated place where its members follow in the footsteps of their ancestors”[8] and these members collectively work for the benefit of the common good.[9] Carceral idylls, I argue, tie this restorative desire to the correction of a normative life gone astray. This results in a cyclically imagined *return* to normalcy, in which the process of repair is also inflected with ideas of linear progress. On the one hand, carceral idylls thus lean on the collectively and ancestrally rooted subject that Mikhail Bakhtin poses as central to many forms of the idyll. On the other hand, they endorse the subject produced by Foucauldian discipline, in which an individual is supposed to improve over time. This Foucauldian subject is singled out in comparison to normative others in order to be relegated to the realm of the excluded – a double technique of “binasry division and branding (mad/sane; dangerous/harmless; normal/abnormal)” that opens the route to the exercise of “the universality of disciplinary controls” on the branded subject in an individual way.[10]

Carceral idylls are idylls precisely because they focus on the isolation of the subject to a place where time works differently, a “stillness” or “ekstasis” that is deemed necessary to achieve linear progression *and* restoration to “normalcy.” Carceral idylls involve experiences, scenes, and incidents of incarceration that can never last, yet persist in idealized forms. Although often associated with criminalized others and the narratives of rehabilitation and moral redemption that come with notions of imprisonment, such carceral idylls are not limited to criminals or the penitentiary.[11] Many cultural expressions, such as *Prison Break* or *Orange is the New Black*, depict socially privileged groups that are not likely to come into contact with incarceration and focus on scenes of escape into exceptional individuation. These scenes should be read as a whitewashing of the more sinister “dreams of order”[12] associated with the disciplinary response to fears of confusion and contagion theorized by Foucault. This whitewashing is also present in carceral idylls that feature the idealization of the prison cell as a place of refuge and monastic contemplation;[13] the exoticization and idealized representation of criminals and prison environments;[14] and the notion that imprisonment can be humane, as long as the prison is “properly” designed

and organized.[15] In many of these cases, the carceral idyll obscures the fact that it (re)creates the very subjects it seeks to cleanse, and enforces differentiations between mad and sane, dangerous and harmless, and normal and abnormal people.

In the Colonies of Benevolence, the carceral idyll manifests through a mix of the Society's dreams of control and progress through social engineering on the one hand, and its mobilization of the rural idyll on the other. In its idyllic view, placing groups of stigmatized people in an isolated and controlled setting where they perform agricultural labor and spend time "outdoors" is considered inherently redemptive of both people and land (see Bosma and Valdés Olmos, this cluster), while the charitable members who pay contribution to the Society[16] are helping to uplift the Dutch economy and its poor population. The ways in which the carceral idyll entwines dreams of order, and its attendant desire for progress and rehabilitation, with the rural idyll is clearly visible in the materials used to promote the concept of the Colonies.

Greetings from Frederiksoord

Mandenmakerij
FREDERIKSOORD
Hoeve Prinses Marianne
Arbeiderswoning
Rustoord
Stoomwijk Frederiksoord
Logement
Kapburg en Logement
G.A.v.S. Landbouwschool
Plattegrond
VAN DE MAATSCHAPPIJ VAN WELDADIGHEID
G.A.v.S. Boschbouwschool
G.A.v.S. Tuinbouwschool

Figure 1: Poster with a map of the free Colonies in the Netherlands, by Tresling and Co, made between 1875 and 1899 for promotional purposes. Circle added by author. © Koloniën van Weldadigheid – Maatschappij van Weldadigheid.

This promotional map centralizes the spatial organization of the Colonies in the vicinity of Frederiksoord. It includes different neighborhoods of the "free" colonies of Willemsoord, Westvierdeparten, Wilhelminaoord, Oostvierdeparten and Boschoord (colony VII on the map), but conveniently leaves out the two so-called "unfree" colonies: De Ommerschans and Veenhuizen. These penal colonies were erected in 1819 and 1823 respectively to house vagrants, beggars and cumbersome colonists. Without the penal colonies, the map appears as highly idyllic, resembling a tourist postcard that could have read "Greetings from Frederiksoord."[17] The map has a "villagey" feel that relies on the rural idyll's treatment of the village as "a safe, sedate, simple little world offering happiness and comfort."[18]

Visitors to the Colonies were not uncommon and the map communicates its potential as an attractive destination by depicting the Colonies' traveler's accommodation in the top right corner. Overall, the idyllic setting is emphasized by the soft lines of the sketched landmarks, the decorative use of flowers, and the depiction of the small drawbridge near its *logement* (lodgings). The Colonies' goal of moral uplift through labor, sustenance, housing, and education is also made part of the idyllic encasing.[19] The map foregrounds education by depicting its three schools (of Forestry, Agriculture, and Horticulture) and highlights the Society's investment in innovation, connectivity, and progress by showing off the horse-drawn tram between Steenwijk and Frederiksoord.[20] The inclusion of an image of Rustoord, a retirement home for colonists and the Netherland's first fully-funded old people's home, also testifies to the Society's idealistic intentions.

The Colonies' industriousness is emphasized by including the basketry and featuring three farms, referencing its agricultural basis. One of these images – circled in figure 1 – jumps out visually because it is placed at an odd angle, making it more difficult to read than the others. Here is the photograph on which the drawing is based:

Figure 2: Colonists in front of their *arbeiderswoning* (laborer's house) in Frederiksoord. Undated. © Koloniën van Weldadigheid – Maatschappij van Weldadigheid.

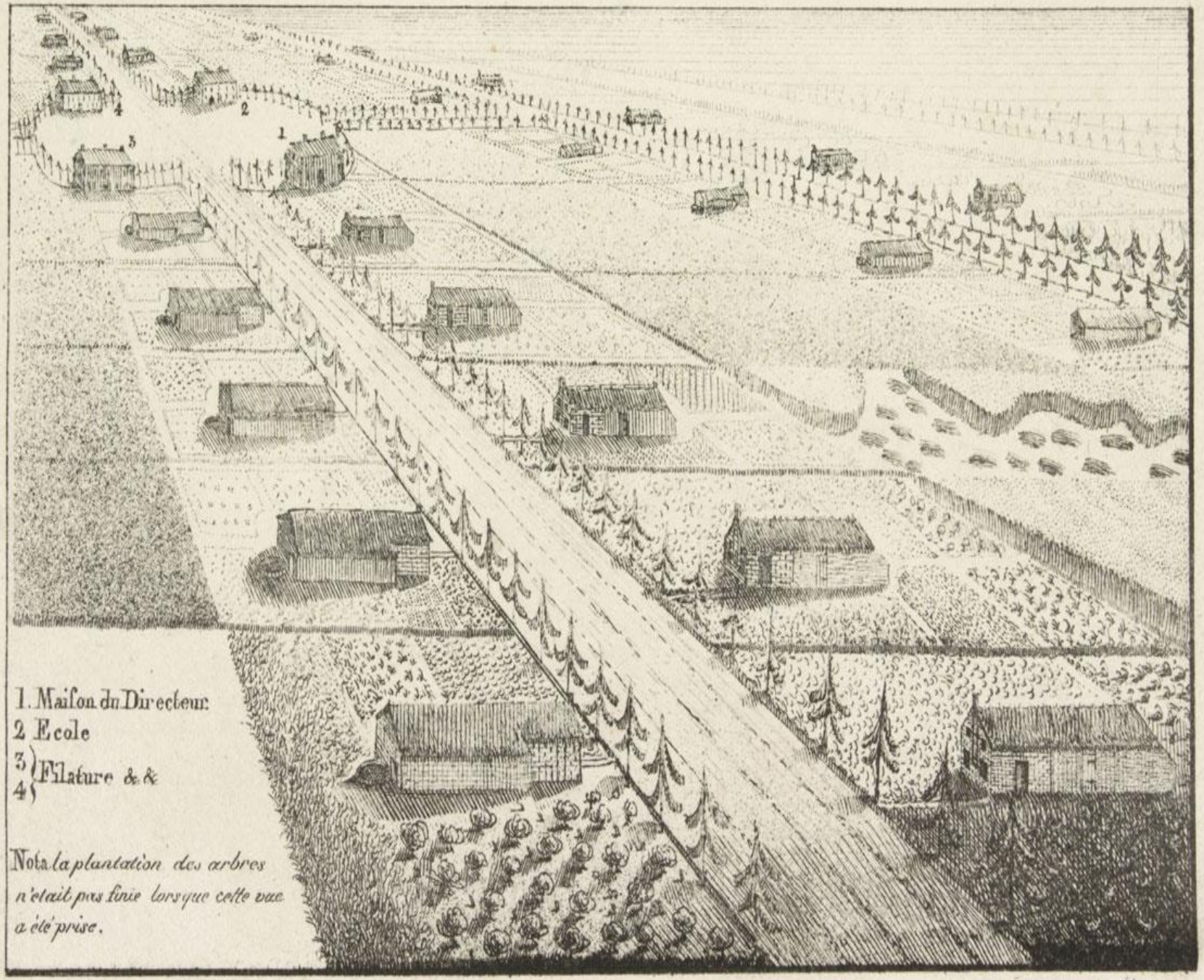
This photograph, although peripheral and tilted on the map, depicts the intended core of the Colonies' internal economy. It shows a standard-issue farm for colonists. The farm, its inventory, the colonists' clothes, one or two cows and some sheep, were all provided by the Society on loan. In exchange, the Society withheld part of the salaries colonists earned during the collective labor they performed on the fields and in the factories for four or five days a week.[21] The rest of the week, the colonists worked their own plot of land around their small farm, with the harvest going directly to the Society for the alleviation of the colonists' debts.[22] Each farm was inhabited by a family consisting of two parents and their children to work the land (the boys) or the weaving mill (the girls). Retired colonists were expected to move out, and if one of the parents was widowed and did not find a new spouse, or if a family did not have enough children to ensure the upkeep of the farm, they would be supplemented with single young adults or orphans selected by the Society of Benevolence.[23] In this way, the Colonies aimed to be self-sustaining and even profitable within sixteen years of their inception.[24] However, when harvests were disappointing and most colonists failed to cover their debts, the Colonies increasingly moved towards a punitive system.[25]

The photograph privileges the *idea* of the farm rather than its actual workings, just as it is about the *idea* of the people it depicts rather than about who they actually are. The image has been archived without a date, exact location or names, and the three colonists are clearly posing for the camera. The man with the pipe on the left is placed in the midst of the foliage he is supposed to tend to and spectrally fades into it. The figures on the right more readily draw our gaze due to their striking white clothing, but they, too, are awkwardly placed. The man in the middle, whose expression is concealed by his hat, stiffly holds a spade that idly hovers in the air. He is not standing anywhere near soil that needs to be turned over or dug out. The woman on the right, who seems liveliest because of her visible smile, functions as a token of the fact that all is as it should be on this family farm. These people, in their collective role of performing agricultural labor, are props belonging to the timeless idyll of the small-scale, self-sustaining farm – an idyll that sits awkwardly with the emphasis on the technological innovation the Society deemed necessary from the outset for the production of cash crops for the national market.[26] In this sense, the photograph stages a myth of the "tradition of 'self-help' in rural communities," where people take care of themselves and each other without external interference.[27] It evokes Bakhtin's idyllic chronotope in "the positively valued image of 'primitive man' existing 'in the collective consuming of the fruits of his labor and in the collective task of fostering the growth and renewal of the social whole.'"[28] However, the head of this family is not, as J.M.

Coetzee argues of the colonial pastoral in South Africa, a “benign patriarch” [29] ruling his own little kingdom, but a serf in the “closed corporate village” of the carceral idyll.[30]

Cells and Walls; Farms and Trees

1



a Bruxelles

Figure 3: View of Frederiksoord Colony, print from ca. 1819-1821. In Johannes van den Bosch, *De la Colonie de Frederiks-oord et de ses Moyens de Subvenir aux Besoins de l'Indigence par le Défrichement des Terres Vagues et Incultes*, trans. Charles Louis Guillaume Josephe de Keverberg (Gent: Houdin, 1821). © Koloniën van Weldadigheid – Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.

In the print above, depicting Frederiksoord in its inception phase, rows of farms stretch and fade into the distance. The print suggests two ideas at once: Frederiksoord is supposed to resemble a village that holds the promise of "tightknit, homogeneous communities" of self-sustaining farmers, but the farms on which individuals are supposed to thrive are ordered disciplinarily along perpendicular lanes that explicitly facilitate surveillance.[31] Despite its lack of walls, Frederiksoord is laced with a carceral dimension as it echoes Jeremy Bentham's principles of social engineering through spatial organization, and closely resembles the penitentiaries from which it tried to distance itself so emphatically.[32]

There are also differences, however. The famous panoptic tower, or any analogous center from which the principle of discipline can be initiated and maintained through a structural (if often unoccupied) center of vision, is presented peripherally: a center resembling a town square, with the director's house, the school, and two *filatures*, occupies a corner of the print. According to the *Cambridge French-English Dictionary*, the word *filature* refers to a spinning mill or a factory in general, but it can also denote surveillance in the form of shadowing someone. Indeed, even though the seat of power and industry seems placed on the fringes, the print reinforces a centralized bird's eye perspective with unavoidable panoptic overtones. In this view, the four buildings on the square are uniform and require the legend on the bottom left to communicate their purpose to the viewer. No such explanation is necessary, however, for the farms, which are apparently self-evident. The "cells" of farms in the foreground are rendered in detail, each of them producing a different crop, reflecting the carceral idyll's reliance on the continuous shuttling movement between branding excluded subjects as a group, and singling them out for individual discipline. In this way, surveillance is visually downplayed and agricultural elements seemingly dominate the scene – a tension that drives home how rural idylls and dreams of order converge into a carceral idyll in the Colonies.

Crucially, the legend emphatically mentions that the planting of trees in Frederiksoord was under way by the time the print was made, suggesting that the colony would not really be complete without them. Once planted, they would provide Frederiksoord with a rustic lushness in line with the demands of the rural idyll. This lushness is deeply colonial because the trees also set apart the Colonies' fields as enclosed plots of land that require industrious labor to reach their full potential (see Ng, this cluster). As the trees grow, they will function as walls that make the farms less visible from the road. On the one hand, they isolate everyday life in the "cell" of the individual farm and thereby reinforce the ideological

construction of these farms as mythical locales of familial and morally upright self-sustenance. On the other hand, as walls, they also keep the inhabitants of the farm in place. The people on the farm cannot see when they will be visited by the clergy or by management, which underlines the panoptic carcerality evidenced by the bird's eye perspective in the print. In this sense, the trees function as cyphers for the rurally inflected carceral idyll that I have also tried to make visible in the images analyzed above. To my mind, this conjunction of the rural idyll with dreams of panoptic order explains how the carceral structure of exiling the poor to the countryside so that they can be molded into disciplinary subjects by the Society of Benevolence, is neglected, even when looking back on this period today. Instead, the Colonies are often presented as rural retreats in which the uncomfortable structures of oppression and suffering that characterize the entanglement of domestic and external colonization are thrown over the fence of history, as if such legacies could safely be relegated to the past.

Notes

- 1This publication emerged from the project 'Imagining the Rural in a Globalizing World' (RURALIMAGINATIONS, 2018–2023). This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program (grant agreement No 772436).

- 2Barbara Arneil, *Domestic Colonies: The Turn Inward to Colony* (Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 2017), 160.
- 3Arneil, *Domestic Colonies*, 160.
- 4Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, [1973] 1975), 279-280.
- 5Ann Stoler, "On Archival Labor. Recrafting Colonial History," *Diálogo Andino* 46 (2015): 153-165. See also Kodwo Eshun, "'The Colony is a Prison:' Richard Wright's Political Diagnostics on the 'Redemption of Africa' in the Gold Coast," 16 December 2017.
- 6*The Colonies of Benevolence: An Exceptional Experiment*, ed. Kathleen De Clercq, Marja Van den Broek, Marcel-Armand Van Nieuwpoort and Fleur Albers (Assen: Royal Van Gorcum Publishers, 2018), 33.
- 7Wil Schackmann, *De Strafkolonie. Verzedelijken en Beschaven in de Koloniën van Weldadigheid, 1818-1859* (Amsterdam: Atlas Contact, 2018), 28.
- 8Esther Peeren, "Villages Gone Wild: Death by Rural Idyll in *The Casual Vacancy* and *Glue*," in *Rurality Re-Imagined: Villagers, Farmers, Wanderers, Wild Things*, ed. Ben Stringer (Novato: Applied Research and Design Publishing, 2018), 66.
- 9Mikhail Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press: 1982), 211.
- 10Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, [1977] 1995), 199.

- 11John Bender, *Imagining the Penitentiary: Fiction and the Architecture of Mind in Eighteenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 202-203; Jennifer Turner, *The Prison Boundary: Between Society and Carceral Space* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016), 8-9.
- 12I take this phrase from Michael Welch's *Escape to Prison: Penal Tourism and the Pull of Punishment* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), 53. Welch who takes it from Michelle Brown. The meaning comes from Foucault's rendition of the relation between the plague as model and the political dream of order it evokes.
- 13Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 141, 143; Monika Fludernik, "Metaphoric (Im)prison(ment) and the Constitution of a Carceral Imaginary," *Anglia. Journal of English Philology* 123.1 (2005): 1-24, here 10; Monika Fludernik, "Carceral Topography: Spatiality, Liminality and Corporality in the Literary Prison," *Textual Practice* 13.1 (1999): 43-77, here 51; Hanneke Stuit, "Carceral Projections: The Lure of the Cell and the Heterotopia of Play in *Prison Escape*," in *The Prison Cell: Embodied and Everyday Spaces of Incarceration*, ed. Victoria Knight and Jennifer Turner (London: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).
- 14Fludernik, "Carceral Imaginary," 21; see also Hanneke Stuit, "The Prison as Playground: Global Scripts and Heterotopic Vertigo in *Prison Escape*," in *Interrupting Globalisation: Heterotopia in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Simon Ferdinand, Irina Souch and Daan Wesselman (New York: Routledge, forthcoming).
- 15Vox, "How Norway Designed a Better Prison Design," 12 December 2019.
- 16Schackmann, *De Strafkolonie*, 13.
- 17Postcards of this kind were eventually produced, like this example from the 1980s.
- 18Peeren, "Villages Gone Wild," 70.
- 19Schackmann, *De Strafkolonie*, 13.
- 20The horse-drawn tram was first introduced in the Netherlands in The Hague in 1864, and in the province of Drenthe in 1885 (Groningen-Zuid-Laren). The fact that the Colonies had a tram stop suggests they were well connected to the rest of the province. The horse-drawn tram connecting Steenwijk and Frederiksoord was superseded by a steam-powered tram in 1914.
- 21*Colonies of Benevolence*, 30; Schackmann, *De Strafkolonie*, 14.
- 22Schackmann, *De Strafkolonie*, 14.
- 23Schackmann, *De Strafkolonie*, 74.
- 24Schackmann, *De Strafkolonie*, 15.
- 25*Colonies of Benevolence*, 49.
- 26Albert Schrauwers, "The 'Benevolent' Colonies of Johannes van den Bosch: Continuities in the Administration of Poverty in the Netherlands and Indonesia," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 43.2 (2001): 298-328, here 316.
- 27Michael Woods, "Redefining the 'Rural Question': The New 'Politics of the Rural' and Social Policy," *Social Policy & Administration* 40.6 (2006): 579-595, here 582; Jo Little and Patricia Austin, "Women and the Rural Idyll," *Journal of Rural Studies* 12.2 (1996): 101-111, here 102.

- 28Esther Peeren, “The Affective Economies and Political Force of Rural Wilderness,” *Landscape Research* 44.7 (2019): 1-12, here 8.
- 29J.M. Coetzee, *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987), 6.
- 30Schrauwers, “The ‘Benevolent’ Colonies,” 323.
- 31Peeren, “Villages Gone Wild,” 64.
- 32*Colonies of Benevolence*, 23, 30 and 40.