

Article

Art, Affect, and Enslavement: The Song of the Oxcart in Colonial Dutch Brazil

Angela Vanhaelen

Department of Art History and Communication Studies, McGill University, Montreal, QC H3A 0G5, Canada; angela.vanhaelen@mcgill.ca

Abstract: Focusing on a single artwork, Frans Post's painting called *The Oxen Cart* of 1638, this article explores what Édouard Glissant calls the emotional apartheid of the plantation system. It argues that the affective evasion of Post's painting fosters anti-Black racism by denying the full humanity of captive peoples. The painting is read together with Caspar Barlaeus's contemporary apologia for the leadership of Maurits of Nassau, who was the governor-general of Dutch Brazil and Post's patron. Focusing on classical and Neostoic understandings of governance and enslavement, the article turns to Paul Alpers's analysis of the pastoral mode as an art of evasion that justifies the exploitation of rural labourers. It concludes by taking up Saidiya Hartman's concept of critical fabulation to consider the oppositional views and counter-narratives expressed in the music-making traditions of enslaved people.

Keywords: art and affect; Black lives; history of slavery; Brazil; colonialism; pastoral landscape; plantations

1. Introduction

Frans Post's *The Oxen Cart*¹ of 1638 is a pastoral scene of life in enslavement. On a road that runs through a green river valley, a group of people are shown transporting goods by wagon. The driver of the oxcart leans back, bracing his legs for balance as he uses both hands to hold a flute to his lips. Another figure walks ahead, carrying a long stick to guide the oxen. A third figure, visible only as a dark silhouette in a wide-brimmed hat, also holds a stick and follows the cart. Creating a mood of peaceful enjoyment, the painting conveys a sense of harmonious responsiveness between people, animals, and the land. Early modern art theorists characterized Dutch landscape painters in a manner that could be applied to Post and his work: "they paint with a view to external exactness of such things as may cheer you and of which you cannot speak ill . . . the green grass of the fields, the shadow of trees and rivers and bridges, which they call landscapes, with many figures on this side and many figures on that" (Francisco de Holanda, translated and cited in Sutton 1987, p. 8). Viewing a landscape painting was described as analogous to taking a virtual walk through the countryside, affording beholders a visual space of relaxation (Schama 1987, p. 72.; Gaudio 2019, p. 46). The well-educated Post undoubtedly was familiar with theoretical assertions that the main purpose of landscape scenes was to create a recreational and restorative experience—immersion in an illusory world that released viewers from their real-world troubles and toils.

Indeed, scholars have described how *The Oxen Cart* offers "a near-idyllic vision of [B]lack people's lives, in a relaxed scene where they appear to be unconcerned, and thus almost free and independent" (Lago and Lago 2007, p. 92). This scene is one of the first paintings done by the artist after his 1637 arrival in Dutch-occupied Brazil, where he worked in the service of the governor-general, Johan Maurits, Count of Nassau-Siegen. The count brought Post to Brazil to serve as a visual chronicler of the sugar-growing region of Pernambuco along the northeastern coast, an area that the Dutch West India Company



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(WIC) had captured from the Portuguese in 1630. As Post took up his assignment, he must have grappled with the challenge of representing the enslaved peoples who were so integral to this place. By the time the artist began working on *The Oxen Cart*, he undoubtedly had encountered the atrocities of the plantation system and thus was confronted with a choice: to bear witness to the horrors or to devise some pictorial means of avoidance. Idyllic and pastoral landscape traditions, I argue, provided the artist with a means to develop an art of affective evasion. The illusory green world that Post created deliberately blocks emotional responses to the terror-centric institution of slavery. The current title of the painting, which focuses on the oxen and the cart, perpetuates this evasion as it fails to recognize the Black persons who are the main subjects of the painting.² Conveying a mood of relaxed enjoyment, *The Oxen Cart* promotes the perspective of its patron, who preferred to look at enslaved experience through a pastoral lens. This kind of remoteness from reality, as Hannah Arendt asserts, “can wreak more havoc than all the evil instincts taken together” (Arendt 2006, p. 288).

While much has been written about *The Oxen Cart* in relation to patronage, collecting, and the artist’s oeuvre and stylistic development, in what follows, I employ methods indebted to Black Studies scholarship, which challenge traditional art historical frameworks of understanding (Lyon and Fowler 2022). This paper proposes an alternate approach that recognizes *The Oxen Cart* as significant visual evidence of the historical importance of Black people’s lived experiences in seventeenth-century Dutch-occupied Brazil.

2. The Odium of *Otium*

The Oxen Cart was originally displayed in Johan Maurits’s princely palaces in the Dutch colonial capital of Recife, which was renamed Mauritsstad after the count. The governor-general had two mansions built for himself, mainly constructed with the labour of people who were enslaved by the WIC. These luxury properties, called Boa Vista (Beautiful View) and Vrijburg (Freedom Mountain), contributed directly to the count’s downfall. He was dismissed from the governor-generalship by the WIC in 1644, in part because of his excessive spending on a lavish courtly lifestyle and palatial dwellings. Justification of these extravagant estates appears in a book written by the Amsterdam professor Caspar van Baerle (whose scholarly Latin name was Barlaeus). Barlaeus was commissioned by Johan Maurits to write a long panegyric to the count’s brief reign, titled *History of Brazil under the Governorship of Count Johan Maurits of Nassau, 1636–1644*. Published in Latin in 1647, Barlaeus’ book is illustrated with several engravings based on works by Post. As Pedro and Bia Corrêa do Lago convincingly argue in their catalogue raisonné of the artist, the printed illustration of the village and sugar mills of Serinhaém in Barlaeus’s book adapts elements from Post’s painting of *The Oxen Cart*.³ Barlaeus and Post worked for the same patron and their representations of Dutch Brazil illustrate and legitimate the governor-general’s view of the colony.

Drawing on classical theories of *otium*, which validate the necessity of upper-class leisure, Barlaeus writes in a defensive tone that conveys the count’s displeasure at his humiliating dismissal: “Men in high position who stand out above the common herd because of their illustrious lineage or their dignity are often denied any form of leisure or pleasant pastime by those who envy them. This unreasonable attitude is true particularly when it is a dignitary’s pleasure to acquire an imposing mansion, seek the beauties of a garden with trees and herbs, or the many delights of paintings”. The mention of paintings is noteworthy, implying that the pleasures of Post’s paintings contributed to the pastoral green worlds that Johan Maurits had constructed in support of his elevated lifestyle “above the common herd”.⁴ *Otium* is the prerogative of ruling-class people, who can exercise control over their free time, and have the resources to create rural retreats for themselves. Barlaeus writes that as Johan Maurits enjoyed “the attractions of a quiet life” (*otium*) at his villa and gardens, the governor-general “relaxed and looked at what he had built”, rejoicing in his good fortune. From his green refuge, “he studied the dark features of . . . [those] who passed by and looked with interest. . . . Here he saw Corydon and Phyllida

with flat noses, thick lips, . . . leading a herd of cattle unlike those seen in Europe” (van Baerle 2011, p. 148). In other words, the count saw the people that were brutally enslaved under his governorship as racialized versions of the happy shepherds and shepherdesses of European pastoral tradition. *The Oxen Cart* illustrates this view. The main subject of Post’s fictive scene of *otium*, therefore, is not the freedom and independence of enslaved peoples, which is a discordant paradox, but the freedom and sovereignty of the count.

The underlying derogatory assumption of the pastoral mode, as Paul Alpers has shown, is that “you can say everything about complex people by a complete consideration of simple people” (Alpers 1996, p. 24). Arthur Wheelock and Jacob de Groot likewise note that Dutch pastoral paintings adapted arcadian ideals about happy shepherds and shepherdesses from Greco-Roman antiquity to represent the prosperity of the land for ruling elites (Wheelock and Groot 2001, esp. 18–23). Classical authors advocated that the leisure of sophisticated elites was well deserved, freeing time for their intellectual and political pursuits. The Roman historian Sallust, for instance, urged male citizens not to “carry on a life obsessed by farming and hunting, tasks that belong to slaves” (cited in Gibson 2000, p. 138). Scorning this mode of existence, the educated property owner should not work the land, like “simple people”, but work with his mind. Retreating to the countryside afforded him time to study books, art, poetry, nature, and good governance.⁵ Barlaeus’s description of the count’s pastoral activities follows this classical tradition of *otium*. The professor writes that besides studying the faces of Black persons who passed by his garden, Johan Maurits also studied the stars and the climate; he looked at the species of birds and fish that he ate for dinner; he considered future invasions, battles, and naval manoeuvres; and he thought about the well-being of his people.⁶

Intellectual labour, then as now, is a practice of freedom. Classical authors overtly asserted that the refinement of reason required leisure time to devote to study and contemplation. In order for a small minority of elite men to have free time, others must labour in the household and on the land to ensure the survival of the community (Arendt 1998, pp. 25–28). A defining text is Aristotle’s *Politics*, which claims that “the usefulness of slaves diverges little from that of animals; bodily service for the necessities of life is forthcoming from both” (Aristotle 2013, I:1254b). Assessing this tradition of political thought, Giorgio Agamben notes that the provision of the bare necessities of life is the “hidden foundation on which the entire political system rested” (Agamben 1998, p. 11). The maintenance of bare life, called *zoē*, forms the threshold of the civic community, as it liberates the male property owner to devote himself to political and intellectual pursuits. This classical theory fabricates hierarchies of human value in which those who labour with their bodies are excluded from political life, denigrated as intellectually deficient, and accordingly categorized as less-than-human, or even nonhuman, comparable to animals or tools. Post’s painting promulgates this theory by creating spaces of relaxation from which governing elites could contemplate a sanitized vision of the labours of captive peoples and animals who worked on the land (Vandenbroeck 1987).

The proposed necessity of enslaved labour was central to Johan Maurits’s governorship of Dutch-occupied Brazil. The governor-general repeatedly requested that more African people be shipped from the coast of West Africa to his colony in the service of sugar profits, as evidenced in this unequivocal report:

It is impossible to achieve anything in Brazil without slaves. Without them, the mills cannot crush the cane nor can the fields be tilled. The presence of slaves is essential to Brazil, and in no way can we operate without them: if any man feels offended by this, his is a useless scruple.⁷

Johan Maurits’s most notorious conquests were accomplished by the West India Company military forces that he sent from Brazil to West and Central Africa to seize the Portuguese “slave” trading fortresses of Elmina in 1637 and Luanda in 1641. Tens of thousands of people were forced into enslavement under the governorship of the Count of Nassau-Siegen (Schwartz 2004, pp. 168–70; see also Onnekink and Rommelse 2019, pp. 74–75). The perpetuation of large-scale acts of atrocity should be remembered as the

legacy of Johan Maurits; the artists and scholars that he commissioned worked in collusion as they legitimated this agenda.⁸

In urging WIC directors to import more captive Africans to work in the mills, Johan Maurits hastened to address any affective responses and feelings that might raise moral objections to the institution of slavery: “if any man feels offended by this, his is a useless scruple”. This statement appeals to the classical education of the WIC directors; like all upper-class European men, they would have been well-versed in the theories of Neosticism. A practical philosophical tradition, Neosticism advocated the deployment of reason to overcome passions and attain disciplined self-control. Scholars like the Dutch professor Justus Lipsius counselled that the practice of Neosticism was essential for princes and rulers, who had to govern with impassivity (Lipsius 2004, 2011). Johan Maurits’s pre-emptive dismissal of “useless” feelings and scruples about the institution of slavery demonstrates how a Neostic outlook could be invoked to facilitate indescribable brutality in support of the profits and self-advancement of an elite minority. As Michel Foucault pithily states, the exercise of reason is “closely bound up with the cunning and wickedness of those who have won a temporary victory” (Foucault 2003, p. 55).

Édouard Glissant writes that the institution of slavery attempts to reduce people to things, an operation that requires a “radical separation (that impossible apartheid) presiding over the life of the emotions on the Plantation”. This affective apartheid prevents perpetrators of the colonial system from acknowledging or taking any interest in the inner lives of Black people (Glissant 1997, p. 66). Achille Mbembe likewise notes that unspeakable extremes of violence and the cries of innumerable people in pain “solicited neither the accepting of responsibility nor solicitude nor sympathy and, often, not even pity” (Mbembe 2019, p. 5). In the affective relations of the plantation system, the enslaver’s control over enslaved bodies was buttressed by Neostic mastery of the emotions. Empathy runs counter to the system, which is why feelings are dismissed by the count as “useless”. Any emotive impulse to recognise the personhood of the enslaved was actively repressed in a regime governed by principles of Neostic reason. Emotional responses were perceived as real threats to colonial order, which operated with cold logic to ensure maximum profit.

To promote his colony in Brazil, the dispassionate Johan Maurits claimed that he needed “slaves”, and he also required a court artist to create pacific pictures of plantation slavery. The European pastoral mode was adapted by Post to serve this agenda.⁹ An art of evasion, the pastoral was developed as a means to deny the mistreatment and dispossession of peasants and rural workers by expressing “the pretense that poor, humble, and deprived people are simply free to sing and woo”.¹⁰ Cedric Robinson uses the term “racial capitalism” to designate how systemic anti-Black racism and globalized capitalism were co-emergent and co-constitutive. He traces how racial capitalism developed out of the medieval European economic system, which depended on the exploitation of rural peasant labour (Robinson 2000; Weinbaum 2019, pp. 2–3). The pastoral is a vehicle for this transformation. *The Oxen Cart* adapts longstanding Dutch and Flemish landscape traditions that present scenes of peasant labour and peasant leisure. The so-called ‘lowlife’ genre represented stereotypes and caricatures of peasants, which mocked the deplorable conditions of impoverished rural people whose lives were trivialized for the amusement of urban elites (Knaap 1996, pp. 31–33).

In his astute observations about Dutch art, Roland Barthes remarks how paintings of rural life portray the peasantry as not fully human. He writes: “peasants have abortive, shapeless faces; as if they were unfinished creatures, rough drafts of men, arrested at an earlier stage of human development. . . . As the ape is separated from man, here the peasant is separated from the burgher precisely insofar as he is deprived of the ultimate characteristics of humanity, those of the *person*” (Barthes 1972, p. 8). In Barthes’s assessment, Dutch paintings designate different classes of human beings, as if each social group was a genetic zoological or horticultural species. Only men of the patrician class are represented as human, so that Dutch art presents Man as the “ultra person” (Barthes 1972, pp. 7–9). Barthes’s analysis resonates with the writings of Sylvia Wynter, who argues that although

Man is a particular species of human, it “overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself” (Wynter 2003, p. 259). Notably absent from Barthes’s 1953 essay on Dutch painting, however, is any discussion of racialized categories of the human/nonhuman.¹¹ Following from Wynter and Robinson, we might revisit Barthes’s critical interpretation in order to assess how the pictorial codes used to dehumanize Dutch peasants lent themselves to the adaptation of anti-Black racism, as in the pastoral pictures developed by Post.

Barthes observes how the Dutch peasant’s blob-like face is always denied a gaze: “this privilege is reserved for the patrician or the cow, the Dutch totem animal and national provider” (Barthes 1972, p. 8). Such negation of the gaze is a pictorial strategy to (mis)represent people as objects. Indeed, the faces of the Black people in *The Oxen Cart* are rendered so dark that their facial features and expressions are indiscernible. Repeating the conventions of Dutch peasant scenes, Post employs visual opacity to deprive rural workers of the gaze of personhood and instead designates the brown-and-white ox as the central intermediary figure who looks out of the painting. The long stick held by the foreground figure points at the ox’s eye, directing attention to this focal point. Endowed with the privilege of the gaze, this cow draws beholders into the scene. In his treatise on painting, Leon Battista Alberti recommends that painters include interlocutor figures to generate affective responses: “I like there to be someone in the *historia* who tells the spectator what is going on, and either beckons them with his hand to look, or with ferocious and forbidding glance challenges them not to come near, as if he wished their business to be secret, or points to some danger or remarkable thing in the picture, but his gesture invites you to laugh or weep with them” (Alberti 2005, pp. 77–78; McCall and Roberts 2013, p. 10). Acting as the painting’s main interlocutor, it is the ox in Post’s painting who makes eye contact and tells the viewer what is really going on.

Engaging with this animal intercessor, beholders might notice that the brown-and-white pattern of its coat is repeated in the ox hide that covers the wagon box. In fact, the hides of oxen were lucrative export goods (Boxer 1957, p. 148), and thus does the predictable theme of Dutch prosperity come to the fore. Just as the pattern of the brown-and-white ox is echoed by the skinned hide, the contrasting tones of the black-and-white ox match those of the dark-skinned people clad in scanty white garments. They too were yoked into lethal enforced labour. In Alberti’s terms, the knowing gaze of the interlocutor—in this case, the ox—“points to some danger or remarkable thing in the picture” (Alberti 2005, p. 78). As with the Black people, it is the skin of the ox that visibly designates the commodification of a living being. It is as if this ox can see its own body inevitably slaughtered and reduced to a hide, exposing the treacherous menace of a system that works people and animals to death.

Across the river behind the oxcart are the plantation grounds. The low buildings directly above the head of the cart driver have been identified as the quarters where enslaved people were housed. While the group on the road appears free to wander at will, their leisure is illusory, and the plantation enclosure is a visual reminder of captivity, enforced labour, and surveillance. Also prominent in this composition is the large tree at left. Rendered in detail, it is identifiable as an acácia. Like the enslaved people, this tree possibly originated from West or Central Africa, transplanted into the Brazilian plantation economy. Notably, the tannin-rich bark of the acácia tree was used in the tanning of hides like the one in the oxcart (Lago and Lago 2007, p. 92). Thus, the “danger or remarkable thing” that this picture points to is the fact that all living beings pictured here—humans, animals, trees—are imperilled as they are reduced to their bare economic use value. *The Oxen Cart* is a painting of commodity transport: like the goods conveyed in the groaning wagon, almost everything in this landscape of death was imported and exported for profit. The painting obliquely indicates how every life can be peeled away, flayed, and stripped down to bare life.

Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing have coined the term Plantationocene as an alternative to Anthropocene. While Anthropocene reasserts a man-centred and man-made world, Plantationocene emphasizes egregiously unequal relations of power and profit, and the

world-changing effects of a global capitalist system designed to dehumanize racialized labourers, sparing no empathy as it separates people from their social worlds while laying waste to the earth (Haraway et al. 2016). The principles of the plantation mix together “ecological extraction, racism, colonialism, financial and mercantile capitalism, militarism, and agricultural science into a destructive, cellular form”, which has “metastasized”, in Kris Manjapra’s apt term (Manjapra 2018, p. 363). Following the logic of the plantation, the dynamics of global capitalism create a racialized economic system of dispossession that exploits and obliterates some communities, lands, and peoples for the material benefit of others (Manjapra 2018, p. 365; see also Glissant 1997; Mbembe 2019, pp. 71–72; McKittrick 2013; Dillon 2019, pp. 627–31). This world-annihilation lies just beneath the surface of Post’s pastoral plantation pictures. Haraway and Tsing emphasize that plants and animals as well as people are enslaved in this system. They identify transportation and transplantation as crucial processes that convert humans, plants, and animals into alienated resources that are dispassionately revalued and monetized. Relocation facilitates the extraction of revenue through the conquest and destruction of diverse multispecies ecosystems in distant places (Haraway et al. 2016, pp. 23–25; Tsing 2015, pp. 19–20, 39–40). Displaced lives are easily abstracted by faraway investors who might only see the effects obliquely and unemotionally—as in the pictures of Post.

Post’s painting thus resolves the pictorial and affective challenge of representing the institution of slavery. He uses the familiar device of the bovine interlocutor to indicate the commodity status of the enslaved (humans, animals, and plants) and delivers this harsh truth with another timeworn motif—that of cheerful shepherds and livestock working contentedly in nature. This happy pastoral scene doubles as a landscape of terror; it simultaneously points out and denies the plantation economy (Taussig 1999, p. 68).

Post’s easy pastoral world of music-making in the open air was packaged for the enjoyment of the European elite. Johan Maurits brought *The Oxen Cart* painting back to Europe with him after he was dismissed from his governorship, and, in efforts to find another prestigious position and much-needed financial support for himself, he sent it as a diplomatic gift to King Louis XIV of France in 1679.¹² Today, it is exhibited in the Louvre in Paris (Lago and Lago 2007, pp. 50–67, 90; Lago and Ducos 2005). The artist Post also returned to the Dutch Republic, where he made a living by producing paintings of pastoral Brazilian landscapes and plantation scenes. He marketed these pictures to a clientele of wealthy picture buyers, many of whom had investments in Brazil or other colonies in the Americas.¹³ Ben Schmidt describes Post’s later works as generic “exotiscapes”. They were desirable commodities that catered to pan-European interest in colonizing the fertile lands of the tropical Atlantic region (Schmidt 2014, pp. 257–58). In these works, Post changed his style and took a more distanced view of enslaved people, reducing them to small staffage figures inserted into sweeping panoramic landscapes (see, for example, Frans Post, *Sugar Mill*, 1650/1655 (mid-seventeenth century). Musée du Louvre, Paris)¹⁴. In catering to the possessive colonial gaze of his potential buyers, these works focus more on the land than the people, who are mostly rendered as small decorative elements. This distant view facilitates detached Neostoic observation and complicity with the plantation system. Emotions and “useless scruples” are easier to overcome when not looking too closely at the faces and bodies of enslaved people. The image of the happy peasant/slave has endured as a pernicious myth to justify a socio-economic system enforced by extreme viciousness. Glissant notes that enslavers and colonists “were possessed of a real need to justify the system”, and that landscape was employed as a medium to fantasize this legitimacy (Glissant 1997, p. 70). *The Oxen Cart* serves this need, delivering a jolting image of peaceable contentment with the extermination of life for the pleasures of those who profited.

3. Pastoral Protest

The pastoral mode stretches time, turning an ephemeral instant into an enduring image of contented workers. Life in enslavement in fact afforded almost no time for

recreation or respite. Toiling captives were described as “hardly having time to breathe” (Ferrão and Paulo Monteiro Soares 1997, p. 174; Massing 2011, p. 170), violently forced into routines of unremitting labour, “without a moment of peace or rest” (Father António Vieira, translated and cited in Schwartz 2004, p. 3). Post’s focus on pleasure and enjoyment denies and covers up the brutality of white enslavers. To simply counter the myths of the pastoral genre with an alternate account of inexorable enforced labour, however, does not do justice to the complexities of enslaved experience. Shifting the emphasis to terror and torture reasserts a disempowering historical narrative of unchanging Black oppression and suffering (Hartman 1997, pp. 1–11). In his work on the pastoral mode, Alpers suggests that we reconsider the imagery of happy workers by perceiving it as an expanded moment rather than a record of a complete way of life (Alpers 1996, p. 25). Hard-won instances of self-possession within dispossession characterized the everyday lives of enslaved people. Without losing sight of the gruelling nature of enslaved labour or the impossibility of reconstructing the experiences of the enslaved, we might also recognize transitory practices and moments of stolen time that, in the words of Saidiya Hartman, are “determined by, exploit, and exceed the constraints of domination” (Hartman 1997, p. 54).

In its circumvention of the horrors, Post’s picture focuses on one of the fleeting moments of introspection that can occur in the interstices of enslavement and exceed its constraints. The enslaved man in Post’s scene appears to have seized such a moment, using his time on the road for contemplation and music-making. Notably, the compositional formula of *The Oxen Cart* was never repeated by Post, who instead developed a distant mode of depicting enslaved workers as tiny staffage figures in an expansive landscape. Perhaps the artist abandoned the pictorial approach of *The Oxen Cart* because it inadvertently shows what must not be recognized in enslaving societies: Black people thinking their own inscrutable thoughts. The ability to think, as Aristotle falsely claimed, was lacking in the “slave”. Johan Maurits’s apologist Barlaeus reinterpreted Aristotle’s passages on slavery with malign assertions about Black people’s want of intellect and autonomy, which he declared made them naturally suited to follow the will and command of a white enslaver.¹⁵ I am not arguing that Post intended to counter these racist assertions or that the intended beholders of this painting acknowledged a Black person’s full capacities for creative thinking. I am suggesting that *The Oxen Cart* hints at the existence of alternative modes of being that prevailed among people who used their inventive capacities to defy the dehumanizing conditions of racism.¹⁶ If we shift focus to consider the inner lives of enslaved people, we might glimpse a moment at the edge of visibility that could be seized for ephemeral, obscured, and subversive practices of self-definition. These pilfered moments were risky, fleeting, and unstable, yet they formed the precarious foundations on which people remade devastated lives.

Hartman uses the term “critical fabulation” to describe a method for recounting the histories of the enslaved. Faced with the impossibility of recovering lives that were discarded and disregarded but confronted with the urgency of addressing this rejected history, critical fabulation provides a way to gain a different, albeit incomplete, perspective by attempting “to paint as full a picture of the lives of the captives as possible” in spite of the scarcity and biases of the documentation (Hartman 2008, p. 11). “Fabula” are the basic building blocks of any narrative—actions and events that are caused or experienced by actors. Critical fabulation takes the raw material of a story and reorganizes it to tell tales that evoke and acknowledge repressed and occluded histories (Hartman 2008, pp. 11–12; Nyongó 2019, pp. 5–13).

While critical fabulation was devised as a method for analysing texts, it offers an important corrective to dominant art historical approaches. Svetlana Alpers has influentially assessed seventeenth-century Dutch art as an “art of describing”, which was allied with the new science and is characterized by the meticulous depiction of observed elements. Attention to detail creates a “reality effect”, giving truth value to fictitious and highly selective scenes of everyday life (Alpers 1983). Considering *The Oxen Cart*, we note how the artist’s close observation of the peoples, flora, fauna, land, waters, roads, and buildings

of Dutch Brazil appear as a sort of documentary realism, designed to convince viewers of the objective truth of this contrived vision of the place. However, attentiveness to detail might also offer fabula and a means to rethink the construction of this visual narrative. Post had the privilege of catching glimpses of Black life, which he captured and fixed into an enduring image according to the conventions of Dutch landscape and peasant scenes. While he used descriptive details as building blocks to create the false narrative of “natural slaves”—captives who happily followed the commands of an enslaver—we might instead search his paintings for elements that hint at how enslaved people persistently worked against the will their enslavers.

The slender pipe held by the driver in *The Oxen Cart* could be viewed as such an element. Its barely discernible depiction is the trace of a material artefact crafted by an enslaved maker. Possibly, it was created in the stolen moments required to find and carve a reed, fashioning it into a musical instrument. The cart is another thing made by the enslaved, and it too made music. Ox carts were constructed from the wood of the *sapupira-merim* tree (Rogers 2010, p. 33), and this hardwood was oiled so that the cart creaked and sang with the swaying step of the oxen, its notes sounding with the turning of the axle, which is visible in Post’s painting. This landscape is thus a soundscape.¹⁷ The man pictured is working—it is his job to drive the cart—and he embellishes this task by inventing a tune to accompany the percussive song of the ox cart. The squeal and judder of the cart and the lowing and snorting of the oxen mingle with the piping of the reed, and possibly the singing or humming of the people who walk barefooted along the road.

The flute appears to be a thing that was not produced as a commodity, but as a means to seize a moment of unremitting toil and use that time creatively. Such practices were swiftly co-opted into modes of production, however. As Jon Cruz argues, Black music was always yoked to Black labour. The music-making of enslaved people occurred within a profoundly coercive context. It was integrated by enslavers into the labour process as a means to make the captives work faster. Compulsory music-making also forced labourers to stay within earshot and be constantly audible without talking to each other, which was forbidden in most enslaving societies. As Harriet Tubman recounts, “slaves must not be seen talking together” and Frederick Douglass relates that “slaves were discouraged from talking”.¹⁸ Music was thus implemented by the enslavers as a useful form of recreation: it speeded production, impeded escape, and prevented enslaved workers from conversing or colluding. While the small flute in Post’s painting may not have been produced as a commodity, it nevertheless served to enhance profits.¹⁹

The air played by the driver is thus an inaudible but jarring note that both reinforces and disrupts the dominant theme of Post’s pastoral ode to commodification. Despite being adapted into the production system of the slavery economy, the affective music-making practices of the enslaved also produced defiant Black musical traditions. The piping of the flute and the singing of the ox cart were transient events, but the tunes invented by enslaved people abided as the building blocks that they used to compose a powerful counter-narrative of struggle and protest, which endures in memory and in music. For instance, Jackson do Pandeiro, a 1950s musician from the sugar cane region of northeastern Brazil, composed a song about his grandfather’s “stubborn old ox”. The song memorializes the ox as “a reminder of the time of slavery”, when Black people were treated “the same as the ox”. Recounting this counter-history is of vital importance: “the reminder of this friend hasn’t left my memory; he died and I remained to tell our story” (cited and translated in Rogers 2010, pp. 82–83). Pandeiro’s song is an instance of critical fabulation, a retelling of the truths of enforced labour from the perspective of those who experienced enslavement, passed down in songs and storytelling for generations (Cruz 2001, pp. 63–64). The tune does not romanticize the time of slavery but conveys the reality of dehumanizing labour along with transient moments of understanding that might have occurred between mistreated people and animals who persistently refused to acquiesce to such treatment.

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Notes

- 1 *The Oxen Cart* is the title given the work in the catalogue raisonné by (Lago and Lago 2007, p. 90). In French, the current title is *Le Char à boeuf. Paysage brésilien*: <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010062027> (accessed on 1 January 2024).
- 2 See Note 1 above.
- 3 See the discussion and images in (Lago and Lago 2007, pp. 52–54, 58, 92; van den Boogaart 2011).
- 4 (van Baerle 2011, p. 140): “The magnificence of these buildings creates an impression of power for one’s own citizens, for foreigners, and certainly for one’s enemy.” See also (van den Boogaart et al. 1979). On enslaved labourers at this court, see (Monteiro and Odegard 2020).
- 5 On the relationship between classical theories of *otium* and Dutch landscape traditions, see (Gibson 2000, esp. 130–38).
- 6 (van Baerle 2011, p. 148); on Johan Maurits’s Brazilian gardens, see (Silva and Alcides 2002).
- 7 The 1638 Report of the High and Secret Council, over which Johan Maurits presided, is translated and reproduced in (Schwartz 2010, p. 245).
- 8 Johan Maurits’s legacy is undergoing revision. See (Abaka and Vinde 2019; Monteiro and Odegard 2020; Hochstrasser 2007, pp. 194–98). An artist working in Dutch Brazil who was not directly commissioned by Johan Maurits was Zacharias Wagener, whose amateur sketchbook contains several images of enslaved people that provide a different perspective. See (Ferrão and Paulo Monteiro Soares 1997). I discuss some of Wagener’s images of enslavement in an article currently under review.
- 9 On this artistic tradition, see (Gibson 2000; Wheelock and Groot 2001).
- 10 (Alpers 1996, p. 6). On pictorial traditions of depicting peasants, see (Knaap 1996).
- 11 Perhaps Barthes did not encounter any paintings of Black people, which might not have been on display in the early 1950s, or perhaps the Black figures were un-visible to him.
- 12 After he was discharged by the WIC, the failed governor-general returned to the Netherlands, where he exhibited some of Post’s paintings—representing his former dominion—in his new palace in the Hague. This classical mansion was designed by Frans’s brother Pieter Post. Johan Maurits named it Mauritshuis after himself. Like the count’s Brazilian palaces, this imposing residence also raised the ire of WIC directors, who nicknamed it “The Sugar Palace”, an incisive jibe at Johan Maurits’s propensity to divert the company’s profits for his own self-aggrandisement. (Abaka and Vinde 2019, p. 111; Boxer 1957, p. 113).
- 13 On these later paintings by Post, see (Schmidt 2014; Brienen 2015).
- 14 <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010062009> (accessed on 1 January 2024).
- 15 “It is better if they lead their lives according to the will and command of others rather than their own” (van Baerle 2011, pp. 179–80), likely drawing from Aristotle’s *Politics* (Aristotle 2013, I:1254b).
- 16 Among others, see (Hartman 1997; Weheliye 2014, pp. 1–2; Nyongó 2019, pp. 1–3; McKittrick 2021, pp. 2–7).
- 17 On sound and image, see (Gaudio 2019).
- 18 Cited in (Cruz 2001, p. 52). Many thanks to my colleague Alex Blue V for this reference and for sharing his knowledge of Black musical culture.
- 19 Enslaved people with notable musical abilities were bought and sold at higher prices. (Cruz 2001, pp. 54–61).

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