
Anomalous Alliances: Spinoza and Abolition

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Abstract

What effects are produced in an encounter between what Gilles Deleuze calls Spinoza's 'practical philosophy' and abolition? Closely following Deleuze's account of Spinoza, this essay moves from the reifying and weakening punitive moralism of carceral state thought towards a joyful materialist abolitionist ethic. It starts with the three theses for which, Deleuze argues, Spinoza was denounced in his own lifetime: materialism (devaluation of consciousness), immoralism (devaluation of all values) and atheism (devaluation of the sad passions). From these three, it derives three parallel abolitionist theses: (1) Spinozan materialism undermines the reifications of carceral state thought; (2) Spinozan ethics undermines the punitivism of the carceral state; and (3) Spinozan joy is inversely proportional to the power of the carceral state. While Spinoza's corpus may not give us an adequate account of the complex dynamics of the carceral state and racial capitalism today, this essay argues that in the infinite streams of the *Ethics* we nonetheless find some vital strategies through which we might compose an anomalous alliance between this condemned philosopher and abolition.

Keywords: Spinoza, Deleuze, abolition, state thought, *Ethics*

What follows is not an attempt to show that Spinoza was an abolitionist *avant la lettre*. Nor is it a reconstruction of the philosopher's theory of the state nor of his conception of punishment. Rather, it is an experimental encounter between what Gilles Deleuze calls Spinoza's 'practical philosophy' and abolition.¹

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Abolition here refers to a specific set of theoretical and political practices that actively undermine the hold that police and prisons have on our lives. As long-time abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007: 5) might put it: abolition undermines the carceral state's apparatus of capture 'catch-all solution' to social problems. But it does so by actively producing and reproducing abolitionist geographies beyond the organised violence and organised abandonment of the carceral state.² And we might say, with Spinoza, that the carceral state – its moralisms, laws, judges, prosecutors, police, prisons and so on – have become a 'catch-all solution' to bad encounters, to decompositions, to sad passions.³

Abolition also evokes the long struggle for self-determination and self-preservation of enslaved Africans in the Americas. Abolition therefore also points to the active refusal of chattel slavery's apparatus of capture through the compositions of anomalous alliances, motley crews, crowds, swarms and perhaps even *multitudo*s. Such is the activity of certain runaway slave communities, or maroons. Perhaps, repressed within Spinoza's 'practical philosophy', we might also find such fugitive figures, figures that – now evoking Deleuze's creative citation of the fugitive thought of imprisoned Black Panther George Jackson – are actively fighting even as they flee.⁴ In Spinoza's imagination we find repressed dreams of fugitive freedoms and in the infinite streams of the *Ethics* we encounter an abolitionist current.

In the fifth chapter of Toni Negri's powerful book on Spinoza, *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics* (1999) – a book written in those moments of time stolen from the rhythms of prison time – the incarcerated communist evokes one of Spinoza's dreams. The dream is recorded in letter number 17, dated from 20 July 1664. This is a letter Spinoza sends just before the famous 'Letters on Evil' (letters 18–24 and 27) addressed to 'the very learned and prudent Pieter Balling'. In letter 17, Spinoza writes,

When one morning just at dawn I awoke from a very deep dream, the images which had come to me in the dream were present before my eyes as vividly as if they had been real things, in particular the image of a black, scabby Brazilian [*cujusdam nigri & scabiosi Brasiliiani*] whom I had never seen before. This image disappeared for the most part when, to make a diversion, I fixed my gaze on a book or some other object; but as soon as I again turned my eyes away from such an object while gazing at nothing in particular, the same image of the same Ethiopian kept appearing with the same vividness again and again until it gradually disappeared from sight. (Spinoza 2002: 803)

Spinoza attempts 'to make a diversion'. He struggles to look away from the image of this spectral figure of a Black 'scabby Brazilian' or 'Ethiopian' but this image insists on returning. Negri reads Spinoza's vivid dream, the eruption of this 'black Brazilian/Ethiopian' in Spinoza's imagination, and relates this figure to the 'complex character' of Caliban and thereby to what the communist philosopher calls 'the Caliban problem', namely 'the problem of the liberatory force of the natural imagination' (1999 :86)

James Edward Ford III's essay 'Interrupting the System: Spinoza and Maroon Thought' initially welcomes Negri's affirmation that 'Caliban is our contemporary hero' but then argues that this figure is not adequate to Negri's own hypothesis about the role of the imagination in Spinoza. Rather, Ford suggests, it is the figure of the maroon, not of Caliban, that best 'complements Spinoza's rebellious philosophical practice'. Ford argues that 'the Caliban symbolizes individual acts of the subordinated that remain mired in what Frantz Fanon calls *ressentiment* or what Spinoza called "melancholy"'; in contrast, '[t]he Maroon actively attempts to overcome the *ressentiment*' (Ford 2018: 174). The Maroon actively refuses this weakening passion.

Is what 'returns' in Spinoza's dream not also repeated in Deleuze and Guattari's consistent 'performative citation' of George Jackson? Michelle Koerner (2011) argues that Deleuze's 'encounter with George Jackson' is haunted by a consistent absence. Time and again, Koerner finds, Jackson's name is found alongside some iteration of the aforementioned slogan ('actively fighting even as they flee') but not cited. In another recent critical essay, titled 'Left Out: Notes on Absence, Nothingness and the Black Prisoner Theorist', Taija McDougall (2019) inhabits and thinks from this 'empty space' that George Jackson occupies in Deleuze and Guattari's corpus. McDougall distinctively argues that this absence cannot be a mere oversight – an omission – nor a 'performative gesture'. Rather, thinking within an Afro-pessimist problematic, McDougall argues that this absence – either a conscious or unconscious disavowal – points to a certain affinity with the plantation-prison logic that enforces the 'nothingness that is Black life' (2019: 7). Without eliding this problem, what follows is an experiment – perhaps a risky one – of thinking vital anomalous alliances whose effect is to undermine this plantation-prison logic (its reifications, its moralisms and its sad passions). But the result of this experiment cannot be settled in these pages. The question remains open as to the effects produced by these compositions and anomalous alliances which are perhaps always subject to certain refrains.

Let me return to Spinoza's dream. As Warren Montag argues in *Bodies, Masses, Power: Spinoza and His Contemporaries*, beyond the associations made between Spinoza's image and either the figure of Caliban or the figure of the maroon, he seems to be singularly haunted by his relationship to the 'outcast', the maroon, the *multitudo*. For Montag, Spinoza's singularity, if not his anomaly, is the place that 'the multitude' or 'the masses' – 'that collectivity beyond any law except the law immanent in its actions' – has in his writings (1999: 89). Montag writes:

It is finally not clear whether the rebel slave, the mangy Brazilian/Ethiopian, was an image in Spinoza's dream or whether Spinoza himself, his words and his works, was the dream of a rebel slave, the dream of all those, slaves, labourers, women, at the moment they turned away from servitude and began to fight for liberation. (Montag 1999: 89)

Montag therefore reads these 'outcast' figures immanently. The 'Maroon' or the 'Caliban' are not external figures that come from without to resemble the image in Spinoza's dream, but rather, these figures can be read immanently in Spinoza's very own words and works. For Montag, Spinoza is not so much an anomaly as he is a heretic who dares to think that which haunts away all of his 'contemporaries' such as Hobbes and Locke. That is, Spinoza dares to think 'the absent center of their political projects' (Montag 1999: 89). Spinoza dares to think the 'outcast', the maroon, the *multitudo*. Montag also relates Spinoza's dream to his excommunication – that is, to Spinoza's day of Judgement, to his day of punishment.

One of the elders of the Jewish community who sat in judgement of Spinoza during his excommunication was a man called Isaac Aboab. Aboab was one of Spinoza's teachers who, two years before the philosopher's excommunication, had been the Chief Rabbi of the Dutch colony of Pernambuco, in Brazil. The Chief Rabbi reluctantly left Brazil in 1654 as the Portuguese 'mobilized slaves against their Dutch masters' (Montag 1999: 88). As has been well documented, even before the Portuguese reconquest of the Dutch colony, Pernambuco had been a target of attacks from neighbouring maroon communities. Montag writes that 'Aboab remained in Pernambuco to the bitter end' and provides another characterisation of Spinoza's dream by provocatively asking:

Did Spinoza's dream, ten years later, express the anxiety of a 'projective identification'? Was the image that lingered before him, even after he awoke, the image that the gaze of his judges reflected back to him as they pronounced

his perpetual exclusion from the community, the mangy slave whose rebellion destroyed their authority? (Montag 1999: 88)

Spinoza's dream, that which perhaps haunts him the most, is the possibility of an anomalous alliance with such outcast – an alliance, Montag suggests, which might be read immanently in the philosopher's corpus. It is this, Montag writes: 'What haunts Spinoza, and the conflicts internal to his work attest to this, is precisely his kinship with this outcast, the fact that they are "objective allies" in a common struggle' (1999: 88) – a haunting that, as Ford argues, might also tell us about how 'race informs Spinoza's philosophy' (Ford 2018: 175).

Beyond facile analogies or ruses, it is vital at this point to also recall that many of Spinoza's friends, comrades and teachers were imprisoned and executed. What relation might be traced between these instances of punishment and Spinoza's heresies? As Michael L. Morgan argues, Spinoza's 1657 exile would 'intensify' his relations with radical figures such as Adriaen Koerbagh and Franciscus Van den Enden (Spinoza 2002: 2). Both of them faced their deaths under conditions of punishment.

Adriaen Koerbagh died on 15 October 1669, while imprisoned in Rasphuis. Rasphuis was an Amsterdam jail in which prisoners were subjected to a labour regime which involved shaving wood from the brazilwood tree, otherwise known as Pernambuco wood. In *Discipline and Punish*, referring to the 'great models of punitive imprisonment' Foucault argues that Amsterdam's Rasphuis jail 'more or less inspired all the others' in this early period of reforms (1995: 120). It is likely that Spinoza published the *Theological-Political Treatise* in response to his friend's death (Nadler 2018: 312–14). Similarly, Spinoza's beloved teacher, Franciscus Van den Enden – a radical critic of slavery and someone with whom Spinoza shared many study groups and probably even lived with at a time – was incarcerated in the Bastille, tried, and eventually hanged in Paris in 1674 for fomenting insurrection in Normandy (Israel 2001: 180–4).

As such, there might be a relation – a certain parallelism, or equivalence even – between Spinoza's metaphysics, his practical philosophy and these affections, these instances of punishment. This is how this singular philosopher 'started'. Spinoza started 'from the middle', as it were, of such affections.⁵ What follows is therefore an attempt – following Deleuze's *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* – 'to try to perceive and to understand Spinoza by way of the middle' (1988: 122). Which is to say, not from first principles, but from a common plane of

immanence, ‘from a mode of living, from a way of life’ (ibid.). It is from there that we trace a strong resonance between Spinozism and abolition as well as the political and theoretical practice of ‘transformative justice’.

It is also in *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy* where Deleuze mentions that ‘[n]o philosopher was ever more worthy, but neither was any philosopher more maligned and hated’ (1988: 17). The French philosopher goes on to argue that to ‘grasp the reason’ of this ‘we must start from the practical theses that made Spinozism an object of scandal’. Deleuze writes that these practical theses – theses for which Spinoza was denounced in his own lifetime – ‘imply a triple denunciation: of “consciousness,” of “values,” and of “sad passions”’ (ibid.). These are the reasons, Deleuze argues, for which Spinoza was accused, respectively, of materialism, immoralism and atheism. Moving, as it were, from morality to an ethics, in what follows we will start with these denunciations, these judgements, to then derive, in a parallel fashion, three abolitionist theses. These abolitionist theses are as follows:

Thesis 1: Spinozan materialism undermines the reifications of carceral state thought.

Thesis 2: Spinozan ethics undermines the punitivism of the carceral state.

Thesis 3: Spinozan joy is inversely proportional to the power of the carceral state.

What follows below will develop these abolitionist theses from Deleuze’s own three theses about Spinoza’s excommunication. Let me begin with the first.

I. Spinozan Materialism Undermines the Reifications of Carceral State Thought

Risking oversimplification, we can say that for Spinoza everything that exists – whether it is called infinite substance, ‘God’ or ‘Nature’ – explains itself in relation to itself. There is nothing that is outside of or ‘transcendent’ to Nature and its complex causal nexus. This infinite web of material causal relations, which includes everything from a cell, to the carceral, to the cosmos, is obviously complex but can nonetheless still be understood. As finite beings, humans have access to two ‘attributes’ of this infinite substance: thought and extension (mind and body).⁶

It is in the ‘middle’ of the *Ethics* that Deleuze finds what he calls Spinoza’s ‘new model’ for philosophy, namely, that of the materialism

of ‘the body’. Spinoza’s proposition states that ‘[t]he body cannot determine the mind to thinking, and the mind cannot determine the body to motion, to rest, or to anything else (if there is anything else)’ (Spinoza 1985: 494). This implies that an action or a passion in the mind ‘parallels’ – is ‘equivalent’ with, as Jaquet (2019) suggests – an action or a passion in the body. There is no hierarchy between the mind and the body nor is there a primacy of one over the other. For Deleuze, this is one of Spinoza’s main ‘theoretical theses’ and it goes by the name of ‘parallelism’.⁷

Deleuze goes on to elaborate the ‘practical significance’ of this theoretical thesis. He is concerned with Spinoza’s ‘provocation’. In the Scholium to the aforementioned proposition, Spinoza writes:

Again, no one knows how, or by what means, the mind moves the body, nor how many degrees of motion it can give the body, nor with what speed it can move it. So it follows that when men say that this or that action of the body arises from the mind, which has dominion over the body, they do not know what they are saying, and they do nothing but confess, in fine-sounding words, that they are ignorant of the true cause of that action, and that they do not wonder at it. (Spinoza 1985: 495)

For Deleuze, this ‘declaration of ignorance’ by Spinoza is a direct provocation to those who speak of the ‘dominion’ of the mind over the body and of ‘free will’ and ‘consciousness’ as if they knew what they were saying. Even today – after decades of advancements in artificial intelligence and cognitive science – can it be said that the true causes of the actions of the body and the mind are known?

This ‘declaration of ignorance’ also points to a repressed potential that lies beyond our supposed knowledge of the body and the ‘consciousness’ of the mind. It is through the aforementioned proposition in the *Ethics* that Deleuze argues that Spinoza’s materialism entails ‘a discovery of the unconscious, of an unconscious of thought just as profound as the unknown of the body’ (Deleuze 1988: 19). The ‘practical significance’ of this for Deleuze, then, is as follows: Spinoza’s materialism is an attempt to ‘discover’ in ‘a parallel fashion’ the powers of thought that ‘elude consciousness’ and the powers of the body that ‘elude knowledge’ of the body. In so doing, Spinoza’s provocation displaces all the ‘fine-sounding words’ such as ‘free will’ and ‘consciousness’. Hence Deleuze’s first thesis: ‘A devaluation of consciousness (in favour of thought). Spinoza the materialist’ (Deleuze 1988: 17).

But why is Deleuze's Spinoza so concerned with consciousness? The problem is that the nature of consciousness is to 'register effects' and not causes. Thought far surpasses whatever consciousness can capture as effects. Consciousness can therefore claim nothing about the order of causes. For Spinoza, the 'order of causes' is defined by the composition and decomposition of ideas with other ideas and the composition and decomposition of bodies with other bodies. This order is such that in an encounter between a body with another body or between an idea with another idea these might combine 'to form a powerful whole' or they might decompose by 'destroying the cohesion of its parts' (Deleuze 1988: 17). The complex laws of compositions and decompositions of relations in these encounters are beyond the limits of consciousness. Consciousness merely registers the effects of these compositions or decompositions. For example, consciousness registers the effect of 'joy' or 'sadness' when a body or idea composes or decomposes, respectively, its relations with another body or idea. The thesis of Spinozan joy and the passions will be discussed more thoroughly in what follows. What is important for now is that consciousness condemns thought to what Spinoza calls 'inadequate ideas'.

Deleuze describes Spinoza's concept of inadequate ideas in the following manner: 'the conditions under which we know things and are conscious of ourselves condemn us to have only inadequate ideas, ideas that are confused and mutilated, effects separated from their real causes' (Deleuze 1988: 17). Inadequate ideas, then, are those that separate causes from effects and thereby mutilate the causal relations in the order of compositions and decompositions of bodies and ideas. They mutilate such relations. The problem with valuing consciousness is that it condemns thought to a world of mangled relations.

If we follow Deleuze's point about the 'practical significance' of Spinoza's materialism, then one task is to take on the 'charlatans' that speak of the 'will' and of 'consciousness' and thereby condemn thought to register effects separated from causes. These inadequate ideas parallel those that condemn thought to a fetish – a mutilation of relations and a mangled world cut off from the determinations that constitute what another materialist, Karl Marx, calls the social ensemble.⁸

The concept of fetish, as developed by Marx in the first volume of *Capital* (1990), entails a mechanism whereby the ensemble of social relations is represented as a thing. However, for Marx, the fetish – the social mechanism that transforms relations into objects – cannot be merely overcome in and by thought. The fetish is an objective effect of a

given social formation. In *Difference and Repetition*, Deleuze gives the following account:

according to Marx, fetishism is indeed an absurdity, an illusion of social consciousness, so long as we understand by this not a subjective illusion but an objective or transcendental illusion born out of the conditions of social consciousness in the course of its actualization. (Deleuze 1994: 208)

As Jason Read helpfully points out, what is at stake for Deleuze here is that fetishism for Marx entails ‘a new understanding on the limits of thought’ and not ‘the empirical limits of error, or even the transcendental condition of illusions hard wired into subjectivity, but the socially produced limits that transform relations into objects’ (Read 2009: 82). So, once again, this mechanism of fetishism cannot simply be ‘dispelled’ in thought alone. Rather, it requires a change in social relations. It requires ‘revolution’ (Deleuze 1994: 208).

Here is an iteration of Spinoza’s parallelism: the materiality of social relations of the fetish finds its parallel in a model of thought that represents those relations. This is what Deleuze and Guattari call ‘state thought’. In short, state thought is a mode of the model of consciousness. State thought produces inadequate ideas: representations that reify the ensemble of social relations.⁹ Note that this strongly implies that we are not dealing with some sort of ‘false consciousness’, or a consciousness that is somehow ‘deluding’ itself. Rather, this is an objective illusion constitutive of consciousness as such. It is an effect of a material cause. It is an effect of the complex causal nexus of relations in a given social ensemble.

For Spinoza, this mangled world of inadequate ideas produces a certain anguish, a certain anxiety that must be calmed. ‘How does consciousness calm its anguish?’ Deleuze provocatively asks (1988: 20). Answer: through the aforementioned illusion. Although Deleuze gives an account of three illusions, he ends up reducing these to two (ibid. 20, 60). The two that concern us here are the ‘illusion of final causes’ and ‘the psychological illusion of freedom’. The latter entails ‘considering only effects whose causes it is essentially ignorant of, consciousness can believe itself free, attributing to the mind an imaginary power over the body, although it does not even know what a body can do in terms of the causes that actually move it to act’ (ibid. 60). To illustrate this, let us focus on an instance of state thought – carceral state thought – to then derive yet another ‘practical consequence’ of Spinoza’s materialism in resonance with abolition.

Let me first consider consciousness's 'illusion of freedom'. If we know neither 'what a body can do' nor what a 'mind can do' then how is legal culpability to be established by invoking some sense of 'will' or 'consciousness'? Penal codes necessarily found themselves on some sense of 'consciousness' to determine guilt. Could there ever be a penal code which is able to think? Which is to say, could there ever be a 'code' that does not merely judge by evoking 'fine-sounding words', such as 'will' and 'consciousness', but rather attempts to understand? And by 'understand' Spinoza means something very specific: namely, grasping our missed encounters – violence, harm and so on – through the causal nexus of relations that compose the social ensemble and its determinations. That is, understanding involves opening thought to the materiality concerned with the composition and decompositions of bodies and ideas: the complex causal chain that produces helpful or harmful effects. We begin to sense that Spinoza's materialism undermines carceral state thought's reified legal subject and all the 'fine-sounding words' secreted by its penal code.

In this sense, as Warren Montag has suggested, Spinoza's materialism anticipates Nietzsche's own genealogy of morality (Nietzsche 1998) and undermines the entire tradition of punishment and guilt that goes from the doctrine of original sin to utilitarianism's doctrine of 'incentives' and 'deterrences' (Montag 1999: 37).¹⁰ The society-effect through which subject-individuals are determined by their capacity to be 'free to choose' is a linchpin of contemporary state thought which suppresses the effects of the social ensemble as well as explanations of racial capitalism and the racialised outputs of social death of the carceral machine. A materialist account of such relations devalues such illusion of consciousness whose inadequate ideas confuse effects for causes and transforms relations into things. Here we reach the second illusion: the illusion of final causes.

Let's consider two examples to think these objective illusions. Consider Brett Story's abolitionist materialist documentary film *The Prison in Twelve Landscapes*. This is a film about prison in which the prison – as object, as enclosed site – makes a brief appearance only in the last frames of the film. The prison is the 'absent center' around which the entire film revolves. The prison is a site out of sight and yet everywhere. How does the film account for this immanent causality of the carceral? The film makes the prison sensible in its multiple 'centers': as an archipelago embedded within a vast carceral geography. In each of its twelve landscapes, the film connects the sites of prisons with the broader ensemble of social relations. Through its cartography it works

to subvert the reifications of carceral consciousness. It transforms what objectively appears as an isolated object – a given prison site – into a relation. And it works to reverse what appears as a cause to a mere effect. As the film shows, the carceral boom in the United States – implicitly periodised as a reaction to the urban uprisings in cities such as Detroit in 1967, the shifting dynamics of racial capitalism, as well as the mutation from the ‘welfare state’ to the ‘warfare state’ (Gilmore 2007: 79) – has itself produced the prison as an isolated site.

But the representation of the prison as an isolated site is an inadequate idea of the carceral. Undermining the reifying representations of carceral state thought, *The Prison in Twelve Landscapes* weaves together the many sites of the vast carceral geographies in which prisons dot the territorial tapestry. A certain montage of sounds and images demonstrates the necessary causal links across frames and geographies. Proper names like Detroit, Baltimore and Appalachia situate relations and flows of all sorts – of buses, commodities and human bodies – across vast carceral landscapes. The cause of the carceral everywhere becomes sensible through its effects.

On a street corner of Times Square a crowd of Black women gather to catch a bus to a prison site in upstate New York to visit their loved ones. In a road that cuts through the hills of southern California, a truck full of firefighter-prisoners makes its way to the front lines of forest fires. In some awkward plateaus of Appalachia, hill tops flattened by the coal industry prepare the grounds for the foundations of a federal prison. In air space everywhere, radio-wave packets of electromagnetic energy carry audio messages to loved ones behind prison walls. In streets and highways, commodities flow into the carceral compounds that dot the carceral geography. Brett Story’s abolitionist audio-visual tapestry of the carceral undermines the reifications of carceral state thought by weaving together these instances – connecting cause with effect and devaluing the objective illusions that reproduce carceral society.¹¹

Another example of this constitutive illusion of ‘consciousness’ that Deleuze calls the illusion of final causes is carceral state thought’s representation of ‘crime’ as the cause of the carceral state.¹² As abolitionist geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore writes about in relation to the largest prison state, the ‘Golden gulag’ of California, ‘In its briefest form, the dominant explanation for prison growth goes like this: crime went up; we cracked down; crime came down’ (Gilmore 2007: 17). But Gilmore’s geographical-historical materialist analysis suggests that a more adequate account of the prison boom is as follows: ‘crime went up; crime came down; we cracked down’, and, she continues: ‘If the

order is different, then so are the causes' (Gilmore 2007: 17). Crime is an effect of the carceral state, not its cause. Carceral state thought reverses the order. Attempting to calm its anguish and confusing everything even further, it races ahead and claims itself to be the 'solution' to our missed encounters, which it calls 'crime'.

It is through these objective illusions that carceral state thought functions as a reification machine: confusing cause and effect and mutilating relations through inadequate ideas. But it is also thus that an abolitionist materialism – in resonance with Spinozism – actively undermines these reifications. Hence the first thesis that follows from Spinoza's condemnation as a 'materialist': Spinozan materialism undermines the reifications of carceral state thought.

II. Spinozan Ethics Undermines the Punitivism of the Carceral State

Deleuze's second practical thesis concerns Spinoza's denunciation of values, an immoralism, which is to say, an ethics. 'Spinoza the immoralist' affirms 'A devaluation of all values, and of good and evil in particular in favor of "good" and "bad"' (Deleuze 1988: 22). Therefore, this second thesis follows from the first one: '[t]he illusion of values is indistinguishable from the illusion of consciousness' (ibid. 23). The mangled world of consciousness which judges all but understands nothing attempts to make up for its inadequate ideas through the values of Good and Evil. Unable to explain anything, carceral state thought moralises. Failing to understand, consciousness charges ahead with the moral illusion of the imperative: 'Thou shalt'. Deleuze recalls Spinoza's reading of the Bible's original sin story to exemplify this point.

In the correspondence with Blyenbergh, also known as the 'letters on Evil', Spinoza comments on what the 'ignorant' Adam hears from God: 'Thou shalt not eat the fruit.' In the (human, all too human) voice of God, Adam hears a command. In contrast to this moralist tale which says that God prohibited Adam from eating the fruit, Spinoza emphasises that God did not issue a prohibitive command at all. Rather, God merely 'informed' Adam that the encounter between his body and the body of the fruit will be a 'bad' encounter. That is, it will be an encounter that will decompose Adam's body and its relations. As such, all of that which 'we group under the heading of Evil, illness, and death' are merely 'bad encounters, poisoning, intoxication, relational decomposition' (Deleuze 1988: 22). So devaluing the moralism of Good and Evil does not necessarily devalue the distinction between good and

bad. Herein lies the Spinozan difference between a morality and an ethics.

For Spinoza, the encounter of bodies (ideas), in the order of causes, can be either (1) 'good' by entering into composition with another body (idea) or (2) 'bad' insofar as it decomposes those relations. As mentioned previously, in the order of effects, consciousness experiences joy in the case of the 'good' encounter or sadness in the case of the 'bad' encounter.¹³ As such, consciousness seems content to stay within the order of effects (not causes). Now we find another way through which consciousness calms its anguish: moralising. That is, by misunderstanding what are merely 'bad' encounters and judging them as 'Evil'. Deleuze writes, 'all that one needs in order to moralize is to fail to understand' (Deleuze 1988: 23). And understanding requires grasping things through the order of causes. In contrast, to moralise is to appeal to some transcendent principle. It is a call to obedience that does not provide us with any knowledge at all. 'Law,' Deleuze writes, 'whether moral or social, does not provide us with any knowledge; it makes nothing known' (ibid. 24).

Again we ask: does the current criminal justice system judge or does it understand? Is the intervention of a police officer ever an effort to understand? Does a parole board that demands a prisoner narrate their redemption story in exchange for freedom an attempt to understand? Do prosecutors understand? Today in the United States more than 95 per cent of all cases in court are decided in plea bargains. That is, fewer than 5 per cent of cases go to trial. That is, after waiting for your trial for weeks or months on end (either in jail or in your house, depending on whether you can afford bail or you become indebted to pay for it) you face a prosecutor who offers you what seems like a bargain: plead guilty and save the state the time and money of a trial (in exchange for some time behind bars) or spend the rest of your life in prison. It seems as if life under the carceral state is just one degree of separation from being captured by debt, by prisons, by police. The carceral state understands nothing. It mutilates everything. This is a fatal symptom of that mass punitive apparatus of capture and its 'catch-all' solutions to our bad encounters. Punitivism is a moralism.

But punitivism is not just found in the practice of police, prosecutors, prison guards and politicians. It is not 'out there', nor simply imposed from 'above'. Abolitionist theoretical and political practice of building community safety without relying on police and prisons actively undermines this weakening moralism. In a recently published collection of essays, *Beyond Survival: Strategies and Stories from the*

Transformative Justice Movement (Dixon and Piepzna-Samarasinha 2020), we find a constellation of abolitionist ‘transformative justice’ practices that provide a way of recomposing our decompositions, our bad encounters, our sad passions, without resorting to the disempowering hold of the carceral state and its moralism.

In a powerful essay published in *Beyond Survival* titled ‘Building Community Safety: Practical Steps Toward Liberatory Transformation’, Ejeris Dixon – long-time abolitionist organiser in Black queer and trans communities – provides an account of how ‘bold, small experiments’ of transformative justice and community accountability practices provide ways of addressing harm and violence ‘without relying on police and prisons’ (Dixon 2020: 16–20). This is a practice that for Dixon and her family was always immanent to its community and its power. As with other communities differentially more vulnerable to police violence, calling the cops was not a solution to resolving bad encounters. For Dixon, vital to her transformative justice and community accountability practices is the ‘knowledge’ that ‘instant expertise runs contrary to our liberatory values’. ‘Safety is not a product that we can package and market’, because at stake is ‘our lives’ (Dixon 2020: 21). Safety is here redefined by Dixon as an active transformation of immediate social relations in our proximate communities through practices such as ‘deescalating violence, planning for safety, resolving conflicts, holding community accountability processes, or navigating consent’. As such, Dixon emphasises that ‘[b]y practicing in slow, measurable, and deliberate ways, we build the knowledge we need to diffuse and address conflict in our communities’ (ibid. 21). Abolitionist practice, therefore, entails a careful, cautious –in other words, prudent – production of knowledge. That is, it entails understanding how certain encounters can compose and decompose our relations, and how we can intervene without resorting to the apparatus of capture of the carceral state.

This abolitionist notion of safety stands in stark contrast to the mangled representation of security of the carceral state and thereby involves a compositional power. At stake is the problem and experiment of building ‘trust’. But, Dixon writes, ‘When we make *judgment* into one of our primary organizing strategies, we reduce the *trust* needed to create *safety*.’ Abolitionist understanding therefore goes beyond judgement. Building ‘trust’ implies a devaluing of judgement in favour of understanding. Dixon goes on to recount the following encounter:

One day, while I was working at the Audre Lorde Project, I received an email that deeply upset me. We had recently attended a march organized

by a mother whose gay son had been horrifically murdered. This mother had organized the march to raise awareness about her son's murder and was also passing out flyers that asked people to report information to the police. In response, I received this message from a critic: 'I can't believe that you would support state based responses. Can you tell us about how this is in line with your politics?' I was incensed by the email. While I didn't believe that the state would bring justice in this case, I believe in supporting Black mothers. I particularly believe in supporting Black mothers who are brave, proud and resilient enough to organize against homophobic violence in the face of devastating loss. I do not need to believe in or even dictate what strategies surviving family members should use. *Instead, I find ways to support them that are in line with my politics because I know that just as punishment does not transform behavior, neither does judgment ...* (Dixon 2020: 23–4, my emphasis)

This devaluing of judgement and moralism entails an understanding of the complex chain of causal relations that make up the mother's desperate call, instead of resorting to judging the 'Good' ones and those 'Evil' ones (and their strategies for responding to harm, violence and generational trauma). Dixon continues:

I believe that when people of color and particularly Black people make the choice to call emergency services, it is an inherent negotiation. We come from generations of state violence. Many of us have family members in prison. Most of us have either directly experienced police violence or intimately know people who have. These are not flippant decisions. Yet when we create a *culture of judgment* so thick that we make it impossible for people to admit that when they have called emergency services or needed to, there are critical impacts ... I believe that we can practice transformative justice while simultaneously reducing the harm from the state. Remembering that one of the primary goals of our work is relationship building, we must ask ourselves who wins when we shame survivors for using the options available, when all the options left are violent? ... As a practical step I would suggest examining when and why we use judgment in our conversations with each other and whether we're seeking to educate or support. We can reframe both education and support in nonjudgmental ways. For instance, education can include sharing tools for de-escalating conflict that a person can try to use before calling 911. We can achieve compassion without judgment when we focus on making sure that people feel heard, understood and not isolated. (Dixon 2020: 24)

Abolitionism swerves away from the moralisms of Judgement which, in failing to understand, can merely end up drawing a line between Good and Evil. In contrast, abolitionist ethics is experimental and compositional. As Deleuze writes, 'experimentation' is the 'the contrary

of a Judgment' (Deleuze 1988: 40–1). To moralise is to appeal to some transcendent principle ('Good and Evil') that turns us against life. And when our lives are at stake, abolitionists do not turn to the guns of the state for a vital strategy of survival, and neither do they turn to moralising and isolating those whose strategies of survival still rely on the carceral state. Rather, in actively devaluing the moralism of punitivism that reproduces the reifying sadness of the carceral state in its judgements, abolition turns towards understanding compositions and decompositions (an ethics). Abolition understands that moralising – that punitivism – can do nothing to resolve our problems. Hence, the second thesis: a Spinozan ethics undermines the punitivism of the carceral state.

III. Spinozan Joy Is Inversely Proportional to the Power of the Carceral State

About the third thesis – 'Spinoza the atheist' – Deleuze writes: 'A devaluation of all the "sad passions" (in favor of joy)' (Deleuze 1988: 25). As just demonstrated, a Spinozan devaluation of morality entails an affirmation of ethics. It is an attempt to understand that by devaluating the moralism of 'Good' and 'Evil' all we are left with is the materiality of 'good' or 'bad' encounters. Deleuze finds that in Spinoza's displacement of morality and its transcendent values ('atheism' also involves a devaluation of transcendence) there is also a critique of the sad passions in favour of joy. As such, this thesis (Spinozan joy) follows from the previous thesis (Spinozan immoralism).

In Deleuze's reading of the *Ethics* we find a critique of the sad passions that is derived from Spinoza's theory of the affections. 'An individual,' Deleuze writes, 'is first of all a singular essence, which is to say, a degree of power' (Deleuze 1988: 28).¹⁴ In this sense, an 'individual' is already quite a multitude. Its degree of power corresponds to 'a certain capacity for being affected'. In turn, it is the affections that 'fill' the capacity for being affected. We can distinguish between two sorts of 'affections' in the *Ethics*: actions and passions.¹⁵

Actions are explained in relation to the 'singular essence' in question and are therefore considered to be active affections. In contrast, the passions are always explained in relation to some 'external' body. The passions come, as it were, from 'without' the singular essence in question. As such, they refer to the power of being acted upon and are therefore considered to be passive affections. Spinoza also distinguishes between two kinds of passions: the sad passions which can block or

diminish the singular essence's power of acting, and the joyful passions which can add to or increase the singular essence's power of acting.¹⁶

Deleuze helpfully notes that the joyful passions are nonetheless still a passion (that is, the power of being acted upon) and so while the singular essence being considered is still separated from its power of acting, its power of acting is nonetheless increased. In contrast, it is in the encounters in which the affection is that of a sad passion – bad encounters, decompositions – in which the singular essence is most separated from its power of acting and in which it feels the most impotent. With this, we can conclude that the *Ethics*' theory of affections posits that the power of acting is inversely proportional to the power of being acted upon but that certain passions (joyful ones) can nonetheless increase the power of acting. As such, a political reading of the *Ethics* makes ethics a question of organising our encounters in such a way that our power is increased. Let's agree to call this 'Spinozan joy'. Furthermore, I must add with Deleuze, this sense of 'organising' is always an experiment (without guarantees).

'Spinozan joy' entails a devaluation of the sad passions. It is an active flight-flight from what Deleuze, following Spinoza, refers to as the hold of the tyrant: 'The tyrant needs sad spirits in order to succeed, just as sad spirits need a tyrant in order to be content and to multiply' (Deleuze 1988: 25). As such, the practical consequence of the devaluation of the sad passions is the necessity to actively flee (while fighting) the hold of the tyrant. The tyrant needs the sad passions and exploits them for his own power. Deleuze writes:

Spinoza traces, step by step, the dreadful concatenation of sad passions; first, sadness itself, then hatred, aversion, mockery, fear, despair, *morsus conscientiae*, pity, indignation, envy, humility, repentance, self-abasement, shame, regret, anger, vengeance, cruelty ... His analysis goes so far that even in hatred and security he is able to find that grain of sadness. (Deleuze 1988: 26)

Even in 'hatred' and 'security' there is sadness. For Deleuze's Spinoza, it is by surrendering to the weakening of the sad passions that we turn to the tyrant's 'security' to 'save us'. It is ultimately a deeply saddening morality that disparages and turns us away from our own power, from life. In the sad passions of 'security', Deleuze tells us, 'we can only think of how to keep from dying, and our whole life is a death worship' (ibid.). The carceral state is such a machinery of premature death – the antidote to which are the many practices of 'survival pending abolition', as Ruth

Wilson Gilmore put it in an interview with Rustbelt Abolition Radio (2020).

An abolitionist ethic is not enticed by ‘the magic’ of the carceral state, by its saddening-weakening ‘solutions’ to our bad encounters. Abolitionists, in particular, are not enticed by carceral state thought’s conflation between ‘safety’ and ‘security’. As incarcerated abolitionist thinker Stevie Wilson writes:

As an incarcerated penal abolitionist, I’m often asked by other prisoners: what do we do about murderers and rapists? When this happens, I acknowledge the fears that people convicted of these crimes might harm others, but I ask the questioner what their real concern is. Invariably and resoundingly, it’s safety – for themselves and their loved ones. They don’t want to be harmed. I ask if they believe the present system of policing and imprisonment make them, their families or their communities safer. Again, the answer is no. It’s at this point that I encourage the questioner to think about what they want, safety, and what they often get, security. I remind them that as prisoners, we live in a very secure environment. But security doesn’t mean safety. There are barbed-wired fences, concrete walls, locked doors, cameras, gun towers and officers with riot gear, shock shields, tear gas and metal batons. But are we safe? (Wilson 2019)

Stevie Wilson’s question is a provocation. It is a provocation to the tyrants and its sad subjects: are we safe with the carceral state’s ‘catch-all’ solutions? It is this ‘fatal coupling’ between those who passively affirm the sad passions, those who are always asking for more walls and cages for themselves and for others – and those who exploit them – through which a paradoxical ‘punitive desire’ is constituted. The hold of the tyrant is the hold of the carceral state on our lives. It is the passive affirmation of powerlessness. It is here that Spinoza’s theory of the affections finds a strong resonance with the abolitionist axiom: ‘strong communities make police and prisons obsolete’. Hence, the third thesis: Spinozan joy is inversely proportional to the power of the carceral state.

IV. Abolition Here and Now

Abolition is no utopia. Abolition is an experiment – here and now – that actively undermines the power that prisons and police (and prosecutors, and property, and so forth) have in our lives. It does so not by moralising but by understanding how bad encounters decompose our relations. It is through that active refusal that abolitionist practices respond to harm

by resorting to our immanent power rather than by submitting to the apparatuses of capture of the carceral state. And it is through a broad range of compositional experiments and their revolutionary becoming that abolitionists actively redefine ideas of ‘safety’ and ‘harm’ – forms of ‘survival pending abolition’. Abolitionists provocatively ask: rather than appealing to the moralising punitivism of the carceral state (which does nothing but multiply our bad encounters), why not desire something else for ourselves? Why continue to empower the apparatus of capture that multiplies our bad encounters? Why continue to desire not just fascism for others, but fascism for ourselves?

Abolition is not just a matter of putting police, prosecutors, prison guards and so forth on trial. That is, it is not merely a matter of pitting one morality against another morality. No, this would be but a moral denunciation of a sad militant that finds comfort in their wretched condition of impotence. To continuously succumb to the carceral state as a solution to our bad encounters is to make a virtue out of weakness – to make sadness our only passion. Rather, what is at stake in an abolitionist ethics is the interruption of something as paradoxical as punitive desire. The problem of punitive desire is that of the passive affirmation of sad passions.¹⁷ As such, the abolitionist desire for experimentation with forms of ‘transformative justice’ is a desire that overflows the walls and cages that continuously attempt to contain us. Abolition is the active refusal of the carceral state’s apparatus of capture’s attempt to become the ‘catch-all solution’ to social problems. The ‘catch-all’ solution to bad encounters.

Abolition makes no theological promises of a world of Justice nor of some transcendent ideal world beyond this one in which there will be neither violence nor harm nor pain. There is no such world. ‘Transformative justice’ is here and now. Spinozan materialism invites us to face the materiality of this world: its bodies and ideas and their respective compositions and decompositions. Understanding this entails connecting the order of effects with the order of causes. Furthermore, Spinozan immoralism (Spinozan ethics) wards off moralising judgements from our bad encounters, and instead invites us to actively renounce the saddening passions and the tyrant’s hold. Certainly, Spinoza does not give us an adequate account of the dynamics of racial capitalism and the carceral state today. Nonetheless, in the infinite streams of the *Ethics* we find elements to compose an anomalous alliance between this punished philosopher and abolition. In this sense, Spinoza’s concepts – and the problems which they think – are active and vital today.

Notes

1. This is a revised and expanded iteration of a paper presented at the Third Annual Boston Area Deleuze Conference on October 2019 that was jointly organised by Geoff Pfeifer and Ed McGushin. I would like to thank the organisers for putting together this wonderful conference as well as Samantha Bankston for the invitation. I am particularly grateful for my joyful encounters and conversations with Geoff Pfeifer, Gil Morejón, Eric Aldieri, Ed Kazarian and Samantha Bankston. I also express my gratitude to my abolitionist comrades of Rustbelt Abolition Radio and Michigan Abolition and Prisoner Solidarity as well as the *compas* of *Vitrina Dystópica*, all of whom have potentialised this anomalous alliance between Spinozism and abolition. Lastly, I would like to thank the anonymous referee for their generous engagement with an earlier version of this text and for their thoughtful feedback.
2. Gilmore (2007) provides a geographical-historical materialist analysis that traces the emergence of the carceral state in California as a kind of ‘spatial fix’ to the recurring crises of racial capitalism. More specifically: ‘prisons are partial geographical solutions to political economic crises, organized by the state, which is itself in crisis. Crisis means instability that can be fixed only through radical measures, which include developing new relationships and new or renovated institutions out of what already exists’ (Gilmore 2007: 26). Concerning the concept of ‘abolition geographies’, see Gilmore 2017.
3. In a short text titled ‘H.M.’s letters’ – referring to letters from a gay inmate incarcerated in France who corresponded with the GIP (Groupe d’information sur les prisons) – Deleuze provocatively asks: ‘for whom and for which problem is prison a “solution”? A precise system comprised of police officers, criminal records, and parole officers lowers the chances of escaping a first conviction; these young people are destined to return to prison almost as soon as they leave. One conviction after another gets them labeled “hardened criminals”’ (Deleuze 2004: 244). For more on Deleuze’s involvement with the GIP, see Toscano 2013 and references therein.
4. ‘To leave, to escape, is to trace a line ... But to flee is not to renounce action: nothing is more active than a flight. It is the opposite of the imaginary. It is also to put to flight – not necessarily others, but to put something to flight, to put a system to flight as one bursts a tube. George Jackson wrote from prison: “It may be that I am fleeing, but throughout my flight, I am searching for a weapon”’ (Deleuze 1997: 36). And again in *A Thousand Plateaus*, ‘There is nothing more active than a line of flight, among animals or humans. Even History is forced to take that route rather than proceeding by “signifying breaks.” What is escaping in a society at a given moment? It is on lines of flight that new weapons are invented, to be turned against the heavy arms of the State. “I may be running, but I’m looking for a gun as I go” (George Jackson)’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 204). Lastly, Deleuze also evokes George Jackson in a short essay titled ‘H.M.’s letters’ published in *Desert Islands*: ‘Community-flights, where the “community” is defined in opposition to “little hippy societies that do nothing but imitate our fascist society.” Or active flights, in the political sense, like Jackson, where one flees while looking for a weapon, while attacking’ (Deleuze 2004: 245). As shown later on in the introduction to this essay, both Koerner (2011) and McDougall (2019) grapple with the non-citational encounter – or missed encounter – between Deleuze and Jackson. See Jackson 1970, 1990.
5. Spinoza’s singularity, in part, resides in that ‘[w]hile it sometimes happens that a philosopher ends up on trial, rarely does a philosopher begin with an excommunication and an attempt on his life’ (Deleuze 1988: 7).

6. See EIp11 as well as EIIp1 EIIp2. Throughout, the commonly used citation format for the *Ethics* is used – in which the part is given roman capitals followed by the proposition number.
7. Although Deleuze follows a certain tradition in the history of philosophy that names this mind–body relation (or non-relation) ‘parallelism’, recent scholarship suggests that this is misleading, in part because Spinoza never uses such a concept. More specifically, Jaquet (2019: 12–19) convincingly argues that it is misleading to think the relation between mind and body in Spinoza as a ‘parallelism’ and instead proposes to replace it with ‘equivalence’ or ‘equality’. This has direct consequences for Deleuze’s account of expressionism in Spinoza. While I cannot elaborate this further, in what follows, ‘materialism’ will come to name such posited ‘equality’ in the precise sense elaborated by Jaquet while prioritising the proximate causal nexus that Marx calls the social ensemble. In that sense, materialism here also comes to name a certain excess to or outside to thought. As such, materialism involves at least two conditions: (1) the thesis of equality (mind – body are two aspects of the same thing), and (2) the thesis of excess (the complex causal nexus that lies beyond the equivalence: the unconscious which overflows consciousness, the unknown of the body which overflows the known of the body). Furthermore, beyond this quick clarification, the materialist philosophical position I am concerned with here is focused on the ‘practical consequences’ of that which – in a very precise sense as elaborated in the three theses – overflows or exceeds the containing apparatus of the carceral state and carceral state thought. In this sense, a materialist position names such an openness of thought to its excesses– a primacy of that which overflows it. This practical element adds yet a third condition to the definition of materialism: (3) the thesis of emancipation (or of composition with that which exceeds the equivalence to produce emancipatory effects and diminish the power of external causes). Given this, since Spinoza (and Marx), materialism affirms equality, excess and emancipation.
8. On this point about Marx’s use of ‘ensemble’, see Balibar 2017: 29.
9. Read (2009) relates Deleuze’s critique of the image of thought with Marx’s critique of commodity fetishism.
10. Montag (1999: 37) adequately calls this tendency in philosophy a ‘hangman’s metaphysics’.
11. For an excellent conversation on the documentary, see Story 2018. Story has also recently published an academic book which offers a geographical-historical materialist account of the carceral state in the United States, titled *Prison Land: Mapping Carceral Power across Neoliberal America* (2019).
12. Meaning that consciousness, in its desperate attempt to calm its anguish, ends up putting effects before causes.
13. See EIVp39: ‘Those things are good which bring about the preservation of the proportion of motion and rest the human Body’s parts have to one another; on the other hand, those things are evil which bring it about that the parts of the human Body have a different proportion of motion and rest to one another.’
14. See the general definition of the two sorts of passions in EIII.
15. See EIIIId2.
16. As per E3p11sch. See also E3p13sch.
17. Desire is one of the three basic passions/affects: joy (pleasure), sadness (pain) and desire. In Spinoza, desire is associated with his doctrine of the conatus (EIIp58): ‘by conatus we understand desire’ (EIIIp9Sch). ‘Therefore desire is also related to us in so far as we understand in so far as we act’ (E3p1). And EIIIp9sch, ‘When this conatus is related to mind alone, it is called Will (voluntas); when it is related to mind and body together, it is called Appetite (appetitus), which

is therefore nothing else but man's essence ... Further, there is no difference between appetite and Desire (cupiditas) except that desire is usually related to men in so far as they are conscious of their appetite.' But then, in the Definition of the Affects (EIII) Spinoza writes: 'I also warned that I really recognize no difference between human appetite and desire. For whether a man is conscious of his appetite or not, the appetite still remains one and the same.'

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