

Spinoza's Dream

Willi Goetschel

In 1664, in a letter to a friend, Spinoza shares a dream he had of a “black, scabby Brazilian.” At the historical moment of a fierce race among Europe’s colonial powers, when the Amsterdam Jewish community’s vested interests in the Dutch colonial enterprise have reached a formidable status, Spinoza’s dream reflects an early awareness of the postcolonial predicament. The dream figures this awareness as the moment of the awakening—inseparable from the imagining—of the modern subject. Although the dream has been discussed with regard to its significance for understanding the role of the imagination for Spinoza as well as the issues of freedom, slavery, and question of race, the paper addresses the specifically postcolonial juncture that Spinoza’s dream and the letter marks. Spinoza’s dream figures the philosopher’s awakening to the precarious status of the postcolonial subject position as recognition of the constitutive significance of the postcolonial constellation for the formation of modern awareness.

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In a letter to his friend Pieter Balling in 1664, Spinoza shares a dream he had in which an African Brazilian appeared, a dream that lingered as he woke one winter morning. The description is puzzling because it contradicts the picture of the philosopher who many continue to see as a staunch rationalist with little or no interest in the life of the unconscious. Moreover, examined in the context of today’s postcolonial sensibilities, the dream is emblematic for the way in which it makes Spinoza’s thought legible as a juncture at which modern philosophy shows an unexpected affinity with postcolonial concerns. Read as a scene of awakening to the postcolonial moment that resides at the heart of modernity from the moment of its inception, Spinoza’s dream suggests that recognition of this juncture—if only for a lingering moment of awakening one winter morning—extends further back than often assumed. Seen this way, Spinoza’s dream provides a critical frame of reference

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for a much needed historical recontextualization of both postcolonial and Jewish studies.¹

Examination of the historical, cultural, and philosophical contexts of the short dream sequence that Spinoza reports offers an insight into the degree to which the postcolonial juncture is inscribed at the moment of the awakening—inseparable from the imagining—of the modern subject. Yet while Spinoza's dream has come to be seen as critically important for understanding the fundamental role that imagination plays in his thought, its interconnection with the body and the dynamics of the affects, the figure of the black Brazilian has only marginally been scrutinized and exclusively with regard to the questions of slavery and race. However, Spinoza's dream is a silent, but potent reminder that in modern philosophy—at least as far as Spinoza is concerned—the postcolonial does figure early on—if only subliminally—as a central concern in the genesis of the modern subject.²

If in the letter to Pieter Balling Spinoza reminds us that not all dreams are to be considered as omens of future events but that they are all to some extent an expression of the inner condition of the dreamer, exploring the themes of Spinoza's dream offers an intriguing opportunity to comprehend its symptomatic meaning of the overdetermined causes that produced the dream. Spinoza describes his dream thus:

One morning, as the sky was already growing light, I woke from a very deep dream to find that the images which had come to me in my dream remained before my eyes as vividly as if the things had been true—especially [the image] of a certain black, scabby Brazilian whom I had never seen before. For the most part this image disappeared when, to divert myself with something else, I fixed my eyes on a book or some other object. But as soon as I turned my eyes back away from such an object without fixing my eyes attentively on anything, the same image of the same Black man [Aethiopsis!] appeared to me with the same vividness, alternately, until it gradually disappeared from my visual field.³

Now, this is not much of a dream fragment, but when examined in its various social and political contexts, it is evidence of an illuminating awareness of the problem of colonialism and the move to what we could call an early or proto-postcolonial

1 For the pivotal role of Spinoza in the debate on what is “Jewish Philosophy” and what defines modern Jewish identity see Willi Goetschel, *The Discipline of Philosophy and the Invention of Modern Jewish Thought* (New York: Fordham, 2013).

2 For readings of the letter, see Lewis S. Feuer, *The American Imago* (14) 1957: 225–42; Michèle Bertrand, *Spinoza et l'imaginaire* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1983), 5–36; Juan Dominguez Sanchez-Estop, “Des Presages à l'entendement: Notes sur les presages, l'imagination et l'amour dans la lettre à P. Balling,” in *Studia Spinozana* 4 (1988): *Spinoza's early writings*, 57–74; Henri Laux, *Imagination et religion chez Spinoza* (Paris: Vrin, 1993), 141–45; Moira Gatens and Genevieve Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings: Spinoza, Past and Present* (London: Routledge, 1999), 19–23; Warren Montag, *Bodies, Masses, Power: Spinoza and His Contemporaries* (London and New York: Verso, 1999), 87–89; Julie R. Klein, “Dreaming with Open Eyes: Cartesian Dreams, Spinozan Analyses,” *Idealistic Studies* 33.2–3 (2003): 141–59; Michael A. Rosenthal, “The Black, Scabby Brazilian: Some Thoughts on Race and Early Modern Philosophy,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 31.2 (2005): 211–21.

3 Letter by Spinoza to Balling, *The Collected Works of Spinoza*, trans. Edwin Curley, Vol. 1. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 353. For the Latin use of *Aethiops* see Spinoza, *Opera Omnia*, ed. Carl Gebhardt, Vol. 4. (Heidelberg: Winter, 1925), 77.

perspective. The image at dawn, at the threshold between the unconscious and the conscious, of a black Brazilian at the moment of awakening and “coming to oneself,” an image that competes upon awakening with the reality of the familiar objects of his home and the book on which to concentrate helps Spinoza to shake off the hallucinatory fixation of the dream, providing a striking reflection of the precarious subject position of the philosopher.

The letter of 1664 to his friend Pieter Balling is the only instance of a dream that Spinoza shares, and it comes from a period when some of his theory of affects later developed in detail in the *Ethics* may still have been somewhat in flux. The letter could also be in contradiction with the theory of affects that Spinoza was developing at the time in order to comfort the addressee grieving the untimely death of his son. Pieter Balling, a Mennonite friend and Spinoza's contact with a circle of friends in Amsterdam that just had begun to congregate to read and discuss Spinoza's philosophy, had shared with Spinoza his thoughts that a dream may have presaged the imminent loss of his son. In response, Spinoza shared a dream of his own, and then comments on both dreams, suggesting that while his friend's dream indeed may be considered as an *omen* of what was to come, Spinoza's dream was not. In his letter, Spinoza takes great care to make clear that an omen is not an objective sign of a future thing but the expression of a person's disposition toward an expectation. A dream, in other words, Spinoza argues, does not reflect an objective reality but is the expression of a person's inner state of being, that is, that person's dynamic of affects at play.⁴

Spinoza's discussion also offers a way to explore his own dream. Motivated by the conflict between the desire to comfort his friend and to account for his own dream, Spinoza's discussion does not so much help to explain the notion of the function of the significance of dreams as complicate the issue.⁵ The reader might wonder exactly what kind of explanatory function his sharing of the dream with his friend was supposed to have. But the inconclusive reasoning with regard to the pairing of these two dreams might be a symptom of Spinoza's critical effort at working through the meaning of his own dream fragment as part of his answer to the question of how his friend's dream may have served as an omen. By recalling a particular dream fragment, Spinoza's discussion functions both as an attempt at analysis and an exploration by way of indirection. After all, as products of the imagination, dreams were not entirely meaningless for Spinoza. As products of the body and mind, dreams, like other mental images, were not just arbitrary episodes, but indicative of the interplay of the dynamics of the affects that produced them.

Before we engage in a discussion of the dream episode, reviewing some historical background will help contextualize the dream and highlight the various moments the dream fragment evokes. Excommunicated in 1656, Spinoza at the age of twenty-four had been forced to leave the Amsterdam Jewish community and give up his interests

4 For a detailed discussion of this aspect of Spinoza's letter to Balling see Bertrand, Gatens and Lloyd, Sanchez-Estop, Laux, and Klein.

5 There may remain some unresolvable tension in the way he discusses the function of dreams compared to his mature theory of the affects, but we should not rush to reduce this to a simple self-contradiction that helped repress one anxiety or another that Spinoza might have experienced. Rather, I suggest addressing the complication Spinoza's discussion creates as an attempt at working through a problematic dream—or rather a problem or number of problems the dream seeks to address.

in the family business, an import-export company that traded in overseas goods from the colonies.⁶ In 1664, Spinoza at the age of thirty-two resided in the small town of Rijnsburg near The Hague. He had moved there in 1660 when, due to the pressure of the Amsterdam community, the Hague city's magistrate had forced him to leave the city for the countryside.

At the local level, the years 1663 and 1664 made it painfully clear that early modern forms of globalization came with steep costs as Amsterdam witnessed an outbreak of the bubonic plague. The epidemic, reminiscent of the medieval "black death" epidemics of mid-fourteenth century, caused the death toll of a significant part of the population. At the end of 1663, ships from Hamburg and Amsterdam were quarantined for thirty days, and the death toll rose to 9,752 in 1663 and in 1664 to 24,148 in the city of Amsterdam alone. That was a loss of approximately 17 percent of the city's population at the time.⁷ The plague broke out a year later in the trading center of London. It was surmised that the plague had been brought to Europe by merchant ships from the Levant.⁸ Thanks to the expulsion that had forced him to move out of the city four years earlier, Spinoza was relatively safe in Rijnsburg, although the plague also claimed numerous lives, "even in the little dorps and villages," as one observer noted.⁹

Imagining Blacks

Long before the plague arrived in the Netherlands in 1663, the presence of black people in art and in person had made an impression in Dutch society. The Dutch East India Company (founded 1603) and the Dutch West India Company (founded 1612) were involved in the slave trade from the coast of Africa that would last until the early nineteenth century, and Jewish merchants and plantation owners such as Isaac Aboab da Fonseca, for instance, often actively participated.¹⁰ During the first half of the

6 The reasons for the excommunication were most likely not religiously motivated but driven by concerns about what was considered a direct attempt at infringement of the Jewish community status of self-administration. Spinoza had taken recourse to the Amsterdam judicial court for a business matter against the custom to submit such cases to the self-regulating body of the Jewish community. See Steve Nadler and for a detailed discussion Odette Vlessing, "The Excommunication of Baruch de Spinoza: A Struggle between Jewish and Civil Law," *Dutch Jewry: Its History and Secular Culture 1500–2000*, eds. Jonathan Israel and Reinier Salverda (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 141–70.

7 See Jonathan Israel, *The Dutch Republic: Its Rise, Greatness, and Fall 1477–1806* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 621, 625; Steve Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 212f.; Mark Harrison, *Contagion: How Commerce Has Spread Disease* (New Haven: Yale, 2012), 26f.

8 For a contemporary account of rumors concerning a Mediterranean origin of the plague see Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year* (London: Penguin, 2003), 3: "it was brought, some said from *Italy*, others from the *Levant* among some Goods, which were brought home by their Turkey Fleet; others said it was brought from *Candia*, others from *Cyprus*. For the claim that a "plague-stricken ship travelling to Amsterdam from Smyrna" was the origin of the 1663 plague see Daniel Panzac, "Plague and Seafaring in the Ottoman Mediterranean in the Eighteenth Century," *Trade and Cultural Exchange in the Early Modern Mediterranean: Braudel's Maritime Legacy*, eds. Maria Fusaro, Colin Heywood, and Mohammed-Salah Omri (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 45–68, esp. 48.

9 Israel, *The Dutch Republic*, 625.

10 More on Isaac Aboab da Fonseca in the following. For Jewish slave owners during this period, see Natalie Davis, "Regaining Jerusalem: Eschatology and Slavery in Jewish Colonization in Seventeenth-Century Suriname" in this issue.

seventeenth century, the majority of black men and women in the Netherlands had been brought there by Jewish mercantile families who traveled the coasts of Africa, Brazil, and Suriname, among other destinations.¹¹ At the beginning of the seventeenth century, there were several dozen African men and women living in Amsterdam, in service to Portuguese and Spanish merchants.¹² The largest group of black slaves and servants in the Netherlands of the time seems to have been associated with the Jewish community.¹³

But life was not without tension. On a Friday evening in June 1620, for example, the eve of Shabbat, a black man called Abraham had attacked among others Isaac Spinoza, presumably Spinoza's grandfather, whom he struck in the face shouting "Ghij sult het ongelden!" (Ye shall pay for it!).¹⁴ The story of an attack by a black man may have been kept alive as a Spinoza family memory.¹⁵ And indeed, during the seventeenth century, several dozen blacks and mulattos were buried in a separate section of the Beth Haim Jewish cemetery in Oudekerk, where also Spinoza's grandfather was buried.

In the Spanish Netherlands, the representation of blacks began with Albrecht Dürer, who during his time in Antwerp in 1520 produced one of the first drawings representing a black woman drawn from life in the Netherlands, and continued to the finest modulations of portraiture in Rubens. The presence of blacks during Spinoza's time inspired some remarkable developments in art (see Figure 1).¹⁶ Visscher's black archer, created after a drawing by his brother Jan, shows for instance a striking portrait of a young black man designed and executed around the time of Spinoza's dream (see Figure 2).

Portrait studies of black models show the interest in representing people of African origins as a way of emphasizing whiteness as a higher aesthetic value.¹⁷

11 Haarnack and Hondius, " 'Swart' (Black) in the Netherlands," 92.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., 92.

14 For an account of the incidence see Vlessing, "The Excommunication of Baruch de Spinoza," 163: "Isaac Spinoza, closely related to Michael Spinoza [Spinoza's father], had once been attacked by a Moor, a negro named Abraham. The assailant carried a stone in one hand and a knife in the other, and hit Isaac on the chest. He was disarmed by bystanders, but returned later with a juvenile gang threatening the Jews, who fled to the synagogue in Joseph Pinto's house." For the likely identification of Isaac Spinoza with Bento (Baruch) de Spinoza's grandfather, who lived in Antwerp but was buried in Amsterdam, see Nadler, *Spinoza*, 31. For the incidence: Gemeentenarchief Amsterdam, Archief 5075. See also Haarnack and Hondius, " 'Swart' (Black) in the Netherlands," 92 and 336 note 15.

15 Vlessing, "The Excommunication of Baruch de Spinoza" calls it a family story and suggests that Spinoza's dream might be linked to this "family story," 163f. There is, however, no indication that the incidence of 1620 circulated as a "family story" that Spinoza would have been aware of.

16 See Elmer Kolfin, "Black Models in Dutch Art between 1580 and 1800: Fact and Fiction," *Black Is Beautiful: Rubens to Dumas* (Amsterdam: Wanders Publishers Zwolle, 2008), 71–87, and Carl Haarnack and Dienne Hondius with a contribution by Elmer Kolfin, " 'Swart' (Black) in the Netherlands: Africans and Creoles in the Northern Netherlands from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century" in the same volume, 89–106. For Dürer's 1521 portrait of Katherina see Haarnack and Hondius, " 'Swart' (Black) in the Netherlands," 90f.; for Rubens's striking 1613–1615 study, see "Four Heads," 76f. See also Jean Michel Massing, *The Image of the Black in Western Art: From the "Age of Discovery" to the Age of Abolition—Europe and the World Beyond*, Vol 3.2. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), esp. 213–60.

17 See Elmer Kolfin, "Black Models in Dutch Art." Besides Dürer and later Rubens (for background: 78) see also Rembrandt (82, 242, 251).



Figure 1: Peter Paul Rubens, Four Studies of the Head of a 1613–1615. © [Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brusselsphoto : J. Geleys/Ro scan]



Figure 2: Black Archer (original title: Boogschutter), Jan de Visscher. (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam)



Figure 3: Ferdinand Bol, Portrait of Pieter de la Court and Catharina van der Voort (1661; Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Antwerp). The black page not only holds the mirror but appears like its extension. While the bride gazes at her reflection in the mirror, the black page's eyes are directed at both the bride and the groom gazing back at the page. Royal Museum for Fine Arts Antwerp © www.lukasweb.be - Art in Flanders vzw, photo Hugo Maertens.

The presence of black models allowed artists to draw directly from experience. There emerged around 1660 “a strong, new penchant for stereotyping black figures.” Kolfin describes “a new mode between 1660 and 1700 for incorporating a black page as a symbol of affluence in scenes of luxury.”¹⁸ In other words, black pages entered the scenes of the portraits of high-ranking women to set off their white skin to greater advantage (see for instance Jan Mijntens’s portrait of Margaretha von Raephorst from 1668).¹⁹ The inclusion of a black page became also a fixture in pictures “associated with Dutch economic might overseas, such as allegories on the Dutch East India and West India Companies, and portraits of their governors and sea captains.”²⁰

For Spinoza, encountering black people, especially in the confines of the Jewish community, would not have been an unusual occurrence and would have been part of the everyday experience of life in the Jewish community in Amsterdam. Slaves and servants to numerous families in the Portuguese Jewish community, they belonged to the daily domestic and public scene. Just as they did socially and politically, they also served the aesthetic desires of artists and the patrons of the arts (see Figure 3).²¹

18 Kolfin, “Black Models,” 83.

19 See *Black Is Beautiful*, painting 62, 247. Including a black page or servant figure became a trend reflected in numerous paintings of the time. See the countless paintings in this volume and also in Massing, *The Image of the Black*.

20 Kolfin, “Black Models,” 83.

21 For a striking example, see Ferdinand Bol’s portrait of Pieter de la Court, his second wife Catharina van der Voort, and a black servant (1661, Antwerp, Royal Museum of Fine Arts). For a discussion of the

Dutch Brazil

The year 1664 also saw the Dutch loss of New Amsterdam, the Dutch colony that at the end of 1664 would be renamed New York as the result of its capture by a British military expedition that had set sail for New Amsterdam in May 1664, two months before Spinoza's letter was written. While Spinoza notes that he had the dream during the past winter, his memory might have been refreshed and gained new significance through these political changes then underway.

New Amsterdam was one of the strongholds of the Dutch colonies in the Americas. From 1630 to 1654, the Netherlands had held Dutch Brazil, also known as New Holland in its possession. Indeed, the oldest synagogue in the Americas dates from that time (Recife, 1636). When the Dutch lost their Brazilian colonies to the Portuguese in 1654, a group of Dutch Jews found refuge by joining Jews from Amsterdam who had just arrived in what was then New Amsterdam. Together that year they founded the oldest Jewish community in New York. The settling of Jews in North America is thus directly linked to the colonization efforts of the Dutch and their rivalry with the Portuguese, which cost the Dutch first the South American and eventually their North American colonies. In return for the loss of New Amsterdam, the Netherlands were allowed to keep Suriname, where Jewish colonization started in the same year, 1664.

Henrique Dias

Spinoza does not give us any information about the person he had in mind. Lewis S. Feuer suggests that Spinoza must have been familiar with the single most prominent black Brazilian of his time, Henrique Dias, a soldier and militia leader born either as slave or free man, born either in Africa or in Brazil, and thus born a creole.²² Dias made a name for himself when, as the leader of the freed slaves against the Dutch forces, his military bravery helped the Portuguese end the Dutch occupation of the Brazilian colony. As a result, he assumed the title of *governador da gente pretam*, that is, the governor of the black people. For his courage and leadership in battle, the Portuguese king made him a knight of the Order of Christ (see Figure 4).²³

If indeed with his reference to "a certain black and scabby Brazilian" (*cujusdam nigri, & scabiosi Brasiliani*)²⁴ Spinoza had Henrique Dias in mind, the dream might represent an acute anxiety about the problematic involvement of Dutch and other Jewish businessmen in the colonies but also an anxiety about the impending return of the rule of the Catholic cross and Christian sword: albeit now in the guise of a black Brazilian in the service of the Portuguese aspirations to colonial imperialism. If it is not difficult to figure this dream appearance as a placeholder for the return of the repressed,

painting see Massing, *The Image of the Black*, 228f. Pieter de la Court was a prominent figure close to Jan de Witt, one of the prominent political leaders of the Dutch Republic 1654–1672. Catharina van der Voort was related to Jan de Witt. Spinoza owned a copy of De la Court's *Political Discourses* and was influenced by his ideas. Cf. Nadler, *Spinoza*, 258.

22 Lewis S. Feuer, *The American Imago* 14 (1957): 225–42.

23 Hebe Mattos, "Black Troops' and Hierarchies of Color in the Portuguese Atlantic World: The Case of Henrique Dias and His Black Regiment" *Luso-Brazilian Review* 45.1 (2008): 6–29.

24 For the original Latin see Spinoza, *Opera Omnia*, ed. Carl Gebhardt, Vol. 4. (Winters: Heidelberg, 1925), 76.



Figure 4: Portrait of Henrique Dias. With permission of the State Museum of Pernambuco, Brazil.

it seems more difficult to conjecture exactly what and whom the dream figure would represent. Let us nevertheless press this point a bit more and pursue some of the possibilities that might suggest themselves in preparing the scene of such a dream.

Isaac Aboab da Fonseca

The situation is complicated if we take into account that one of the rabbis who replaced the popular but notoriously moderate Manasseh ben Israel—who may have had more tolerance for Spinoza—was Isaac Aboab da Fonseca, who had returned from the Brazilian colony after the Portuguese victory had been made possible by Dias. And it was he who pronounced the *herem* that banned Spinoza from the Amsterdam Jewish community in 1656.

Whether eight years after the *herem*, or ban, and four years after his expulsion from the city of Amsterdam, the traumatic experience was still strong enough to merge the figures of Dias and Aboab da Fonseca must remain a speculation. But we are entitled to wonder whether the dream image of the black Brazilian might have served as a screen memory for what Spinoza so intensely might have desired to repress: the trauma of his banishment. Feuer suggests that the dream figure directly connects with the trauma of the excommunication that was presided by Rabbi Aboab da Fonseca, who had served as chief rabbi of Pernambuco at the time when the Dutch colony fell to Henrique Dias.²⁵ The excommunication, however, was most likely not a strictly religious affair but rather motivated by economic interests. And closer

²⁵ Feuer, 229–33.

examination suggests that Spinoza might have still have been subject to feelings of guilt that may well have resurfaced in his dream.²⁶

Whether we view the dream as a harbinger of freedom or of renewed oppression—that is, whether we view the black African Brazilian ushering in the end of Dutch colonialism or simply signifying the force that would restore the merciless grip of colonialism and thus the terrifying rule of the Portuguese cross—seems of little import given the deeper underlying ambivalence that the haunting dream image brings to the surface.

While in Spinoza's account the dream image remains curiously devoid of any positive or negative affective charge, the description of the scabby nature of the black Brazilian suggests some subliminal emotional charge. This curious aloofness makes it uncertain whether the imagined dream figure is to be seen as the bearer of the promise of liberation and equality or a disquieting sign warning of the perils of the resurgence of the old regime that his family had escaped (i.e., whether it might figure as an emphatically literal figuration of the return of the repressed) therefore must remain an open question. But whatever the answer, the intensity of the affective charge is undeniable, as Spinoza stages the power of its hallucinatory force that would only gradually subside, and tellingly enough, not until a book or another object would offer him respite.

Does the dream image thus represent the promise of freedom, the image of the man who successfully liberated himself from oppression as the legend of Henrique Dias would have it and with which Spinoza may have identified—though he may initially not have expected to encounter a paramount champion of freedom in a figure of military bravery such as Dias? Or does this dream figure, to the contrary, represent the very persecution from which Spinoza's family had escaped and of which he finds himself reminded one winter morning? Does the black figure from the colonies serve as a harbinger of freedom and the threat that the promise of freedom might pose, or does his appearance signal the fear of oppression, slavery, exploitation, and the resurgence of what seemed to have been left behind but now threatened to catch up? Hope or fear? And does the impossibility of answering this question point to the ambivalence or trace of traumatic experience that resides irreducibly at the center of this appearance? Did it signal the moment of repression that might always accompany the process of liberation? How are we to read this dream figure? Does the scab signal the deprivation and oppression inflicted on the colonial subject or its healing?

Whatever the answer, there is a distinct postcolonial moment that informs the dynamics of this image. Whether Henrique Dias was on Spinoza's mind—consciously or unconsciously—or possibly a composite of him mixed with other figures that Spinoza might have been aware of—is impossible to determine. Given the strong economic interests of the Amsterdam Jewish community in the Dutch West India Company and the important business they conducted with the Dutch colonies at the time of Spinoza, it is more than likely that the ongoing conflicts in the colonies and their reverberation on the domestic front would find their reflection in the imaginary of the time (See Figures 5 and 6).

If we now attend to the particular way in which Spinoza comprehends the function of dreams, we can attend to the deeper role that dream images such as the

26 For a detailed discussion of the complicated economic and financial situation that led to the *herem*, or excommunication, as anything but religiously motivated see Vlessing.

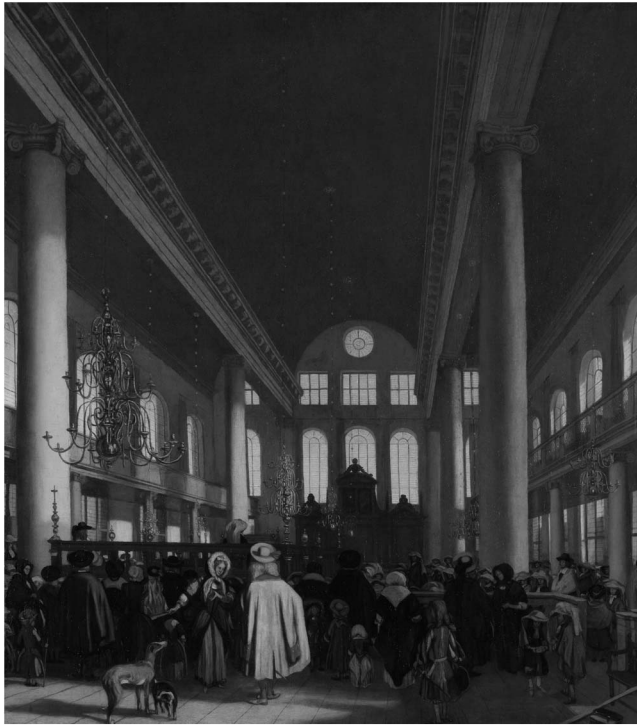


Figure 5: The Portuguese synagogue stands as an example of how the experience and memory of the Brazilian colony loomed large in the everyday life of the Jewish community. The synagogue's interior was built with Brazilwood or Pernambuco tree, an intense dark, warm, hard, and extremely valuable wood. Interior of the Portuguese synagogue in Amsterdam. Emanuel de Witte, 1680 (Rijksmuesum, Amsterdam).

one he describes in his letter play. In the continuation of the letter, Spinoza describes the function of such images in a manner that highlights their significance:

The effects of the imagination arise from the constitution either of the Body or the Mind. To avoid being tedious, I shall prove this for now by experience alone. [. . .] We see that the imagination is also determined by the constitution of the soul alone; for as we find by experience, it follows the traces of the intellect in everything and links its images and words together in order, as the intellect does its demonstrations, so that we can hardly understand anything of which the imagination does not form some image from a trace.

Because of this, I say, none of the effects of the imagination which proceed from corporeal causes can ever be *omens* of future things, because their causes do not involve any future things. But the effects of the imagination (or the images which have their origin in the constitution of the Mind) can be *omens* of a future thing, because the Mind



Figure 6: Photograph of the interior of the synagogue. The synagogue was built after Spinoza had left Amsterdam. Source: “BlaDSCF7296Portuguese Synagogue” by Johnbod - Own work. Licensed under CC BY-SA 3.0 via Commons.

can confusedly be aware, beforehand, of something which is future. Hence it can imagine it as firmly and vividly as if a thing of that kind were present.²⁷

This passage offers a remarkable summary of some of the crucial aspects of Spinoza’s theory of affects and the fundamental role that imagination plays in the function of reason. While the Cartesian construction of the subject is based on the strict separation between mind and body that gives the mind the final say in the governance of body and matter, Spinoza famously turns the relationship around. His pointedly philosophical materialism understands the mind’s ideas and images as aftereffects of material and bodily conditions. The affects are contingent on the bodily experience. As Spinoza notes at one point: our body has more power than we understand, and it makes us do all kinds of things. His evidence: how little we control even one of our smallest body parts, the tongue.²⁸ Tellingly, the long “scholium” or note to proposition 2 of part 3 of the *Ethics*—an excursus on the lack of power of mind over body where the mind is guided by inadequate ideas—ends with the conclusion:

Those, therefore, who believe that they either speak or are silent, or do anything from a free decision of the Mind, dream with open eyes.²⁹

The motifs that crystalize in the dream image of the black Brazilian bring together the critical features of Spinoza’s project of rethinking the subject. According to Spinoza, a

²⁷ Spinoza’s *Collected Works*, 353.

²⁸ See Spinoza’s *Ethics*, E3P2Schol.

²⁹ Curley, *Spinoza’s Collected Works*, 497.

dream image expresses the dynamics of the affects that constitute the life of our mind. In other words, the dream image plays a constitutive part in the construction of the subject. For Spinoza, the subject is not a given, self-identical entity but the product of the interplay of the material forces that drive an individual's affects and thus its imagination. The dynamics of this interplay define the individual as a person whose mind/body relation represents an irreducible reality whereby mind and body represent two different aspects under which we recognize the features of a particular individual human being. After all, Spinoza's is a dual-aspect monism. As a result, the material and intellectual aspects determine the nature of an individual in an irreducible combination, and it is from this interaction that the subject—or the phenomenon we call the subject—arises. The dream thus gives us a window into the dynamics of the psyche, of what concerns us, and those aspects as they represent things that engage our mind and reflect the way our mind operates. They expose elements that go into the process of the production of knowledge and thus assume a cognitive function. The nature of an image and the function it plays in our imagination is thus not coincidental but decisive in the formation of the subject's mental state.³⁰ But what is important is that Spinoza holds here that imagination plays a constitutive role in the construction of the mind and that its images and fantasies—conscious or not—inform the subject formation of the individual.³¹

But there is more to it. According to Spinoza, the subject constitutes itself not independently of other subjects, but its constitution is the result of a complex interdependence with others. Etienne Balibar calls this aspect of Spinoza's view trans-individuality to capture the foundational moment that interdependence plays in the constitution of individuals.³² Besides the fundamental role of imagination and the affects as a constitutive force that conditions human subjectivity, there is also an additional moment through which an individual becomes who he or she is based on interaction with others. Part of the force of the dream fragment to Spinoza is that it continues to grip him after he wakes up, extending its power well into the moment of awakening. We can see such a “trans-individual ‘intercourse,’” as Balibar calls it, in Spinoza's dream image of the black Brazilian that crystalizes in symptomatic manner as the response to the conflicted situation the dream reflects. As such it is always both real and imaginary.³³ And for Spinoza, the imaginary has its own reality because imagination represents a constitutive part in the process of the production

30 As Spinoza notes in the passage quoted earlier, effects of the imagination that don't proceed from corporeal but from the mind can assume the role of being omens of what will happen because our mind but not our body is able to anticipate things, that is, to represent something as present that is not present (“the effects of the imagination [or the images which have their origin in the constitution of the Mind] can be omens of a future thing”). Whether the later Spinoza would agree with this determination is another question.

31 See Bertrand's remark in the concluding paragraph of the introductory chapter that makes paradigmatic use of Spinoza's dream: “La connaissance adéquate ne se substitue pas à l'imaginaire, elle s'y superpose.” Bertrand, *Spinoza et l'imaginaire*, 36.

32 Etienne Balibar, *Spinoza: From Individuality to Transindividuality*, Mededelingen vanwege he Spinozahuis 71, 1997.

33 Etienne Balibar, “What Is ‘Man’ in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy? Subject, Individual, Citizen,” *The Individual in Political Theory and Practice*, ed. Janet Coleman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 215–41, esp. 230, and the discussion of Balibar's notion of transindividuality in Gatens and Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings*, 65–69.

of knowledge.³⁴ As Gatens and Lloyd note in their discussion of Balibar's notion of transindividuality: "Self-consciousness is inseparable from desire, joy and sadness, fear and hope. Here the constitution of individuality and the constitution of the imagining of the 'multitude' are one and the same process."³⁵

But that does not make it easier: Spinoza dreams of a black Brazilian, an African from Brazil (*Aethiops* can also just mean a black person or an African), but his letter does not leave us any hint as to whether this carries any positive or negative charge or whether it is, more likely, a profoundly mixed affect that caused the dream and hallucinatory aftereffect, respectively, whether it evoked any one particular affect. Given the overdetermined character of the dream appearance, one might rather suspect a number of affects of likely conflicting nature. The absence of any information that amounts to a peculiar degree of silence suggests the multilayered nature of the affects it might have produced. But what emerges is that the dream image reflects an intensified dynamics of the play of the affects, potent enough to transfix the dreamer beyond the stage of sleep and exercise a hold over him into the waking world. What remains of the dream at the moment of awakening is the recognition that although the dream may be no omen but purely imaginary, its imaginary function turns out to be a constitutive part of the dynamics of the affects that drive both body and mind. As such Spinoza's dream serves as evidence of the philosopher's self-awareness that his body produces images that capture his mind but that reason is yet to fully comprehend in its meaning. Evidence that the mind can do more than we might understand, Spinoza recognizes the dream as a phenomenon that reason is yet to comprehend.

One way of interpreting the dream would be to follow Lewis S. Feuer and argue that the dream is a reflection of Spinoza's ambivalence and second thoughts about his revolutionary philosophy, an expression of eventual anxieties concerning the questions of what unbridled freedom might bring.³⁶ Such an interpretation, however, relies on too reductionist an approach to Freud. But it also seems to sit uneasily with regard to the thrust of Spinoza's philosophical project as a whole. I would like to examine a few possible aspects that, taken together, offer remarkable cues regarding the way Spinoza's thought addresses the postcolonial constellation as a challenge but also recognizes it as a constitutive feature that solicits critical attention. The dream fragment's hallucinatory hold indicates the profound role that the postcolonial moment plays in the formation of the modern subject as the black Brazilian embodies the defeat of the Dutch colonial rule in Brazil and the co-option of the indigenous liberation forces by the Portuguese colonial power.

- 1) We could view Spinoza's dream of the "scabby" African as a relief dream that deals with the fear of contamination by the bubonic plague that was thought to hail from the shores of North Africa and whose devastating outbreak in 1663 and 1664 led to the death toll of more than 15 percent of the population of Amsterdam. Having moved in 1660 to Rijnsburg, Spinoza could feel relieved and safe from the imminent danger and even possibly experience some compensatory satisfaction that his expulsion from Amsterdam's thriving intellectual circles had

34 See for instance Bertrand, *Spinoza et l'imaginaire*, as well as Gatens and Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings*.

35 Gatens and Lloyd, *Collective Imaginings*, 66.

36 Lewis S. Feuer, "The Dream of Benedict de Spinoza," 240–41.

turned after all into an unexpected blessing. Alternatively, the black Brazilian could also stand for Spinoza's own fear of continued persecution by the Amsterdam Jewish community and its more extremist exponents such as Rabbi Isaac Aboab da Fonseca who, as one of the former settlers in the Dutch colony of Brazil, had himself been associated with the Dutch colonialist enterprise and the slave trade. We could then interpret the dream fragment as an anxiety dream that would assure the dreamer of his safety as the very trauma of his banishment now turned out to have become the cause that saved his life. Either way, the consequences of colonialism play a central part in this dream.

- 2) Given the wider geopolitical implications of the Netherlands' siege between Portuguese and British claims in the colonies, the dream might also be a reminder of the fragile condition of the freedom of thought and religion that the Dutch had succeeded in establishing in the face of a dangerously hegemonic form of imperial Catholicism of a country such as Portugal and an equally hegemonic Protestant force like the British. While Jews had been expelled from the Iberian countries since 1492, they also were not allowed to settle in England until 1753. During the time of the procedure that would lead to Spinoza's expulsion from the Amsterdam Jewish community, one of its most open-minded rabbis, Manasseh ben Israel, for instance, was absent on his mission in England trying to convince Cromwell of the feasibility of admitting Jews to finally reside in England. This situation and the precarious predicament it created for Jews, especially those residing in the Netherlands, may have manifested in Spinoza's dream as an expression of the concern regarding the condition of Jews and, more urgently, heretics on the fringe of Dutch society like Spinoza, in the face of the rising power of the Spanish and Portuguese, on the one side, and the surging power of the British on the other. In the face of these challenges coming in 1664 to a head, the Netherlands seemed no longer to represent the safe haven for which Spinoza admired his country, a country that not only guaranteed freedom of thought and religion but also offered a promising paradigm for reimagining the modern polity. If the Brazilian's scabby look linked the dream with the period's heightened concern for contagion and its commercial, social, political, and theological implications as the Netherlands found itself quarantined and the connections with England had become strained, the black Brazilian figure's refusal to disappear reflects the convoluted complex of competing European interests for colonial as well as domestic rule at the brink of the Anglo-Dutch war that was about to break out in March 1765 but had arguably already begun early in 1764.³⁷
- 3) In the figure of Henrique Dias—if indeed the dream appearance might point to this black Brazilian—the dream might express a further idea, one that was close to the heart of Spinoza's critical project: Henrique Dias, the commander of Portuguese troops of Brazilian freed and runaway slaves stands less for the universal liberation from slavery than the difficult dialectics that would await the colonial world, a world where even the promise of the struggle for freedom could be forged into a triumphant instrument for the greater glory of the

37 Israel, *The Dutch Republic*, 766.

colonial powers. The enthusiastic support that Henrique Dias enjoyed from the hands of the Portuguese who deployed his troops to secure Portuguese interests in the colonies in the new world as well as in Africa exemplified to what degree even the subjects of the colonies could become the fiercest and most reliable instruments of a colonial imperialism they had escaped only to submit themselves “freely” and more insidiously so to its hegemony.

Whatever we wish to make of this dream, it represents a haunting reminder that the unconscious and the return of the repressed appears at the moment of the formation of the modern subject in the form of the colonial and postcolonial subject. The moment of the awakening to the precarious status of the postcolonial subject position is thus integral to, and constitutive for, the formation of the modern awareness or so Spinoza’s dream and the waking hallucination of the black Brazilian suggests. In modernity, the subject can no longer extricate itself from the memory of the colonial past and the postcolonial situation into which it finds itself thrust.

Spinoza’s dream signals the critical acknowledgment that the material conditions stand at the beginning of any critical epistemology that resists the idea that thought is to be viewed as independent and in command of the material condition by which it is determined. Spinoza’s dream thus serves as a reminder that the modern subject is a product of the material conditions that colonialism produces—and not just in the colonies but also in equal measure and intensity ‘at home.’ The dream represents the threshold where the domestic serves as the scene for the construction of the postcolonial. Spinoza’s dream exposes the powerfully transferential force field of the reciprocal movement of this transindividual moment in all its intensity.

But this dream also suggests that the modern subject is not only the product of colonialism and therefore as a result is inextricably caught in its irresistible power. In its lacuna-like, muted appearance, the subaltern enters the construction scene of the modern subject as a figure that may not speak but whose existence announces the postcolonial juncture dramatically and distinctly. Already by its mere existence defiant, it exposes the colonial situation as a manmade social construct that eventually remains subject to change however immutable it might appear to be. As such it returns agency to both the subject of colonialism as well as to the consciousness that stages the scene for its appearance. Potentially dreadful and uncanny, this dream figure can, on the other hand, also assure us that with the return of the repressed, repression might in the end be overcome. It then can also be read as the hopeful vision of a philosopher who views the dialectic of freedom and oppression as a conflict where repression might ultimately undo itself thanks to the nature of the dynamic of the affects that gives expression to the silenced, forgotten, and repressed but that will always defeat any sort of containment and continue to reclaim the spirit of freedom and emancipation as the desire for self-determination.

Spinoza’s dream of an awakening thus serves as a critical reminder that the postcolonial takes effect at the most intimate moment when the modern subject emerges as the product of the dynamics of its own imagination, or more precisely, as the product of the dynamics of the affects that constitute the products of the intellect and imagination at one and the same moment. Spinoza’s dream reminds us that the gaze of the postcolonial subject cannot be avoided, but its power is that it carries the emancipatory promise of hope for freedom as self-determination.