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Author: Stefanie Bognitz
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Anton Wilhelm Amo: Signposts of a Precarious Biography

Stefanie Bognitz

Withholdings of the Archive

Based on evidence-in-writing and antecedents-in-archive from the 18th century and beyond, this contribution draws connections between otherwise far-flung signposts: residues we have inherited from an early-Enlightenment philosopher of West African descent in Europe, Anton Wilhelm Amo, in places such as Axim, Amsterdam, Wolfenbüttel, Halle, Wittenberg, and Jena. Kwasi Wiredu attempted to trace Amo's work in Europe and remembers that "in 1959 William E. Abraham, on the suggestion of Kwame Nkrumah, then President of Ghana, and I, as a fellow traveler of the former, searched in libraries in Europe and could not find this work. Unfortunately, it may be lost" (Wiredu 2005, 200). Kwame Nkrumah himself reminisces in his book *Ghana: The Autobiography of Kwame Nkrumah* how he had always wished to write about Amo. He remembers how hopeful he was when he visited the British Museum in search of Amo's *De arte sobrie et accurate philosophandi* and how disheartened he was when, after several hours, he was told that the very section of the library that had housed the original print of Amo's book had been destroyed during one of the enemy's—Nazi-Germany's—air raids over London in 1941. The fire had turned into cinders one of the few traces of Amo, a text he had written in early-Enlightenment Germany (Nkrumah 1957, 185).[1] Like many others after him, Nkrumah left the British Museum questioning why we still know so little of Amo's thought, writing and overall academic merit (Brentjes 1976, 76–77; Hountondji 1983, 205).

However, it is the specific assumption, put forth by Kwasi Wiredu, that Amo's writings about the rights of Africans in Europe have been lost that curiously prevails to this day. Burchardt Brentjes was the first scholar who, in the 1960s, turned to the archive to find out more about Amo. Since then, scholars have continued to engage the promise of what the archive might hold, or withhold, on his life and work. To engage possible archives around Amo means to reconsider an archive as an itinerary in search of signposts that help us approach the biography and retrieve this philosopher's everyday (Giannachi 2017). Seen from this vantage point, the archive is a memory laboratory, a mediated site of imagination and representation. The engagement with the archive to establish a sense of the everyday of Amo's academic life suggests that there

is no final draft in the script of everyday life. Readers of Amo must accommodate many inventions and reinventions of his life and times as the promise of the archive continues to hold and withhold the ways of knowing, which are always intertwined with the unknowing of Amo. The voice in this text, therefore, lays no claim to the authority of knowing Amo. Rather, the voice in this text asks how we know about Amo. The following biographical signposts, in all their scarcity and in the way in which they are loosely tied in with Amo's scholarship, rely on this speculative epistemology, these wishful ways of knowing the precarious biography of Amo.

Coming of Age at the Dawn of the Enlightenment

In 1720, the young Amo, approximately 20 years old, resided in Wolfenbüttel. This can be said with some certainty, as Amo signed receipts that prominently noted place and date, acknowledging receipt of his monthly stipend. The payment, a remuneration probably for his services at the court, added up to 16 thalers, a sum that was handed over to him by the court's treasurer. What Amo did between 1720 and 1727 remains undocumented. But the changes in his signature over this period allow a glimpse into Amo's coming of age. In 1719, he calligraphed his name, A.W. Amo, in elegantly curved letters below a carefully and orderly composed text. At the end of the period, he etches his signature onto the paper in thick ink and a firm underline that connects the initials to the surname. His handwriting has become bold, freed from limiting aesthetic conventions. The lines on the paper convey a sense of certainty of his own self. He is not just *paid* his salary; he has *earned* it. His signature gives evidence of his own authority at the moment when he is compensated. The reading of his hand in writing leaves us speculating about his education and wanting to know more about the world of his adolescence.

However, we lose trace of Amo back in 1720. This might be the year when he prepared his departure to Helmstedt, the location of a reputable university, for we know that he lived there at some point in his life (Abraham 2004, 192). He may also have been in contact with scholars at the prestigious library in Wolfenbüttel, where he read and served as assistant librarian.

Whatever influence led to the change in his handwriting between 1720 and 1727, we cannot say for certain that he went to Helmstedt as there is no thesis of his on record in the archive of the University in Helmstedt, an internationally renowned institution of higher learning at this time (see Abraham 192). The absence of a record could mean that Amo studied there but never graduated. A glance through the archive's lists of numerous scholars from all over the world who had studied there not only reveals the university's repute far beyond the borders of the Duchy of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel but also tells a story of academic excellence and international appeal. The university repository, *Helmstedt Printings*, located in the Herzog August Library Wolfenbüttel, lists authors Yitsḥaḳ Abravanel (1721), Galfredus de Vinosalvo (1724), Orechio D'Avalos (1725) and Nicolas de Eireval (1727) for the period of Amo's speculative presence at Helmstedt; for the time when he would already have left for Halle, it registers publications by Girolamo Rosario (1728), Yitsḥaḳ Aramah

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(1729) and Sultan Gyen Achmet (1732).[2] This early form of international scholarship and the presence of intellectuals from different contexts and linguistic backgrounds conveys a sense of openness to a plurality of ideas, knowledge and thinking beyond the imagined boundaries that we so often assert for the early Enlightenment. The Helmstedt University, and by extension the duchy, were reputed to attract international scholars and possibly introduced Amo to a worldliness of scholarship situated in-between worlds (cf. Bognitz, "In-between Worlds," in this issue). Taking the worldliness of Helmstedt into ac- count for the analysis of Amo's life, time and thought resituates the philosopher as one among many scholars from different parts of the world who arrived, lived and thought in the vicinity of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel. Even more, it situates him in the philo-Africanism through which the worldliness of the gen- try was portrayed during early modernity.[3] With a particular fondness for the African continent and a measure of Afrophilia, the aristocracy's wisdom about other parts of the world and their power to collect "subjects" from the African continent and integrate them in their courtly doings culminated in beliefs about the religious and moral equality of people of African descent.

The Co-Constitution of Afrophilia, Enslavement and Enlightenment

The turn to Africa and the love for the continent did not end with the gentry imagining the African in the form of a still life. The German territories and empires were also involved in the making and taking of enslaved persons. The principality of Brandenburg is a case in point. It illustrates the presence of the institution of slavery in the empires of the German-speaking territories during the early modern period at the dawn of the Enlightenment. The Brandenburgisch-Afrikanische Compagnie (BAC) was established as early as 1682. Like its sister companies of other empires, such as the Dutch East India Company or the Dutch West India Company in the Netherlands, the BAC was modelled on the insatiable profits it hoped to gain from trading exotic goods from far away—the *Kolonialwaren* (colonial products)—and enslaved persons. The BAC established its *Kontore* (offices) in the Caribbean, with the prospect of running plantations labored by people abducted from the African continent. It also had *Kontore* on the *Gold Coast* of West Africa, from where these enslaved persons were traded, through intermediaries, from the interior of the continent and the coastal states of Senegambia to be dispatched across the Atlantic on death-rearing slave ships. The BAC maintained a fort called Groß-Friedrichsburg Festung until 1717 (Bosman 1970, 7–12). What is of interest here is the involvement of the empire state of Brandenburg, situated in the very middle of the German territories, in the trade in enslaved persons on the brink of the Enlightenment era. The absence of the institution of slavery in the German territories—different from the situation in the colonizing empires of Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, Denmark or Sweden—does not necessarily imply the absence of the presence of slaves, notwithstanding the presence of Africans at European courts well into the early modern era (Zeuske 2018, 111). In fact, the ambitions of small empire-states such as Brandenburg, in light of the establishment and

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involvement of the BAC in the trading of enslaved persons from 1682–1717, need to be named, studied and contextualized as the practice of colonialism and must be historicized and memorized as such.

Given the colonial aspirations of German principalities on the coast of West Africa, a few questions are in order regarding the position of the court of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel on the question of slavery and enslavement. During the early modern period, the German territories did not have legal frameworks that would provide for slavery or enslavement, unlike in the Netherlands, where the free-soil principle was corrupted by the actual practice of enslavement during the 18th century (Holzmann 2022). Legally speaking—and in light of the heritage of the Holy Roman Empire, as we will trace in Amo's argumentation in his *Dissertatio inauguralis*—the institution of slavery did not exist in this period, but the occurrence of the presence of enslaved people—Amo's speculative transit to and arrival in Europe might be proof—who belonged to a sovereign ruler and, to a certain degree, had to submit their destiny to this ruler's sovereign will cannot be ignored (Zeuske 2018, 111). Amo, as the subject of the Duke of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel, had no inalienable rights comparable to the citizens of the German states. He certainly enjoyed a life of privilege, if only in material terms, as he was free from concern about his cost of living or education (Menn and Smith 2020, 5, 13). During his time in Wolfenbüttel, he does not have to labour for his wages as he receives a bursary. This provides Amo with some power and control over his fate and life course. Access to education and assurance of funding for his studies in Wolfenbüttel (evidenced by his signature on a receipt for his annual stipend) and later in Halle had an immeasurable influence on his biography. Still, Brentjes' reflection on what it meant to be an African scholar in the early Enlightenment and early modernity seems to resonate with us today:

> For him [Amo], a lone African living in Europe at a time when … slavery was common – his own brother had been sold to Suriname – the difficulties on the way to science were even greater than the immense problems which face African students now. He overcame them and became a Master of Law, the highest academic rank then attainable by a foreigner in Germany. (1975, 444)

From Wolfenbüttel to Halle: The Inception of Academic Repute

Amo's academic aspirations—from his basic education in the years 1717–20 at the Rudolph-Antoniana *Ritterakademie* (knight academy) to his enrolment at the University of Helmstedt, to his admittance at the Academia Julia in the Duchy of Wolfenbüttel where he read for a degree in law from 1721 to 1724 and his studies at the Fridericiana University in Halle beginning in 1727—leads to a detour, via two interconnected biographies: that of scholar Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) and that of philosopher and "professor-at-large" Christian Wolff (1679–1754). Between 1691 and 1716, Leibniz served as a librarian in the renowned Bibliotheca Augusta (Herzog August Library) in Wolfenbüttel (Firla 2020, 12). Even though the ducal library had already been established in

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1572 and was known in the 17th century as the most comprehensive library north of the Alps, it enjoyed a noteworthy make-over under Leibniz—architecturally, in the organization of the collection and the registration system. Leibniz's innovations at the library could hardly have gone unnoticed by the adolescent Amo, who was residing at Wolfenbüttel at the time; Schloss Wolfenbüttel was literally a stone's throw away from the Bibliotheca Augusta and its literary, scientific and scholarly treasures from around the world.[4] Amo must have been a frequent interloper and reader in the library, as he is listed in the library's record of users. One such entry lists "Amo Afer" with his social status, "*Lakai*" ("lackey"). The latter references Amo's (social) status at the court of Wolfenbüttel. However, how does somebody identified as a lackey at court become a reader in the library? His presence there gives evidence of his other life at court, that of the student, most probably taught by a private tutor. Amo's presence in the library, listed as a lackey at court but reading as a student in the library, therefore signifies a noteworthy shift in his biography, suggesting that he is aspiring to exit his social status as a "lackey." We must also note Amo's self-identification as "afer," the singular nominative of the Latin word for "the African." The use of this attribute during his years in Wolfenbüttel suggests an emancipated claim of belonging to the continent of Africa and of being of African descent, and that this claim already starts before he enrolls at the University of Halle.

The second scholar with whom Amo intersects is Christian Wolff. Wolff not only admired Leibniz's work at the library but also his universalist thinking and its implementation in realms other than academia in a strict sense. At the beginning of the 18th century, when Wolff defended his thesis *De philosophia practica universali, method mathematic conscripta* (*On universal practical philosophy, composed from the mathematical method*) at the University of Leipzig and was already teaching at its faculty of philosophy, he exchanged letters with Leibniz.[5] When Wolff followed a call in 1706 from the Fridericiana University in Halle for a chair in mathematics at the Faculty of Philosophy, Leibniz could not have missed hearing about Wolff's success and renowned work in the field of the philosophy of rationality. In Halle, Wolff developed theses on the reasonable human being who, conscious about his capabilities but also his boundaries, can translate his knowledge into the social sphere, thus social life and society at large; who can act on moral grounds based on his knowledge and reason; who is independent not only in his thinking but in his spirit. Wolff published his theses systematically from 1712 onwards in altogether seven volumes entitled *Vernünftige Gedanken*, translated into English as *Logic*.

The First Student of African Descent Enrolls at a European University

The first trace of Amo's relocation to Halle is a handwritten entry in the student registry at the University of Halle in 1727 under No. 488. The entry identifies name and place in Latin: *Antonius Guiliemus Cognominatus Amo. Aethiops. Ab Aximo in Guinea Africana*.[6] Given his place of origin, Amo identifies himself as being of an "Ethiopian" background. This could be considered as synonymous

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with the meaning of "African Christian." However, even more are the associations this provides for the "European" understanding of the African continent during the early modern period. Again, reading through the Afrophilia lens underlines Europe's yearning for Africa as a mythical place of civilization, purity, religiosity and devotion. Ethiopia's proximity to the Kingdom of Kush, or what was believed to be the location of Christian faith on the continent, allowed this longing for origins of faith and spirituality conveyed in Europe's Afrophilia to be translated back to Amo's identification. This imaginary identity speaks more about Europe's invention of Africa than it does about Amo's own positionality. The inscription of "Ethiopian" forges a bond of common religion and civilization before "Axim at the Gulf of Guinea" speaks to the extraction of human lives from the Gold Coast, that point of no return (Hountondji 1983, 114–15). The archival evidence, however, that speaks to Amo's first years in Halle is relatively scarce.[7] The only written testimony is a paragraph in the local weekly newspaper *Die Wöchentlichen Hallischen Frage- und Anzeigungsnachrichten* published on 28 November 1729, reporting that the student Amo had proven ready in his studies of Latin and Law to hold a public disputation (in Latin). The university chancellor, Johann Peter von Ludewig, presided over the disputation; the chancellor also happened to be on friendly terms with the dukes in Braunschweig. Since 1702, Ludewig had been writing the *Germania Princeps*, a handbook that shaped the understanding of the laws of the state as based on legal principles from the Holy Roman Empire. It is possible that the topic chosen for Amo's defense originated from, or at least was inspired by, Ludewig's teaching and writing (Menn and Smith 2020, 11). What is more, Ludewig was also the founder and editor of the very newspaper that reported on Amo's disputation. Amo, as reported in the paper, had received the topic on which he would then choose the theses upon which he would build his defense:

> So that the argument of the disputation should be appropriate to his situation, the topic de jure Maurorum in Europa, or the law of Moors, was chosen. Therein it was not only shown from laws and from history, that the kings of the Moors were enfeoffed by the Roman Emperor, and that every one of them had to obtain a royal patent from him, which Justinian also issued, but it was also investigated how far the freedom or servitude of the Moors bought by Christians in Europe extends, according to the laws in use.[8]

Given this short glimpse into Amo's defense, what are plausible steps for his argumentation? Amo could have argued that modern European enslavement of Africans was unlawful as it was based upon the laws of the Holy Roman Empire. Since Europe claimed a degree of constitutional continuity from ancient Rome, a person's legal status (the rights held within the realms of the empire) was often negotiated by reference to imperial charters. Amo could have argued that, based on these charters, the freedom of subjects in African territories is non-negotiable and their enslavement illegal, as much as the freedom and rights of people of African descent sold, bought and brought to Europe are inalienable. Hountondji uses the information from the newspaper article to inter-

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pret the topic chosen for Amo's first public disputation in convergence with his identity and experience:

> The significance of this article is that it shows Amo's profound awareness of his position as an African and his preoccupation with the problem of slavery and of the social condition of blacks in Europe. In this dissertation, basing himself on law and history, he showed how the kings of Africa had once been vassals of the Roman Emperor, enjoying an imperial franchise, which Justinian in particular had renewed. He also made a detailed examination of the question how far the freedom or servitude of Africans living in Europe after being bought by Christians was in conformity with the laws commonly accepted at this time. (Hountondji 1983, 116–17)

What is left unsaid in this speculation is the continuation of enslavement well into the era of enlightenment and the continuation of the practice and institution of slavery under the auspices of the colonizing empires overseas, as the Middle Passage was still sailed by the ships of the Dutch West Indian Company (Scott 2004).

A Lost Dissertation or a Successful Disputation?

Several authors have speculated about the loss of Amo's Halle dissertation. However, rather than a loss, it could be a confusion between the early modern academic merits of *disputatio* and *dissertatio*, both of which are mostly inter- dependent, the oral drawing on the written (Menn and Smith 2020, 62). Indeed, it is unlikely that Amo submitted a written *dissertatio*, as he never graduated in law. His academic titles, as indicated in later works, always refer to him as "Master of Philosophy and the Liberal Arts, and student of both Laws" (Amo 1734). It is thus more likely that Amo's *disputatio* had been an oral performance, not a defense of a written *dissertatio,* to give public evidence of academic credibility for his benefactors in Braunschweig and to secure funding to further pursue his studies. The newspaper report hints not only at the out-of-the-ordinary candidate and topic but introduces Amo and his status as a person of African descent at the University of Halle to the public. It was meant for the Duke in Braunschweig to continue his support for Amo's education and for Ludewig, the university chancellor, to demonstrate the extraordinary achievements in education at the university. The paragraph speaks to the candidate's successes in his studies, as it proves that the university was living up to the promise of education during the early Enlightenment era. In the imagination of Amo's mentors in Halle, the university's role in becoming a center of early enlightenment thinking was already aligned. From this vantage point, Halle was a place that could attract students from faraway places who would come together in the common pursuit of liberation and freedom, a way of living together in a common world shaped by the Enlightenment.

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Biography

Stefanie Bognitz is a social anthropologist with strong interest in epistemologies embracing the political, legal, ethical and everyday resonances and remaking after genocide. As a senior research fellow at the Johannesburg Institute for Advanced Study (2022-24), Stefanie started to conduct research in Ghana, the Netherlands, Germany and the UK for her second single authored book tentatively entitled "Anton Wilhelm Amo in-between Worlds" which takes its inspiration from a philosophically-inclined anthropology that relies on long-term research and theory-oriented writing. Her publications include, "Mistrusting as a mode of engagement in mediation: Insights from socio-legal practice in Rwanda," in Florian Mühlfried, ed., *Mistrust. Ethnographic Approximations (*Bielefeld: transcript-Verlag, 2018, 147-67); "Mediation in circumstances of the existential: Dispute and Justice in Rwanda" in Günther Schlee & Karl Härter, eds., *On Mediation* (New York: Berghahn, 2020, 146-178); and "Dispute as Critique: Moving Beyond 'Post-Genocide Rwanda'," (*Anthropological Theory*, 23.4 (2023): 386-403); "Promising Access to Justice: The Everyday of Legal Aid and Mediation in Rwanda," PhD Thesis (University of Halle-Wittenberg, 2025).

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Notes

1. See also a letter by Nkrumah to Burchardt Brentjes. Herzog August Bibliothek. https://opac.lbs-braunschweig.gbv.de/DB=2/SET=6/TTL=1881/MAT=/NOMAT=T/CLK?IKT=12&TRM=151357927. Accessed 15 August 2024.
3. This is contrasted in Akinbode Akinbiyi's photographic wanderings, his sensitive consideration of the gaze, and its implications for the practice of the artist in this issue.
4. Indeed, the time of Amo's adolescence and presence at Schloss Wolfenbüttel saw numerous other changes. Between his lessons at the *Ritterakademie*, which was situated at the Kleines Schloss, Amo could have observed the upgrade of the castle's exterior façade with the unmistakable decorations and aesthetics of the Baroque (1714–16). A new portal was added, a powerful show of force to everyone who entered. Numer-

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ous sculptures were placed on the bridge and along the castle's moat, representing Duke Anthon Ulrich von Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel (1633–1714), his son and successor Prince of Wolfenbüttel, Duke August Wilhelm von Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel (1662–1731) and their associated or imagined virtues and duties. All these alterations are preserved in the present-day appearance of Schloss Wolfenbüttel.

5. See "Christian Wolff," in the university repository Catalogus Professorum Halensis, *Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg,* accessed 15 August 2024. https://www2.catalogus-professorum-halensis.de/wolff-christian.html.
6. For an impression of the entry see Amo's Archive in this issue.
7. A recently catalogued poem penned by Amo in July 1729 is signed with his name and occupation as librarian and secretary at the Court of Duke August Wilhelm von Braunschweig-Lüneburg (Firla 2020).
8. *Die Wöchentlichen Hallischen Frage- und Anzeigungsnachrichten,* 28 November 1729.

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