



Spectres of Anton Wilhelm Amo

Fazil Moradi & Stefanie Bognitz

Introduction

It is in the year 1727 that a university of the Prussian Empire, the Fridericiana (today's Martin Luther University of Halle-Wittenberg in Saxony-Anhalt, Germany), admits Anton Wilhelm Amo as a student of philosophy. Amo's entry in the Fridericiana's registry book reads, "Antonius Guilielmus Cognominatus Amo. Aethiops."¹ In the column entitled "Patria" (lit., homeland or place of origin), we read, "Ab Aximo in Guinea Africana," from Axim in Guinea in Africa (for an impression of the original page in the university's registry book see "Amo's Archive" in this issue). While other students have entered cities located somewhere in the German-speaking territories, Amo has registered his heritage on the continent and his hailing from Africa (see also Diagne and Amelle 2020). He does not, however, mention his childhood and upbringing in the Principality of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel—the location of his early education and employment as a librarian and secretary (Firla 2020). His identification locates him on the Gulf of Guinea, known to the colonizing empires for its immeasurable mineral wealth as the "Gold Coast" on the continent of Africa, present-day Ghana. Amo, the student hailing from Axim in Guinea in Africa, would become a published Enlightenment thinker, holding "positions" at the universities of Halle, Wittenberg and Jena.

The essays in this issue address the circumstances of Amo's arrival, early life and upbringing in Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel, how he would become a student, teacher and thinker of early Enlightenment philosophy and a critic of slavery at the Fridericiana in the first half of the eighteenth century, and how he lives on in the twenty-first century. Unlike other Enlightenment philosophers or "white spectacles" who dominate philosophy departments in Germany and worldwide, Amo's published works do not resonate in the genealogy of philosophers in the established metanarrative of thinkers influencing early Enlightenment and/or modernity. Neither has Amo entered the canon nor the curricula of decolonial education and critical (race) theory, or what Souleymane Bachir Diagne has termed philosophy-by-translation in his outline of "Decolonizing the History of Philosophy" (Diagne 2018).² However, more than any other Enlightenment thinker of his time, the resonating demands of his specters take us to both, the "joining of a radically dis-jointed time" (cf. Derrida 1994, 20), and the underlying inequalities and ambivalences of imperial-colonial violence through philosophical, legal, religious and public vantage points.

The imperial-colonial conditions made the work of certain Enlightenment thinkers and the era of Enlightenment known to the world as exclusive embodiment of the Western “race,” people and nations while homogenizing and annihilating its relations to other intellectual traditions and movements and abandoning scholarly inquiries that would take the love of critical knowledge production as a principle. Some Enlightenment philosophers, who celebrated their “being white” as a natural sign of male freedom, subjectivity, “race, racial superiority” and being racist and sexist as an “ontological” practice, not only continue to constitute the aura of the “modern” university, the library, or, the faculty that provides the esteem for distinct/ive ideas to gain momentum; they are also institutionalized as symbols of western culture/“racial superiority” and as such are made central to the philosophical and “racial” understanding of being human and the human condition.

This is where the *Enlightenment to come* is also a question of democracy to come, beyond state sovereignty and citizenship (Derrida 2005: 115–40). The Enlightenment to come, as Derrida writes, takes us to “the ‘Enlightenment’ of today and tomorrow (which must not without qualification be reduced or assimilated to *Aufklärung*, the *Enlightenment*, the *Illuminismo*, or *Les Lumières* of the eighteenth century)” (1995: 400). The Enlightenment to come is tangled with the future to come and of becoming receptive to haunting or the spectrality of Amo. Amo, as a person who was born, lived, philosophized, and continues to haunt beyond his lonely grave in Shama, Ghana, comes to us as a timeless reminder that Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum* (“I think, therefore I am”)—I, “in charge of it-self and of its decisions, as the sovereign power to do as one pleases, in short, the power to attain “perfect independence” (cf. Derrida 1995: 43)—always arises within a broader context.

Here, Amo looks at us and remains both absent and insistently present. At issue is the persistence of this haunting that unsettles the framework of Enlightenment claims of universality, exposing the fissures of its complicity with the transatlantic trade in human beings from the continent of Africa or colonial violence in the centuries to follow. In the postcolonial present, Amo occupies a liminal space: spectres that disrupt, question, and refuse to be confined to the imperial narrative of territorial and racial belonging as well as its denial of a place of hospitality and the quest for epistemic justice (Moradi in this issue; see also the editor’s note by Peter Trnka in this issue).

How can one write of the spectres of Amo?

In this issue, we turn to Amo, his life, writings, and spectrality, critiquing and moving beyond Euro and Afrocentric appropriations of his thinking. We are interested in how Amo’s ideas are shot through with philosophical concerns far older than the Enlightenment era and temporalities that resist appropriation and never cease haunting our world. The archive of Enlightenment philosophy has omitted the thought of Amo for more than 250 years. It is only at the dawn of decolonization or independence that he comes to haunt Kwame Nkrumah (Nkrumah 1964/1970, 18-19, 87; see also Abraham 2004, 191-99; Wiredu 2004, 200-06), in the 1960s and 1970s that he becomes politically relevant in the German Democratic Republic (Brentjes 1975, 443-44), and lately that his life and

work receive more sustained scholarly attention (Dauvois 2020, Menn and Smith 2020).

By weaving together anthropological inquiries, archival work at the university and sites in Halle (Saale), philosophical inquiries into Amo's work and photography and by trying to intuit Amo, what he would feel and perceive, what he would take with him on his daily wanderings and passages, we aim to disrupt the border and boundary-making struggles that are at work suspending Amo between the imagined binary of Africa–Europe. Similar to the two imaginary coordinates of “Africa” and “Europe,” in this issue, Amo is both present and absent, real and imagined, between worlds, and European and African. We are committed to allowing Amo's ghost to hover between life and death, here and now and then, making certainties vacillate.

Contributions

This issue consists of five contributions and a “Postface”. In the first contribution, “Anton Wilhelm Amo Beyond ‘His’ Time and Place,” Fazil Moradi draws on anthropological research in selected places in Germany and Ghana to discuss how Amo's life and memories confront the coexistence of advancing intellectual life or the Enlightenment as the ideals of “reason and progress” and slavery as imperial violence that persisted across empires in the 18th century. His contribution is a movement that crosses borders, going beyond the linear understanding of history, traversing more than one place, narrative, memory or human experience, and bringing into conversation W.E.B. Du Bois with Amo. Fazil Moradi reiterates and engages the Amo Lectures, delivered by Arjun Appadurai in 2016 and Souleymane Bachir Diagne in 2017 at the University of Halle, to explore how a re/turn to Amo transforms the pursuit of learning and knowledge into an experience of hospitality and how dwelling on Amo is being and dwelling in what Homi Bhabha discusses as beyond as both “a space of intervention in the here and now” and the possibility of re-inscribing “our human, historic commonality” (2004, 60).

Avram C. Alpert's contribution, “To Philosophize is To Learn How to Live with Others: Notes on the Works of Anton Wilhelm Amo,” focuses on how Amo's philosophy takes us one step further: to philosophize is not just to learn how to live as such but to learn how to live with others, to learn the difficult art of keeping your personal integrity while integrating your life into the lives of others. It pursues the relationship between seemingly abstract philosophical categories and the specific things that philosophers write—or, in Amo's case, do not write – about race and culture in their philosophical works. It engages the philosophical tendency on this point among contemporary scholars, primarily, though not exclusively, in the United States and Europe. This tendency is to discard what a philosopher says about certain matters as if it did not affect the philosophy itself and how the traces of enlightenment or past ideas still reach into the present.

The contribution, “Anton Wilhelm Amo: Signposts of a Precarious Biography” by Stefanie Bognitz, does not make an effort to bring order or comprehension to the extraordinary academic or biographical heritage of Amo. She

turns to evidence-in-writing and antecedents-in-archive from the 18th century and beyond to draw connections between otherwise far-flung signposts. In this vein, she shows how the residues we have come to inherit from a philosopher-scholar of African descent in Prussian Empire, Amo in places such as Axim, Amsterdam, Wolfenbüttel, Halle, Wittenberg, Jena—of his living presence, his education and his profession—are not only scattered, at times opaque, they are moreover invested in a temporality of possibility and horizons that would open up a different perspectivism of a world-yet-to-come. She writes that the prospective ideas and writings of Amo embrace connectivity and proximity, not only for a new humanism but for an inter-relationality of two continents, Africa and Europe, conscious of their pluriversality of epistemic practice and knowledge regimes.

In her second contribution, “Anton Wilhelm Amo: A Biography In-Between Worlds,” Bognitz follows signposts of the scholarly biography of Amo by way of engaging the knowledge retrieved from the archive and selected writings by Amo himself and by scholars who engage with his biography and its academic legacy. It covers his biography in between worlds when Amo returns to Africa and spends the remainder of his life as an intellectual in the “Gold/Slave Coast,” present-day Ghana. By opening up a conversation with Amo beyond his time and place, the text alludes to postcolonial perspectives on Amo’s scholarship. Amo’s noteworthy passages from Africa to Europe and back, in many ways, allude to a relational making of these seemingly separated worlds. Amo’s in-between-worlds biography reveals a hidden archive of a possible philosophy between worlds. Bognitz seeks out an engagement in and with emerging archives around the many questions we continue to ask about the life and times of Amo. Dwelling on theorizations of archive and archiving as critical method, her research reveals the ways in which the everyday doings of Amo during his years in Europe and Africa far from give a complete account. On the contrary, if we learn anything from the archive, it is continued critical engagement with its memory and knowledge practices.

In an attempt to let possible archives emerge, Akinbode Akinbiyi’s account and photographic search, “Anton Wilhelm Amo: Attempts at Understanding – 8 Photographs,” tries to feel Amo, his emotions and perceptions, his observations and thoughts on his daily walks. His is a different time, well embedded in the past, but one still intuitively accessible by trying, striving to wander as he did then. The pathways he walked, etched into the landscape, the cobble roads and streets, the lanes and byways that all define a certain geography, a specific location. Wolfenbüttel, Braunschweig, Halle, Wittenberg, Jena—small-time towns and places of residence, eking out an existence. The everyday of coming to a kind of acceptance of difficult neighbours, familial tensions, and sensing the gradual wear and tear of one’s body. This contribution speculates how the fundamental human desire for justice beyond race and racism allows for this reach back into another person’s past as a world memory while being, at the same instant, in one’s own condition, present history.

Souleymane Bachir Diagne closes this issue with a *Postface*.

Biographies

Fazil Moradi is a Japan Society for Promotion of Science Fellow and serves as a Visiting Researcher at the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Hiroshima University. Dr. Moradi is also an Associate Researcher at the Institute for Social Anthropology, Austrian Academy of Sciences, and an Affiliated Scholar at the Center for the Study of the Holocaust, Genocide, and Crimes against Humanity at the Ralph Bunche Institute for International Studies, Graduate Center—City University of New York. Dr. Moradi served as a Visiting Associate Professor at the University of Johannesburg (Nov. 2021–Oct. 2024) and held Research Fellowships at the Johannesburg Institute for Advanced Study, has been a researcher at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology and a Research Fellow with the International Max Planck Research School on Retaliation, Mediation, and Punishment in Germany, and collaborated with medical scientists at Sahlgrenska Academy, University of Gothenburg, to study the long-term effects of chemical weapons on the human body. Dr. Moradi's publications include: *Being Human: Political Modernity and Hospitality in Kurdistan-Iraq* (Rutgers University Press, January 2024); “In Search of Decolonised Political Futures: Engaging Mahmood Mamdani’s *Neither Settler nor Native*,” a Special Issue in *Anthropological Theory* (2023); and *Memory and Genocide: On What Remains and the Possibility of Representation* (co-edited with Maria Six-Hohenbalken and Ralph Buchenhorst, Routledge, 2017).

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. Dr. Bognitz publications include, “Mediation in circumstances of the existential: Dispute and Justice in Rwanda” in Günther Schlee & Karl Härter, eds., *On Mediation* (New York: Berghahn, 2020); “The legal laboratory in Rwanda: Experimentalization and adaptation” in Kathrin Seidel & Hatem Elisie, eds., *Normative spaces in Africa: Constructing, contesting, renegotiating and adapting dynamics in motion* (London: Routledge, 2020); and “Dispute as Critique: Moving Beyond ‘Post-Genocide Rwanda’,” *Anthropological Theory* 23.4 (2023): 386-403.

Notes

1. Universitätsarchiv Halle-Wittenberg, Rep. 4, Sektion XVII, Nr. 5, Bd. 3, Lfd. Nr. 488; DAB 4.
2. This was Diagne’s lecture entitled “Decolonizing the History of Philosophy”, which was part of the Anton Wilhelm Amo Lectures at the University of Halle, organized by Matthias Kaufmann, Richard Rottenburg

and Reinhold Sackmann. Diagne started his outline by emphasizing the spectrality of Amo's absent presence captured in the motivation of the lecture series at the university of Halle in the following words: "To be standing in a place where I like to think that the spirit of Wilhelm Anton Amo is alive is very special to me" (2018, 17).

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