

No Racism on Our Doorstep!

Researchers of the Institute for European Ethnology Demand: Rename M*straße in Berlin-Mitte and Rethink it as a Place of Postcolonial Coexistence

Many colleagues and students at our institute are very unhappy that our street is still called M*Strasse – although this name degrades Black people from today's point of view and although critics have been protesting against it for decades. For us as European Ethnologists this address carries a special irony due to the history of the discipline and our current scientific self-image. The street's name testifies to the fact that in our present, violent German and European colonial histories which we have been critically examining for a long time, continue to be felt, perpetuated as racism.

We are inspired by the Black Lives Matter Movement and waves of anti-racist protests in the US triggered by the brutal public murder of George Floyd by the police. Germany also has a serious problem with racism, which, at times has been as brutal as in the US: the unresolved murder of Oury Jalloh and the Hanau massacre of 2020 shows us this.

We think that passers-by and neighbours, like us, find the everyday racist meaning of the M* word unacceptable. Furthermore, it is not acceptable for globally networked institutes and facilities with international guests, employees and a (as in our case) highly diverse student body to have their headquarters in a street marked with the 'M*' word.

The M* word is discriminatory, racist and offensive to Germans of colour, Black Germans and Black people from around the world. The continued, uncritical use of the word M* as an official street name therefore makes all neighbours and institutions along the road silently complicit in this discrimination. This can not go on. As German president Steinmeier has urged, it is not enough to be not racist. One must be anti-racist. To be anti-racist is to change the street name and honour a black historical figure more worthy of praise instead.

We therefore call for the renaming of M*-street to Anton-Wilhelm-Amo-Street as well as the establishment of a post-colonial place of learning and remembrance.

We are striving for a broad alliance of the scientific institutes, public institutions and foundations located in our street with other initiatives and supporters.

We will present this demand to the Berlin-Mitte district council in the near future.

Reasons for renaming

Numerous scientific investigations, including those from our institute, show that the naming of the street 'M*strasse', probably in 1706, goes back to the time of the Brandenburg-Prussian colonial enterprise and the violent history of the slave trade that was interwoven with it. The term 'M*' is not a self-description for Black people, as the term is exoticizing and disparaging, even degrading. Our current critical view of this colonial cultural heritage should be expressed in a respectful renaming of the street.

The symbolic representation of history and the prevailing culture of remembrance is particularly visible and present in street names, as the perception and evaluation of historical contexts and actors are directly expressed in these names. They shape the orientation of passers-by, tourists and local residents in everyday urban spaces and are sent all over the world with every piece of mail featuring the address.

Instead: Honoring an outstanding Black scientist of the 18th century with the new name Anton-Wilhelm-Amo-Strasse

From our point of view as well as that of many critics, the street should instead bear the name of a historical figure who is associated with the history of Black people in Berlin, Brandenburg-Prussia and Germany. We support the proposal to rename the street in honour of Anton Wilhelm Amo (born around 1700 - date of death unknown). We are aware of the Berlin Senate's decision that streets should be named after men only in exceptional and justified cases. But Amos' life story, unusual for the 18th century, identifies him as the first jurist and philosopher of African origin in Germany, and at the same time testifies to the participation of German courts of rulers and nobility in the abduction of African people as 'Hof-M*' (Africans forced to work as court servants). Amo was abducted as a child from present-day Ghana and in 1707 the Dutch East India Company donated him to the court of Braunschweig-Wolfenbüttel, where he had to serve as 'Kammerm*' (synonymous translation as Hof-M*). As a special feature, he received private lessons and later studied at the University of Halle (then part of the Kingdom of Prussia). In 1729 Amo received his doctorate there on the legal status of Black people in Europe. He argued, as can be concluded from a summary of the work with was handed down, for the abolition of the slave status. As a private lecturer he taught at the universities of Halle, Wittenberg and Jena. Amo experienced not only scientific recognition but also racist hostility. It is suspected that this, among other reasons, may have led him to move to Ghana in 1747.

Renaming and the establishment of a postcolonial place of learning and remembrance

At the same time, the history of the street, its name and its renaming from the Brandenburg-Prussian to the German and National Socialist era, as well as from the time it was located in East Berlin to the post-reunification period, is to be documented and made publicly accessible in a post-colonial place of learning and remembrance. For this purpose, a decolonizing cultural workshop will be created, in which *glocal* perspectives on the histories of the street with different publics are to be collected, conveyed and (together with their gaps) made negotiable for these publics. We want to offer our contribution to the shaping of these processes with our European Ethnological expertise.

Creating a broad alliance

Many academic and civil society actors in Berlin, Germany and Europe share our concern for a critical examination of colonial history and its present. For them and for us it is important to make this critical view clear, especially in everyday urban space. We therefore join the long-standing efforts of associations such as the Afrika-Rat Berlin-Brandenburg, Berlin Postkolonial and the Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland (ISD) and support their demands to rename the M*-strasse and the underground station of the same name. We also support the representatives active in the Bezirksverordnetenversammlung of Mitte who, for their part, have long been committed to this cause.

Setting a Berlin sign for urban open-mindedness

The signals for a change towards an inclusive, post-colonial urban self-image are very good right now. The critical discussion of origin, representation and, in general, the handling of testimonies of colonial entangled histories has become an important topic of urban publicity. This has been stimulated not least by the debate surrounding the Berlin Humboldt Forum. Following the decision to rename streets with a colonial-racist history of origin in the so-called African Quarter of Berlin (which has not yet been implemented), to which an expert report from our institute contributed, the time now seems ripe to successfully implement this concern also with regard to M*Strasse. The renaming and the accompanying documentation and reflection of the history of the M*Strasse can set an important signal in the face of an increasing racist, neo-nationalist threat to the liberal cosmopolitanism for which Berlin in particular stands.

Regina Römhild

Neighbourhood Initiative Anton-Wilhelm-Amo-Strasse
c/o Institute for European Ethnology of the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

If you wish to express support for the initiative, please simply send an email with the subject heading, "I Support the Renaming of the M*Strasse, Berlin" to Regina Römhild regina.roemhild@hu-berlin.de Harriet, Merrow ([merrowh\(at\)student.hu-berlin.de](mailto:merrowh(at)student.hu-berlin.de)) or Duane Jethro ([Duane.Jethro\(at\)hu-berlin.de](mailto:Duane.Jethro(at)hu-berlin.de)).