

Changing Street Names

Decolonisation and Toponymic Reinscription for Doing Diversity in Berlin

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The autumn chill had begun to creep into our bones by the end of the three-hour post-colonial tour through Berlin.¹ As the last afternoon sun dissolved into the Spree river, we stood around and listened to the activist and public intellectual Joshua Kwesi Aikins describe the significance of this final Kreuzberg tour stop at May-Ayim-Ufer. He had by then taken us along streets with names that he explained were either outright racist, such as M-Straße in the district of Mitte, or marked with colonial traces such as those in what is called the African Quarter in the district of Wedding. These street names had long gone unchallenged and black activists had struggled for years to change them.² The renaming of May-Ayim-Ufer was a milestone, he said. It had originally been named Gröbenufer after Major Otto Friedrich von der Gröben, an 18th-century German explorer. In 2007 activist groups such as the Initiative for Black People in Germany (ISD) agitated in the district council (Bezirksverordnetenversammlung, BVV) that the street name be changed. Gröben, they argued, had participated in advancing the early German colonial enterprise by, among other things, establishing the fort Großfriedrichsburg in Ghana on behalf of the Great Elector Friedrich Wilhelm as a way station for the trade in African slaves. After two years of persistence, activists succeeded in persuading BVV members and local residents that Gröbenufer should instead be named after the poet, activist, feminist and educator May Ayim (see MacCarroll 2005; Konuk and Janovich 1997; Florvil 2020).

The renaming was not just a decommemoration of a problematic street name (Gensburger and Wustenberg *fc*). It was simultaneously about the commemoration of a leading feminist in the black German movement. A plaque installed on site further affirmed this double function: the headline states that it is May-Ayim-Ufer formerly known as Gröbenufer, and it recounts in German and English the history of the former street name, state's why it was problematic, provides a short biography of May Ayim and explains how the renaming came about. This is not a substitution of one name for another, or the erasure of a name for another. Instead, it set a precedent for what Aikins repeatedly referred to as shifting perspectives on commemorations (Aikins 2012). By that he meant critically intervening in existing public commemorative signage so that one historical narrative

is more emphasised than the other.³ This is a negation of substitution or erasure, and an embrace of the idea that decommemoration and commemoration go hand in hand. This was an important first step, Aikins said, for ‘decolonising public space’ and creating a decolonial urban future.⁴ Standing alongside the plaque at the conclusion of the public tour, he expressed pride in having helped facilitate what was then the first activist-initiated street renaming in Berlin (see Author Unknown 2016).

6.1 *May Ayim Ufer. Joshua Aikins, Decolonial City Tour – The Everyday Presence of the Colonial Past, Sunday 21 October, 2018.*



Walking off into the noisy, hustle and bustle around Schlesisches Tor U-Bahn station at the conclusion of the tour, I wondered what precisely the decolonisation of public space meant? What could a decolonial urban future look like? It led me back to thinking about the kinds of commemorative interventions I had witnessed and researched in South Africa, my home and another region of my research focus. There, a similar but more wide-ranging state-sponsored project to change urban streetscapes, geographic designations and apartheid commemorative culture has been underway

since the mid-1990s. It was enacted as a cultural policy of reconciliation and nation building, which explicitly eschewed punitive removal, substitution and renaming. New statues and museums were built to diversify the commemorative landscape. Street and place renaming was also implemented as symbolic reparation and historical justice, the assumption being that some signs and place names celebrating figures from the apartheid past needed to be changed to create a more inclusive post-apartheid society.⁵ The Department of Arts and Culture described it as 'decolonising the heritage landscape by replacing colonial names with the names that reflect a post-colonial, post-apartheid, democratic South Africa'.⁶ Here, it was implied but never asserted that decolonisation was an exercise in the removal of old, problematic names and substituting them with new, more representative ones.⁷

At the time, my understanding of decolonisation was shaped by more recent experiences in South Africa where, in 2015, the Rhodes Must Fall movement revived and amplified the term 'decolonisation' as part of their call for the transformation of the University of Cape Town. The movement targeted the symbolic culture, signs, symbols, institutional structures and curricula. While the term certainly has other genealogies and histories (see Tuck and Yang 2012; Mignolo and Walsh 2018), it was the concept of decolonisation formulated in South African higher education contexts that informed my interpretation of the commemorative interventions in Berlin. And it is precisely these assumed shared universal ideas of the relationship between race, identity and commemoration that through the course of my research would also be productively troubled.

In this chapter I follow Joshua Kwesi Aikins's tour as I explore the arguments made by activists about why references to the German colonial past are problematic, why renaming is necessary and how they see renaming as a restorative, commemorative act. Building on previous research by other scholars of colonial legacies and street names (Jacobs and Sprute 2019), I also bring in arguments and alternative commemorative strategies proposed by residents, civic organisations and political groups opposed to renaming, showing how they frame the debate as a purely civic matter of rights to belonging, as facts explicitly not about race. Unpacking the conflict through a South African perspective, I show how attempts to rename street and place names are commemorative acts of doing diversity. This activism concerns an attempt to diversify Berlin's urban geography and the history it commemorates, a struggle over race as a term in which German belonging can be staked. Claims to and about names are also claims to the possibility of diverse German identification. The renaming debate is the urban setting in which the renegotiation of German identity takes place.

Street renaming as commemorative intervention

In Berlin, on our tour of the city, Joshua Kwesi Aikins asserted the symbolic force of renaming, emphasising its importance and relevance for a more diverse and inclusive city. The existing names, and those we would encounter on this tour specifically, were, Aikins suggested, exclusionary. These ideas were asserted again and again on other tours of the city, such as those offered by Berlin Postkolonial e.V, run by the activists Christian Kopp

and Mnyaka Sururu Mboro. Walking the city while following the traces of colonialism and interpreting the colonial past was itself activist work.

If, as the urban geographer Maoz Azaryahu argues, 'street names communicate official representations of the ruling socio-political order' (2009: 53), for Aikins and colleagues, certain streets and places in Berlin discriminate against black Germans, and exclude them from full membership as city residents and German citizens. Not only were some street and place names offensive, but the city had failed to name streets in honour of figures and histories that black Germans and the city's African diaspora could identify with. Read as a city-text, as a grand narrative of history and power in an urban space (Azaryahu 1990; 1996), the numerous walking tours that keep tourists busy illustrate how densely historicised the city streets are. This is, however, as black activists emphasised, a story of a white German past. Street names, in that sense, are 'convenient and popular political symbols, a fact not generally recognized' (Azaryahu 1986: 581). Activists work to point out and persuade the public and local politicians to recognise that existing 'street names reflect and manifest a certain political identity' that is one-sided and exclusionary towards them (*ibid.*).

The history of apartheid naming and renaming in South Africa sharply illustrates the ties between political authority, naming and the racialisation of space that Aikins and others draw attention to. Until 1994, city maps represented the apartheid state's political vision of the primacy of the colonial past and a racially divided social order. Street and place names reflected this reality and the apartheid state's authority over history in urban space (Murray et al. 2007). Moreover, apartheid-era street names referenced or concealed real material histories of violent forced removal, segregation and the erasure of urban memory, as in the case of District Six in Cape Town and other suburbs across South Africa (Field 2001; Kentridge 2013; Rassool and Prosalendis 2001). Apartheid-era naming policy was explicitly engineered as urban spatial violence aimed at concretising associations between race, place and power.

In a city like Cape Town, policies of apartheid urban segregation provided a convenient map for neoliberal market policy during the post-apartheid period, further reinforcing racialised residency across the city. Affluent, scenic, touristic suburbs under Table Mountain remain overwhelmingly white as market logic has kept working class black residents at the distant periphery on the Cape Flats. As a black South African, I have personal experience traversing the city from the township to the town centre, effectively navigating the urban history of spatial woundedness. Yet the pathways created by my inherited assumptions about race, street and place names in Cape Town led me astray in Berlin. Navigating this city was different. It bore its own map of race, and indeed, histories of political transition, that include names of figures linked to WWI and WWII, National Socialist resistance, the Holocaust, the Cold War division and reunification (see Azaryahu 1997). These are different histories of purposeful and calculated segregation. They are also not merely layered upon each other as separate and distinct ages, following Andreas Huyssen's (2003) claim about Berlin as an urban palimpsest. Rather, they cross over, intersect, converge and diverge, and even clash in surprising ways. Berlin, we will see, is a multi-directional urban memoryscape (Rothberg 2009) that is not easy to navigate.

Certainly, Berlin was no apartheid city, and activists had never claimed that it was. Neither was it racially segregated. And despite having an area called the 'African district', which I discuss in detail later, it does not have a distinct area for the working-class African diaspora that is common in other big European cities. Berlin activists' complaints were not they had been formally segregated through racialised urban housing policies. To be sure, gentrification was contributing to transformation in the city that could lead to such segregation. Instead, theirs was an argument about symbolic exclusion in that the symbolic culture of street and place names was exclusionary, discriminatory and offensive to black Germans and residents from the African diaspora. One major point of difference was that while the idea of symbolic exclusion and racial offense was taken for granted and widely understood in South Africa in Berlin activists had to repeatedly make this very case. They had to point out why certain street and place names were problematic, and they often needed to argue vociferously for years for them to be changed. It was tiresome work that reinforced a sense that black struggles in the city had yet to receive true recognition.

The streets they identified led off of popular, tourist maps of the city, and wound their way into a history of blackness that increasingly and awkwardly was surfacing in mainstream public conversation about race and the German colonial past. The historians Fatima El-Tayeb (1999; 2001) and Grada Kilomba (2008) have argued that the notion of race as referring to blood ties, and the visible markers thereof, still codes dominant, contemporary notions of national identity in Germany (see also Florvil and Plumly 2018; and Florvil 2013; Ha 2014). Indeed, as the literary studies scholar Michele M. Wright points out, for many white Germans, the relationship between blackness and German identity is largely unintelligible: 'many white Germans are either resistant or incapable of imagining someone who is both Black and German ... Afro-German identity is not the antithesis in the dialectic of (white) German subjectivity: it is simply non-existent' (2003: 298). 'German-born individuals of African descent' are considered to be temporary residents who have a real home elsewhere and are seen as just passing through (Campt 1993: 110). There was a direct link between this disavowal of identity and street names. As the anthropologist Jenny Engler (2013) has pointed out, street renaming was about black Germans making a case for belonging: 'The claims to rename racist or colonial streets in Berlin are often rejected with reference to a German identity that is thought of as exclusively white and based on a shared [white] past' (2013: 50). Percolating in the struggle for street names was the issue of the terms in which German identity could be formulated. The German colonial enterprise in Africa, and the place names and institutions that covertly commemorate it, are particularly visible to black Germans. It is visible, moreover, as a period of trauma with which they can identify, and which, they argue, links to present day racism that continues to go largely unaddressed. Street signs commemorating the names of German colonial officers, for example, are prime examples of continuing offense.

Those who identify as Afro-German share a common experience of having ties to the African continent, being racialised and self-identifying as black in a majority white European society (Lennox 2017). They also share the German language and culture. This is, however, no homogenous group. Organisations that represent different constituencies in the broader black community active in Berlin, such as Each One Teach One (EOTO),

Berlin Post-Koloniale, the ISD and others have their own varying interests, geographic and political orientations, and participate in local debates about the terms of black Germanness. While key identifiers such as people of colour and BIPOC (black, indigenous and people of colour) are commonly used, the term Afro-Deutsch (Afro-German) has gained currency, but not exclusivity, as a distinctive identifier and subject position that many black Germans can step into. I use 'Afro-German' below as the most common (if still debated) term for Germans who identify as having a black, African background.

The term emerged out of an awakening in social consciousness that occurred among black Germans in the late 1980s during the American poet Audre Lorde's literary collaboration with a group of black German women. The publication *Showing Our True Colours*, which grew out of that workshop, coined 'Afro-Deutsch' as an inclusive label for framing a common black German experience. May Ayim and others built on this new sense of identification to co-found the (ISD) in Germany as an organisation that campaigned for black German cultural issues and to advocate against racism and discrimination. Following the fall of the Berlin Wall, Ayim and others contested the terms of German reunification, citing rising, violent East German racism and ongoing exclusion through public renaming practises, such as the 1991 renaming of the Mohrenstraße U-Bahn station in Berlin, which I elaborate on below. This became more strident starting in the 2000s, when Afro-Germans and diasporic groups led the renaming initiative as a sustained point of civic protest.

The anthropologist Damani Partridge points out (2012: 17) that Afro-Germans are simultaneously citizens and non-citizens, incorporated and excluded on the basis of race. Illustrating this distinction between white German belonging and black exclusion, another activist interlocuter remarked that, 'when you're controlled [passport is checked] in the US or elsewhere [as a black person] people don't ask you if you belong there. Whereas in Germany they do'. It was a telling analogy with strong resonances after the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests following George Floyd's murder. In context, the remark was meant to convey the idea that black Germans were prevented from fully occupying the dominant national subject position and enjoying all its civic benefits. This would include the authority to contest inappropriate signage in their city. Contesting colonial legacies was in many ways, then, an attempt to secure this right to civic recognition based on a claim to historic presence and agency.

Identifying as black and African, but not German, I also stepped into and moved through a category of non-whiteness and blackness that allowed me to appreciate the dynamics of race, identity and commemorations being contested in the city. The sometimes confusing subject positions available to me both opened up and closed off access to logics circulating in this field of identity politics and commemoration. I could identify with the experience of being excluded from being seen as European, which Afro-Germans often highlighted. My race was readily apparent to conservative individuals suspicious of race and identity politics, but also to black Germans. Despite my enjoying the freedom of being able to move through such positions of race, by any calculus Afro-Germans were often far more materially privileged than me. Our shared blackness was to some extent also illusory, perhaps even merely situational. In research settings I have often shared with my colleagues and interlocuters a sense of *Bruderschaft*, to reference a colloquial German expression for kinship of a kind, that also concealed complicated hi-

erarchies of privilege that marked us out as different even while it instantiated a claim to affinity. Yet these differences were far from my mind as our bus made its way through the city in preparation for our tour of the places important for black Germans in Berlin.

The Afrikanisches Viertel

Our bus wound its way through the suburb of Wedding on its way to what is known as the *Afrikanisches Viertel*, or the African Quarter. The district name refers to the many African street and place names concentrated in the area. It also maps an urban history of Germany colonial exploits in Africa. The street names also referenced the names of colonised African nations as well as German colonial officials involved in that project. As our bus pulled off, Aikins rose, introduced himself and attended to issues of house-keeping. Among other practical matters, he warned us about a possibility that we could be approached by those whom he referred to as 'revisionists'. Evoking a potent historical designation (see Lewerenz 2011; Dederling 1993), he said that the revisionists could be local residents who disagreed with the arguments he and other activists make about the German colonial past and their attempts to change street names.⁸ If it did so happen that we were approached by individuals speaking 'rapid German', he warned, we were just to refer them to him. It appeared that revisionists were everywhere. Sometimes 'revisionists even come on these tours', he ominously remarked.⁹

We alighted and walked into the African Quarter. This suburb in the north of Berlin was established in the late 19th century. It was Carl Hagenbeck, an animal trader who proposed the idea of building a zoo in the district, in the Rehberge Park, modelled on a type he'd built in Hamburg. He imagined that it would show not only animals but also peoples from Germany's African colonies. Fortunately this did not come to pass, but an African colonial profile was etched into the landscape starting with the Togostraße and the Kameruner Straße. These colonial commemorative aspects would be accentuated post-WWI as the district became a piece of post-war urban propaganda. The streets and squares retrospectively mapped 'Germany's African land grab' as 'more than 20 [street signs were erected] between 1899 and 1939, long after Germany had lost its colonial territories during the First World War' (Stevenson 2017: 38; van der Heyden 2002: 261–263). We stood gathered around on the corner of Swakopmunder Straße, a street named after the former German colonial port city in Namibia. Aikins explained in his introduction that the tour was to point out 'traces of the colonial past that exist in the present in the Berlin cityscape' and to explain how they continued in the present. Moreover, it was about 'tracing continuities from slavery and colonial times through National Socialism to the present'. He highlighted that Berlin, and the African quarter in particular, was 'a place of contestations', a place of 'quarrels and activism' where different layers of history 'wrestle' with each other. It was not about seeing huge construction sites, big monuments, memorials or museums. Rather, the tour was about surfacing 'subtle traces', and the African Quarter, he emphasised, was full of them.

6.2 *Afrikanisches Viertel*. Joshua Aikins, *Decolonial City Tour – The Everyday Presence of the Colonial Past*, Sunday 21 October, 2018.



Aikins also took a moment to reflect on his own position as an expert. One could not relate historical information, especially information about such a sensitive subject, without explaining one's own position, he stressed. 'We cannot be objective if we do not share the perspective from where we come from'. He was a Ghanaian German, a father of two and a scholar working in political science in Germany. The point was not to be objective: taking a perspective is at odds with the idea of a universal rational standard. Rather, it was an effort to be transparent and open, to reveal one's position rather than assume oneself to be making a universal claim. Asserting transparency and evidentiary truth are discursive tactics employed by activists and revisionists alike when positioning themselves vis-à-vis the body of factual historical knowledge.

Further along on our walk we paused on Petersallee. This street, Aikins explained, had originally been named after the notorious colonial official Carl Peters, who had ad-

vocated for the establishment of the colony of German East Africa in what is now Tanzania. Labelled 'Hanging Peter' by the late-19th-century German press for the murder of his mistress and her secret lover, Peters was also chastised by politicians in Berlin for his brutal treatment of Africans. The district municipality rededicated Petersallee in 1986 to the anti-Nazi resistance fighter Hans Peters.¹⁰ Aikins pointed out that, following protests, the city planned to rename part of the street Maji-Maji-Allee to commemorate the Maji-Maji war of resistance (Gwassa 1973; Giblin and Monson 2010). Aikins then noted that we were standing on the corner of Nachtigalplatz, a public square named after Gustav Nachtigal, an official known for establishing colonies in Togo and Ghana. In light of these jarring colonial histories, activists were campaigning to have this square renamed too.

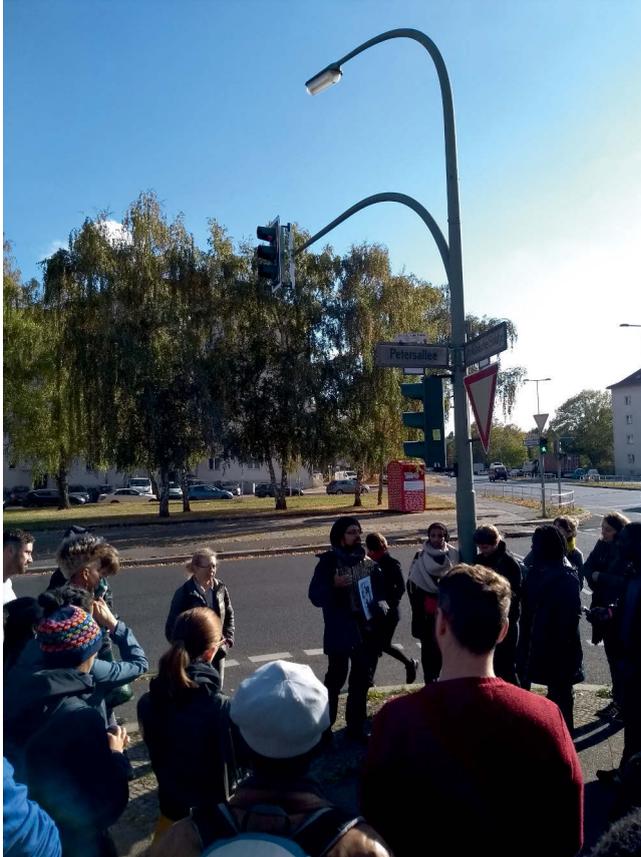
Continuing to trace the concentration of colonial markers in the quarter, we were led into to the *Dauerkleingarten 'Togo'*, a recreational green space of fenced-off garden allotments. Another German iteration of the notion of a 'colony', the *kolonialer Garten* refers to an area of enclosed allotments where residents in urban spaces can plant gardens.¹¹ Standing at the entrance to the Togo Allotment Association, Aikins explained that 'Togo' was established as a piece of colonial propaganda in 1939 by the Nazi state. He drew our attention to the different flags flown inside the garden. One in particular, he noted, referenced the garden's historical origins in the 1930s. At this point, a middle-aged couple passed our group and entered the garden, muttering 'this is not OK. This is not OK' in German. What exactly was not OK was not made clear despite earnest enquiries from tour participants.

A short walk past the garden led us to Lüderitzstraße, which was named after the aristocratic and colonial pioneer Adolf Lüderitz and the namesake of Lüderitz in Namibia. The city bore this name, Aikins said, because an agent working on behalf of Lüderitz had swindled large tracts of land from the local Nama people. It was for that reason that activists wanted to rename the street after Cornelius Fredericks, a leader in the resistance against German colonialism. By advocating for the renaming of two streets and Nachtigalplatz, rather than all the streets in the quarter, activists aimed to transform its public profile from one bearing the legacy of colonial figures into a place of learning about Africa, the horror of the German colonial enterprise and the significance of African historic resistance.

As we exited the Quarter, Aikins directed us to an information board on Otawistraße, near the Rehberge U-Bahn station. An emblem of the prevailing clash of perspectives about the African Quarter, it illustrated the complicated local politics in which the renaming debate was situated. Unveiled on 8 June 2012, the information board was the product of a political compromise reached between the Social Democratic Party and the Christian Democrats, who in the 2011 local elections had campaigned for and against street renaming, respectively. To come to an agreement in the local parliamentary coalition, the parties decided to suspend the debate and instead install an information board recounting the colonial history of the district. Yet the well-meaning overture was not without controversy. Activists argued that the narrative proposed by the district council softened the history of the quarter. Unable to achieve a shared text, activist NGOs and the municipality agreed to include one version of the district's history by the ruling coalition and another by activists.¹² When it was unveiled, however, the text relating the local government's version was prominently positioned to greet oncoming pedestrian traffic,

while the activists' text faced a wall. Naturally, another struggle over the reorientation of the plaque ensued.

6.3 *Petersallee. Joshua Aikins, Decolonial City Tour – The Everyday Presence of the Colonial Past, Sunday 21 October, 2018.*



A number of local residents also opposed the renamings (see Förster et al. 2016). This was not necessarily because they held positive views of colonialism, however. For example, the Pro-Afrikanisches Viertel, a local residents' organisation, mobilised sophisticated arguments aimed at rededicating rather than renaming streets, to signify new, more acceptable historical figures and places.¹³ They stood against renaming but also the honouring of German colonial history and memory, the spokesperson for the organisation argued. They felt that their proposals for the rededication of existing names was a reasonable compromise and argued that they were trying to make a positive difference in the area. They objected to the way the renaming process was being 'pushed through' the district parliament to the detriment of district residents who they felt were not being taken seriously. They saw rededication, rather than renaming, as the way forward.

Rededication was the retention of the original names for streets and places but reinscribing the original dedication behind it. The rededication of the Petersallee to Hans Peters, they argued, was a good model, which had been more cost-effective and less disruptive. Yet the kinds of rededications that they proposed did not entirely free existing names of their colonial baggage. For example, in the case of the Lüderitzstraße, they proposed to keep the name and rededicate the street after the city rather than the person, Lüderitz. They claimed that the city had decided to keep its own name and so the rededication would honour the city rather than the person. This work around did not negate the fact that the sign continued to honour Lüderitz the person if only by one degree of separation.

Moreover, Pro-Afrikanisches Viertel argued that it would mobilise around the renaming issue to establish a partnership with the city of Lüderitz for educational exchange and learning, so as to strengthen ties between Africa and the Afrikanisches Viertel. In so doing, they seemed to be styling themselves as activists and advocates for African partnership through rededication rather than renaming. At every turn of the official renaming process, Pro-Afrikanisches Viertel posted information on flyers and their website about the district and the heavy-handed approach of local politicians and activists. The organisation stressed their marginalisation and the 'ideological way' in which the renaming process was being handled. For Pro-Afrikanisches Viertel, the struggle to keep the existing street names in the African Quarter was about claiming recognition for the civic rights of local residents through what they saw as dispassionate appeals to reason, strident legal action, public relations and concrete plans for African partnership.

M-Straße

We left the district and travelled across the city from Wedding to a spot in Mitte near the location on Wilhelmstraße where the Berlin Africa Conference of 1884 was held. European powers arrogated the authority to themselves to establish distributed domains of influence, marked by the drawing of artificial borders at that meeting. Aikins noted that this history had painfully shaped the experience of space and belonging for Africans, and continues to do so today. To counter this history of unacknowledged spatial violence, Berlin activists had gathered funds for a plaque marking the site where the conference had taken place. The plaque contrasts with the official information boards dotting the inner city, which mostly focus on National Socialist and GDR history. Activists hold a demonstration every year on 26 February—the final day of the conference—to memorialise the violence that it represents.

Aikins then guided us across the street and stood on a square at the M-Straße U-Bahn station.¹⁴ Located in former East Berlin, the station received the name in 1991 during a time when names commemorating the GDR past were being changed to fit the reunification agenda. Activists soon called out the renaming of the station after M-Straße, arguing that reunification politics was serving to exclude black German residents. The station has since been a rally point for anti-racist activism and has repeatedly been vandalised, and has even led the transport authority to take an official stance (see Jethro and Merrill *fc*).¹⁵ The painful history of the street—now home to the Department of Justice,

the Institute for European Ethnology of the Humboldt University, several luxury hotels and a shopping mall—is hidden in plain sight. The word *Mohr* is an offensive, if archaic, racial slur, and the German dictionary, Duden, indicates that the term is discriminatory. Despite its clear racist undertones, however, the history of the street's name is complex enough to have complicated straight-forward renaming efforts. The street name was first registered in 1706, with the name making reference to a group of black African residents who were seen to make use of it. Historians disagree whether this group was invited as a special delegation by the Prussian Royal family, or whether they were a group of slaves brought to the city as part of the sale of the Groß-Friedrichsburg fort in Ghana to Great Elector Friedrich Wilhelm of Prussia.

6.4 *M-Straße* street sign defaced, 20 June 2020.



Aikins stressed that activists were campaigning to have the street renamed because the etymology of *Mohr* emphasises the backwardness of people of colour and because the word is directly linked to early German colonial activities and slavery. Finally, the name is problematic today because it continues to carry negative associations for black people who do not use it as a self-descriptor. It was for these reasons, he argued, that an alternative name had been put forward: that of the German philosopher Anton Wilhelm Amo, a recognised, distinguished black intellectual who was born in Ghana but educated at the University of Halle (see Lochner 1958, Abraham 1964; Sephocle 1992). Renaming the street after him would publicly commemorate a black intellectual in Germany who had worked to subvert the colonial past and the legacies against which activists struggled. It would publicly recognise black intellectual history in Germany and make the case that Africans are part of Germany's history (see Diallo and Zeller 2013).

6.5 'Decolonize the City'. M-Straße Ubahn Station defaced, 23 July 2020.



Activists were not the only ones to advocate for this street name to be changed. As Jenny Engler explains, local councilman Christoph Ziermann proposed in 2004 a motion to rename the street on the grounds that it was offensive. He argued that in very few other places in Germany – in museums, in the public sphere, in the education system – was there such an explicit reference to the country’s colonial history. He also believed that the German black community should be included in the process of finding a new name. ‘The search for a new name,’ his motion declared, ‘should take place in cooperation with the black community in Berlin to make sure that the new name signals a postcolonial, anti-colonial and equality-based representation of Africa’ (Engler 2013: 48). Unfortunately, his efforts ran up against a lack of sustained political will. The case is a reminder that renaming is a local political issue and often leads to heated debates, with district elections being contested explicitly on the back of parties taking positions on either side of the argument. As the case of the African Quarter also showed, commemorative debates and identity politics are very much entwined with local city politics.

The M-Straße debate has its own history of debate and resistance. The historian Ulrich van der Heyden, a leading scholar of German colonialism who has written extensively on the history of M-Straße, argues that the street took its name from a visiting African delegation who stayed in nearby barracks (van der Heyden 2008). The issue, he believed, came down to an acknowledgment of the facts, which in his estimation showed a history of African and German partnership. As to the word *Mohr*, he argued that it arose from a historically specific idea of Otherness that was not discriminatory toward black Africans today. His arguments were used by Pro-Mohrenstraße, an organisation that was led by a retired lawyer, Bodo Berwald, and that opposed activists’ renaming efforts. The spokesperson for Pro-Möhrenstraße said that the street name was not offensive because the German etymology of the word *Mohr* was different to the English *Moor* and did not carry the same racist connotations. Moreover, the street already has a heritage going all

the way to the 18th century, when it was first designated; renaming the street would rob it of that heritage. As in the case of Pro-Afrikanisches Viertel, members of Pro-Mohrenstraße were motivated by a sense of civic duty and justice. Their case was about the right to be heard as local residents. They argued that activists were conflating historical facts in order to push through an ideologically-loaded agenda. Again, they mobilised ‘the facts of history’, ‘cold reason’ and ‘objectivity’ in arguing that activists were making emotive and ideologically skewed claims. It was decidedly not about race, they maintained. And even if it was, it concerned notions of race that lay in the past and not in the present, the argument went.

As the M-Straße debate raged on, activists in 2014 began to stage an annual protest that playfully engaged issues of discrimination and renaming in Berlin. The Street Renaming Festival forcefully inverts existing politics of commemoration and reclaiming blackness in the city. Organised by the ISD in partnership with other activist groups in Berlin and across Germany, the festival takes place annually in late August to coincide with the International Day of the Remembrance of the Slave Trade and Its Abolition. It features musical and cultural performances and tributes of solidarity showing how street renaming is tied to the repatriation of objects and human remains from Berlin’s museums. It often includes contributions by migrants and other minorities and links into their struggles. The event concludes with a collective performance in which participants are invited to show their support for the name Anton-Wilhelm-Amo-Straße by holding up mock street signs bearing the philosopher’s name. This is always a joyous moment, and provides a celebratory photo opportunity. This festival is part of the work of doing diversity in Berlin, and shows how entwined issues of race are with the urban struggle for recognition.

Conclusion

In August 2020, following weeks of Black Lives Matter protests after the police murder of George Floyd in the U.S., the Senate for the BVV of the district of Mitte voted to rename M-Straße to Anton-Wilhelm-Amo-Straße. It was a momentous, timely announcement arriving on the eve of the 2020 street renaming festival. After a years-long campaign, public and political perspectives appeared to be shifting towards recognising the causes of the Afro-German community. While, at the time of writing in early 2022 the street name has not yet been changed, it is indeed true that the Berlin city map was changing in the ways that activists had hoped.

The renaming projects I have described here revolve around issues of civic authority, race, identity and national belonging. In that sense, the struggle to change street names is, I submit, part of doing diversity. Not only were activists trying to diversify markers in the urban geography so that they are more inclusive and representative. They were also making a case for recognising contemporary black residents and the histories of black life in Berlin and Germany. Race has been a crucial aspect in the debate over street names. In the case of M-Straße, activists mobilised race for claiming recognition: the name needed to be changed, they argued, because that name was offensive. But that sense of offense was not shared by local residents and some historians, who claimed that the histories on

which this claim was being made were false or entirely misconstrued. Clearly, what was playing out here was a dispute about what constituted race and racism, both then and now. For activists, the dispute was an important point of identification, recognition and denial. To be able to effectively make claims to and about public space was to close the gap between being black and being German. They adroitly navigated questions of race and rarely confronted it with allegations of outright racism, which could trigger legal action. Both sides approached the issues through arguments, facts and evidence, believing that the best rational argument, rather than the strongest moral appeal, would ultimately win out.

This stands in marked contrast with how arguments about engaging with problematic commemorations in South Africa were framed and engaged. Race was taken for granted as a primary historically informing criterion of the past in South Africa. In the context of colonisation and apartheid, renaming and transforming the urban landscape was presented as a matter of historic justice. In South Africa, decolonisation functioned as a rhetorical strategy for uniting ideas of commemoration, race, identity and the past. It was against that backdrop, and especially the student movements of 2015 and 2016 that I encountered Aikins's use of the term decolonisation to describe the work of urban activist projects in Berlin. As I thought it through in context and comparison, I came to see how important and beguiling decolonisation was. It enabled activists to frame renaming efforts as a challenge to uncritical commemorations of Germany's colonial past and a promotion of Afro-Germans' national belonging in the present. The idea of decolonisation could facilitate solidarity among people of colour in the struggle over urban signage because it was an appealing message that invited a wide range of actors to identify with the cause.

But while these struggles were similar to those in South Africa, this use of the term decolonisation glossed over important current and historical differences—as it probably also did in South Africa. Seeing street renaming as a form of doing diversity means recognising the politics of occlusion that goes hand in hand with mobilisations of identity. Certainly, activists and activist groups were not unaware of those cleavages. What it does allow is new questions about how and where the Afro-German struggle creates entry points with and for other non-white minorities with claims to commemorative real estate in Berlin. One wonders, say, about the future claims to heritage made by Turkish Germans and how they fit into a black struggle for diversification and for the diversification of commemoration in the city generally.

The efforts I have described in this chapter are better observed up close. My anthropological approach of renaming was meant to deepen the usual analysis of street renaming debates, which frequently takes place at a remove. Thinking with Berlin activists, and occupying a space of solidarity, challenged my own historically informed perceptions of race, urban space, and of what it means to be black, Other and yet to belong. This research was an active occasion of doing diversity. The solidarities and differences that the struggles I participated in and tried to understand troubled my embodied assumptions about belonging and my scholarly training, which told me to keep my distance. As the activists I met sought to change perspectives on commemorations, my perspective changed on how identity could be brought to bear in such debates. This had consequences for perceiving dynamics in South Africa and Berlin, for recognising how in these struggles cat-

egories of blackness could emerge and yet also collapse in on each other. It also had consequences for thinking about what an engaged anthropology of museums and heritage can be today. I realised that taking a position and reading the debate from the activists' perspective made sense as a contribution not only to social transformation but also to a vibrant, public anthropology where my scholarly knowledge could be put to work. I understood that it was in the streets that socially significant heritage debates were being waged in earnest and where important shifts in perspectives were occurring with significant repercussions both in and beyond the academy.

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Notes

- 1 Decolonial City Tour - The Everyday Presence of the Colonial Past, 21 October 2018.
- 2 I use the abbreviation 'M-Straße' out of solidarity with activists and black city residents who find the official street name racist and discriminatory. The chapter builds largely on the public tour narrative of following the city's colonial traces. This is but one version of the narrative; there are other ways of exploring the colonial past in Berlin.
- 3 The anthropologist Jenny Engler, while discussing the case of M-Straße in Berlin, believes that the process inverts perspectives on commemorations, therefore referencing the activist assertion about the shifting of perspectives.
- 4 Decolonial City Tour - The Everyday Presence of the Colonial Past, 21 October 2018.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Other references are scant. For example, the word appears in the 2017/2018 and 2016/2017 annual reports, where it explicitly refers to geographical names and to the transformation of the education sector, but no clear definitions are provided. Nevertheless, it is worth remarking on the mobilisation of a word that calls to mind the struggles for independence and, more recently, the transformation of institutions of higher learning and inherited systems of thought and practise associated with apartheid.
- 8 The term 'revisionist' has a potent cultural and political genealogy in Germany going back to the early 20th century. It refers to historians who tried to revise the facts about the colonial past to suggest that allies had lied about the German colonial project, especially their brutal treatment of African subjects. Revisionists portrayed

- Africans as willing, even enthusiastic, accomplices, and emphasised the ‘positive’, beneficial outcomes of the colonial project.
- 9 Increasingly—as the organisers of a leading post-colonial activist tour group dishearteningly mentioned—incidents of confrontational opposition from members of the public were making walking tours with smaller groups more difficult to host in the area. Revisionism, activists wanted to assert, was not merely a code for an outdated form of historical misrepresentation; it was also an active, present-day form of denial that could lead to real public hostility.
 - 10 While noble, activist groups subsequently discovered that the rededication was unlawfully enacted and was no longer binding, which opened the way for its outright renaming.
 - 11 On the history of these gardens in Germany, see Gert Gröning, ‘The Politics of Community Gardening in Germany’, accessed at <http://www.cityfarmer.org/german99.html#develpgerman>, 1 June 2019.
 - 12 The full text of the information board is available here: https://pro-afrikanisches-viertel.de/downloads/pdf/BVV-Beschluss_Texttafeln.pdf (accessed 1 June 2019).
 - 13 See ‘Argumente’: <https://www.pro-afrikanisches-viertel.de/index.php/argumente> (accessed 1 June 2019).
 - 14 See note 1 on the politics of the designation of the abbreviated, M_Straße, and my use of it in text.
 - 15 On 3 July 2020, the Berlin Transport Company, a private company, announced that due to global protests against racism and white supremacy triggered by the death of George Floyd, they would be renaming the U-Bahn station Glinka Straße, after the Russian composer. This was subsequently rescinded when Glinka’s antisemitic links and references in his work were made public. The motion has been stalled until M-Straße is renamed.

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