A Forgotten German Black Philosopher:
A Self-Critical Reflection on Black Lives Matter by a High School Teacher

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The German philosopher, legal scholar and polymath, Anthony William (Anton Wilhelm) Amo, successfully defended his PhD thesis in 1734, at the University of Wittenberg, after having already gained several Master's degrees. Amo was probably born around 1703, near Axim, in what today is Ghana, into the Nzema people, a subgroup of the Akan people, and was sold into slavery at the age of five. Having been transported to Amsterdam by the Dutch West India Company, Amo was subsequently given as a gift to Anton Ulrich, the Duke of Brunswick and Lüneburg-Wolfenbüttel, who passed him on to his son, August Wilhelm, as a "chamber Moor." Thereafter, in an Enlightenment experiment to see if all human beings, even those from Africa, are really born as a tabula rasa – a mental blank slate that takes on the knowledge impressed upon it, Amo was raised and educated within the court, in which Gottfried Leibnitz was the librarian. He was christened Anton Wilhelm Amo and later attended a *Ritterschule*, a school for noblemen. Amo was obviously gifted at languages and mastered German, Dutch, French, Hebrew, Latin, and Greek and presumably spoke his mother tongue, Twi.

He subsequently studied law at the University of Helmstedt, as well as medicine and philosophy at the Universities of Halle and Wittenberg. Later, Amo taught at Halle, a very cosmopolitan university at that time, as well as at Wittenberg and Jena. Amo was initially highly respected and influential in early Enlightenment circles in Germany and the Netherlands, following in the tradition of the controversial philosopher Christian Wolff, who himself was inspired by Chinese philosophy, having read Confucius and Mencius in Latin translations by Pater François Noël. We may detect this influence in Amo's notion that happiness comes through right practice and right thinking. Amo also engaged closely with the works of Rene Descartes and indirectly with the ideas of John Locke. One of Amo's first significant works was a legal argument for the equal rights of Africans in Europe.

In 1747, at the height of his fame, Amo sank into depression, resulting from a growing climate of intolerance, anti-Enlightenment sentiments, racism, and the loss of his patronage. He left Germany and returned to his native land, where he was reunited with his father and sister. His reintegration was apparently not easy and he lived as a recluse working as a goldsmith until the end of his life.

Amo is best known philosophically for his theory of the relationship of the human mind to the body. His thinking was very much located in the early Enlightenment debates between notions of independent thinking and a scientific approach, on one side, and pietism and religion, on the other. His representational theory of mind built on the one developed by Descartes but departed from the French philosopher with respect to explaining the nature of sensation. According to Amo, the mind (or in German *Geist,* which translates more correctly as "spirit" – and Amo clearly meant *spirit*) is absolutely non-material and has no physical, bodily cause. Its nature is continuous action, and it is the source of what we would call agency. *Geist*, for Amo, is the location of consciousness. He wrote (in Latin): "The human mind is: a purely actual and immaterial substance which, in exchange (*commercio*) with the living and organic body in which it belongs, understands and operates from intentions to an end of which it is self-conscious" ("On the Impassivity of the Human Mind," 1734, p. 8, cited in Meyn, 2019). The term "exchange" suggests an interaction between mind and body, though an asymmetrical one, as the mind is the one to determine the meaning of the sensations of the body. The mind itself is not capable of experiencing sensation directly, but rather is conscious of the bodily states that respond to sensory information, forming mental representations of experience, which it retains and to which it gives significance and meaning. Amo further explains sensory perceptions as the response of the living physical organs to their fields of contact with the world. Indeed, Amo's description of the whole process of perception is remarkably detailed and has close affinities to both Aristotle's and Steiner's.

Amo's philosophy further defines spirit as something existing in its own right, neither the product of material processes nor of divine gift. And yet, whilst mind is a category of spirit, it operates in conjunction with the body; it uses the body as "an instrument and medium of its operations" ("On the Impassivity of the Human Mind," p. 8). In doing so, the mind uses ideas that have two possible origins: *sense experience* and *reflection*

or non-sense-based thinking (the latter explains the source of concepts that have no obvious empirical basis, such as the concept of justice).

Amo's position on the relationship between mind and body was eclectic, original, profound, but also questing and incomplete. Had he continued to publish philosophical writings, had he developed his ideas further, had others constructively engaged with him in discourse, perhaps he would have significantly changed the course of philosophy. Sadly, Amo's work was entirely ignored by the important thinkers who later taught at the same university in Jena, such as Schiller, Fichte, Hegel, and Schelling (for overviews of Amo's biography and works see Fikes, 1980; Sephocle, 1992; Abraham, 2004; and Meyns, 2019).

I came across Amo when reading Kwame Anthony Appiah's (2018) book, *The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Identity, Creed, Country, Color, Class, Culture*. Appiah is himself a philosopher, half Ghanaian, half English, a professor at New York University, and a leading writer on the notion of cosmopolitanism, among others. I used extracts from Appiah's book, including his section on Amo in my class 12 block. We teach English as a second language in blocks at my Waldorf school, in Germany; the benefit of teaching English as a second language is that it carries no Waldorf curriculum requirements other than that it should be used to study social and cultural issues.

In class 11, I had introduced a new block on postcolonial literature, using short stories, centrally the collection *An Elegy for Easterly* by Zimbabwean Petina Gappah. A third of the students were people of color, immigrants or children of immigrants, including a boy who came to Germany as a refugee from Afghanistan. In classes 12/13 we focus on the *African-American Experience*, a theme determined by the local Hamburg exam board in its guidelines for the graduation or Abitur exams. (Students in Waldorf schools in Germany who want to go to university have to take the Abitur exam in eight subjects, of which English is one of three majors). For this theme, I had chosen Yaa Gyasi's 2016 novel *Home Going*. Gyasi, too, was born in Ghana but raised in Alabama. We just started to work on this novel, when the protests following the death of George Floyd began.

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Gyasi's novel offers a historical panorama of biographies from mid-18th century Ghana to the present in the USA. It follows the lives of the descendants of two women, first in Ghana, where they are abducted and transported to the United States, where they are enslaved and put to work in plantations. Later they escape to the North and experience the challenges of life in post-abolition America; the narrative continues to track these challenges up to the present. The novel has been widely and rightly praised for its literary merits, which make it very suitable for learning about narrative voice and narrative structures and many other literary devices. Having studied the novel's important social theme and rich stylistic elements, students should be well-prepared for their exam, in which they are required to demonstrate their ability to analyze the stylistic qualities of different text types.

We had just read the chapter in which the son of an Asante woman and an English slave trader – the Governor of the settlement – is sent to England to continue his education and to remove him from the temptations of his homoerotic feelings towards his male friend, when the protests following the killing of George Floyd began. These were the first months of the Covid-19-pandemic and classes were taking place online. We used Padlet as an online platform for posting links, texts, and images, and we were meeting daily through video conferences, thus making it possible to engage in both synchronous and asynchronous, on- and off-line learning.

Among the links I uploaded for the class were two articles from *The Guardian* newspaper reporting on events in Bristol, UK, where protester pulled down a statue of the 17th-18th century politician and merchant, Edward Colston, who was heavily involved in the slave trade, and rolled it into the harbor. The whole event was both symbolic and an expression of outrage. After the statue had been toppled, recalling the toppling of a statue of Saddam Hussein in Baghdad, in 2003, a photographer captured an image of one protester placing his knee on the neck of Colston's statue – a moment that few in the photograph seemed to have noticed. The statute was then dumped into the harbor at the same spot where slave-traders moored in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Edward Colston, who was the Member of Parliament for Bristol and a major philanthropist and benefactor of the city, had made his fortune as a leading member of the Royal African Company (RAC), which, like the East India Company, had a trade monopoly by Royal Charter and was in effect the pre-colonial institution that paved the way for full colonization. Other prominent

members included the philosopher John Locke, who later changed his position on slavery, and Samuel Pepys, the famous diarist. The RAC's main business was slave trade, taking part in that infamous trading triangle that included cheap industrial products and guns shipped to Africa, enslaved people shipped to America, and raw materials such as sugar, cotton, and tobacco shipped from the American plantations back to the factories of Britain. There were other similar shipping companies in Amsterdam, Copenhagen, and Hamburg; though slave ships did not dock in these ports, the European trading companies owned the slave ships and even plantations in the Caribbean, where enslaved people were forced to work. The captains of the Bristol slave ships were permitted to bring one or two slaves back to Bristol to supplement their income, and today there are many descendants of these slaves still living in the city. For years, there have been attempts to get rid of Colston's statue and to remove his name from the city's main concert hall, but even as recently as 2017, prominent local business people and politicians managed to prevent this. There have been racial tensions in Bristol for decades; in the 1980s, my father's shop was burned down during riots. Members of the Black community helped him clear up the rubble and they continued to exchange Christmas cards until last year.

Assuming we have modified our curriculum from its German original model of 100 years ago, have we done so in a way that looks at its content from a post-colonial perspective in the widest sense?

As such, one could say, the lessons and the material in my 12 class English block could not have been more appropriate. And yet I had a strange feeling because the theme explored in our readings is so close to the living realities of many people today. Here we were busily analyzing texts, writing essays, and gathering points for academic achievement. In a short time, I will be marking exams with objective, clinical, detached accuracy, detailing and documenting the points the students achieve for their interpretations, their literary analysis, their skill with language. I ask myself: Can one really use such significant biographical experiences that the students were having as the basis for measuring and assessing and awarding points? What happens to us when we do this? Isn't our empathy and emotional response being abstracted, alienated, instrumentalized, reduced to grades, and then filed away? Isn't that a kind of colonialism too?

Some, perhaps many readers, including my colleagues at the Waldorf school, might find this question completely exaggerated. What is wrong with using such material? Doesn't it show just how relevant some exam material could be? Yes and no. I would like to ask, whether and how can one separate these levels, and if we do have to perform such separation, what do we lose in doing so?

Perhaps I am being over sensitive. I could call on my pedagogical common sense and rationality and say, Yes, there is no logical reason why we shouldn't separate the instrumental from the existential. Or I can draw on my pathic, pedagogical sensitivity, on my tact. Tact, as the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer (2013) and before him the physiologist Hermann von Helmholtz describe it, is a particular sense for the social, intersubjective field of the lifeworld. We develop this sense and the abilities belonging to it, like all senses, by using it. The Dutch-Canadian educator and phenomenologist Max van Manen (1991, 2008) describes pedagogical tact as the ability to sense emergent qualities in children and young people in order to construct learning situations that can support this process. In particular, pedagogical tact is needed to support transformative learning that leads to sustained change in capacity in the whole person.

Gert Biesta (2013), the educational philosopher, says that schools have three functions: enabling socialization, which means guiding students to being the kind of people they need to be in a democratic, multicultural society today; enabling qualification, which means learning dispositions, skills and knowledge to participate constructively in civil society and the world of work; and enabling subjectification. Subjectification, or becoming a subject, means being capable of making judgements and acting in an ethical and ecological way; Biesta also refers to this as *grown-up-ness*. A practice that prescribes and controls educational input and output throughout the course of their education prevents young people from becoming autonomous subjects. Subjectification cannot be taught; at best, teachers can facilitate it through providing learning opportunities and supporting these with dialogue and reflection. Biesta has also been warning for years of the impact of the "Global Educational Measurement Industry" (e.g., Biesta, 2020), the impact of which has been to lead education to valuing primarily what it can measure. This can also lead to using grades as the primary learning motivation and to collecting grades, credit points, and certificates as social capital. Both of these outcomes can further lead to an egotistical attitude

towards learning; they educate the person not towards freedom but towards dependency and paternalism.

The theme of postcolonialism is much wider than the experiences of former colonies. It has come to refer to a much wider awareness of processes of oppression and the instrumentalization of identity. Together with the insights of feminism and critical pedagogy, we have learned to develop a new sensitivity to encountering otherness (even if we have never engaged with academic versions of these ideas). These perspectives have changed the way we look at the world. Instead of looking at the world as something 'out there' that we can represent 'in here', instead of taking a spectator position and rationally analyzing what we see in a detached, presumed objective way, we can try to meet the world as *other*, with openness and respect, while not expecting to capture, master, control and use what we find.

The American philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2006) has argued that democratic education needs to enable students to learn to make judgements, develop democratic capacities, and, above all, cultivate narrative empathy, that is, the ability to tell another's story authentically. This capability is also the basis for an ethic of care, which is a central quality in education. An ethic of care depends above all on being able to listen attentively to the other. It also includes self-care, listening to one's inner voice and needs, and cultivating the self in the sense of self-education. It means being open to and sensitive to the vulnerability of the other and to acknowledge our own vulnerability. It is an essentially inclusive gesture. An ethic of care requires us to take responsibility, firstly, for our own actions, which means being critically reflective of our own dispositions, attitudes, habits of mind, assumptions, expectations, and prejudices.

As Waldorf teachers we have to apply this critical pedagogy to our own practices and what informs them. We may ask ourselves whether and how we critically reflect on how inclusive our practice really is and how post-colonial our curriculum is. Assuming we have modified our curriculum from its German original model of 100 years ago, have we done so in a way that looks at its content from a post-colonial perspective in the widest sense? Is it enough to ensure that our dolls and puppets come in a variety of hair and skin color in kindergarten, that other than white faces appear in our blackboard drawings? (And how do we portray black faces on a blackboard? And how do we relate to the color black?) Are there female heroes and archetypes in our stories? Do we present the Age of Discovery from the perspective of those peoples who lost their cultures, identities, and their lives and tell the stories of their long journeys to emancipation? Do we valorize the influence of Islam and Asia in European culture? And when we tell our students about other cultures, do we stereotype them, be they Ancient Egyptians, Greeks, Celts, Romans, or Americans? Does our curriculum reflect an antiquated Middle European perspective rich in Grimm's Fairy Tales, Norse Myths, and Parzival? And if these issues do not pose as a problem for you, why not? We have questions enough about our curriculum and its not-so-hidden assumptions.

The questions raised by the Black Lives Matter protests go deeper than the curriculum. But can we allow these questions to be instrumentalized as 'school stuff'? Nel Noddings (2012), the American educational philosopher and feminist thinker, has pointed out that teachers have always struggled in a field of tension between their responsibilities within an ethic of care and delivering prescribed learning outcomes, though the struggle has become very asymmetrical in the age of measurement. She makes the point that teachers have to critically reflect whether their school's culture is one that fosters and lives a spirit of celebrating difference, collaboration, inclusion. This also means offering all students tasks in which they can all develop their emergent personhood, tasks that engage them existentially, not as detached observers of social conflict and injustice, but as participants. If students also learn about narrative voice and stylistic devices whilst engaging with literature and media that offer challenging narratives, then they do so to become more effective writers and – not to be underestimated – to show them how literature, images, media affect us. Being a critical thinker includes understanding how text and image work. So we are reading Yaa Gyasi, Kwame Anthony Appiah, or Petina Gappah not because they are on someone's syllabus, but because they challenge us to identify and awaken our will. If the writings of Anton Wilhelm Amo had been read in the same spirit, perhaps Germany and Europe would have gone down a different road. The balance between the development of the person and the acquisition of social and cultural capital has to be dynamically maintained through ongoing critical reflection. This essay was a modest attempt at doing that.

Nel Noddings makes the point that teachers have to critically reflect whether their school's culture is one that fosters and lives a spirit of celebrating difference, collaboration, inclusion.

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