

“In the spirit of Oscar Romero”?!

The Oscar Romero House/Bonn as a Negotiated Space of Social Activism

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I am located in the margin. I make a definite distinction between that marginality which is imposed by oppressive structures and that marginality one chooses as site of resistance – as location of radical openness and possibility.

bell hooks (1989)¹

The Oscar Romero House (ORH) in the German city of Bonn is a dynamic and historically changing diverse space of social activism, a space for networks of civic engagement from the Latin American solidarity movement to climate justice activism. This article² concentrates on negotiation processes about the significance of the namesake of the house, the Salvadoran archbishop Óscar Arnulfo Romero, and what Romero as a figurehead might represent for the house networks. Based on published and archival sources³ as well as my own personal experience, it approaches in an essayistic way the self-governing project house “Oscar Romero House” as a medium of remembrance.

As the sociologist Thomas F. Gieryn argues, buildings give structure to social networks: “Buildings stabilize social life. They give structure to social institutions, durability to social networks, persistence to behavior patterns.”⁴ Giving the name Oscar Romero to a building in Bonn was a very consequential act of remembering the Latin American bishop on a local European level.⁵ The US-American feminist author and social activist bell hooks notes with

¹ hooks, ‘Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness’, 23.

² I am very grateful for the support of Wolfgang Burggraf, Adrian Hermann, Benedict Kaufmann and Georg Milz who offered helpful suggestions and thoughts and provided pictures for the article.

³ Besides the literature mentioned in the bibliography I consulted the loose-leaf collection “Romero letter” (*Romero Brief*). It is the publication organ of the association and is published two times a year to inform about the activities of the association and news concerning the house networks.

In the following, all translations from German sources are mine.

⁴ Gieryn, ‘What buildings do’, 35.

⁵ The Oscar Romero Haus in Bonn is not the only building in Europe named after the Latin American bishop. In Germany Romero houses exist in Gersthofen (near Augsburg), Oldenburg, Hannover, Viersen and Duisburg-Walsum.

reference to the British filmmaker Pratibha Parma that the appropriation and use of space are political acts. “Spaces can be real and imagined. Spaces can tell stories and unfold histories. Spaces can be interrupted, appropriated, and transformed through artistic and literary practice.”⁶ The transformation of the building into the Romero house was a far-reaching action of political engagement.

But what’s in the name ‘Oscar Romero’, which discourses and different understandings are hidden behind the name, and how is Romero’s legacy defined and expressed in the actions of the house networks? These guiding questions of the article are accompanied by the question of what role the category of ‘religion’ plays in the development of the Romero House organized as a secular association?

In this article I will explore the social practices, history, and discourses around the Romero House – based on the experiences and reflections of myself and others engaged in the house networks. First, I will introduce the current organizational form of the Romero House: since 1982 it is run by a secular registered association (Förderkreis Oscar Romero Haus e.V.).

Then I will give an overview over the history of the building: from a prison to the Oscar Romero House. After that I will describe the social networks based at the Romero House since the 1980s by discussing three phases of civic engagement. Afterwards I will focus on negotiation processes about the meaning of “in the spirit of Oscar Romero”. Finally, I will present today’s Romero House as a creative space “located at the margins”.

In summary, the central questions addressed by this contribution are: What is being negotiated in the name of Oscar Romero in the context of the Romero House? What agenda is hidden behind the term ‘in the spirit of Romero’ as the statutes of the association responsible for the house put it?

The current Oscar Romero House in Bonn accommodates a residential community on its first and second floors that ensures the self-administration of the house. Located at the ground floor are the offices of the “Latin America Information Centre” (ila), the Rosa Luxemburg Library, and a counselling point of Medinetz e. V.

The house was built as a prison in 1869 and is now a protected monument. The name Oscar Romero Haus was adopted after the renovation that took place from 1973 on and with the founding of a support association of the same name in 1982.

⁶ hooks, ‘Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness’, 23.

Personal connections to the Romero House: An auto-ethnographical approach

This essay does not present systematic analytical results but wants to encourage further questions connected with the topic of Oscar Romero as a public representational figure of liberation theology. As a post-doctoral scholar of the Study of Religion at the University of Bonn, the conference “Romero:Memory. Activating Heritage of International Solidarity” inspired me to explore the above mentioned sociological questions arising from my personal connection to the Oscar Romero House Bonn.

The article draws on the few published texts that address the history and social practices of the Romero House in Bonn. The methodological framework of this essay is based on the approach of autoethnography that links personal experiences with cultural aspects, placing the author in the center of social contexts.⁷ This essay was an occasion for me to reflect on the period I lived in the Romero House, my involvement in its networks, and my motivation for my later engagement in the house association. I drew on my memory and tried to remember the time when I was myself living on the first floor of the house and I also sought conversations with former housemates and others involved in the house networks. Through this process of self-reflection I connected this part of my autobiography to wider cultural, political, and social dimensions. In following the genre of autoethnography I quote personal recollections throughout the article that are visually marked in italics.

From 2002 until 2005 as a student of the Study of Religion I lived in the Oscar Romero House. Before moving in I did not know anybody of the house networks or inhabitants, but I was impressed by the aura of the house, its social activities and the vision of community living in solidarity (with a low rent). During this inspiring period in which I lived in the house, I was involved in different social projects, e.g. public events concerned with social movements in Latin America. I myself launched together with the house networks and friends solidarity initiatives for Roma from Serbia who were threatened with deportation. Since then I have been a member of the support association of the Romero house that owns the building and is legally responsible for its maintenance.

When I started to live in the Romero house as a master student in 2002 I hardly knew anything about Romero. I remember older academic friends telling me that moving into the house “is a statement”. I vaguely remember a picture showing Romero dressed in priest clothes hanging on the wall of our kitchen on the first floor with the slogan “They

⁷ Wagner-Egelhaaf, *Handbook of Autobiography / Autofiction*.

can kill me but the voice of justice can never be silenced.” I had mixed feelings concerning this almost guru like figure: it was hard for me to connect to this old man from far away who lived a celibate life within Roman Catholic hierarchy. But somehow he also seemed familiar like an old, friendly uncle from my Catholic milieu back home, with a beautiful sounding name.

When I returned to Bonn after living abroad for a some years, I was elected to the board of the association “Förderkreis Oscar Romero House” (from 2012 until 2016). The association was urgently looking for people to take over positions of responsibility in the association’s board and take on this legally relevant task on a voluntary basis. In the Romero letter in spring 2013 I expressed my motivation for this commitment (illustrated with a picture of me with my newly born daughter tied on my back): “It’s a pleasure to be involved in the house projects again – together with my former flat mate and friend Astrid Kafsack – and to be more connected to the house.” This position suited my new life situation very well: I had just moved back to Bonn with my newly founded family after about 5 years of living elsewhere. In this role I was involved in the organization of the 40th anniversary of the ORH in 2013, an occasion to reflect on the house as a “creative space”, its development, and the meaning of the house networks.

“In the spirit of Oscar Romero”

The organizational form of the *Oscar Romero Haus* is and always has been a secular registered association. Even if its founder Martin Huthmann was a Catholic priest it was since its foundation in 1982 always independent from the Catholic church or any other religious group. This independence was important to the founding generation and the association administering the house. Nevertheless, the name of the house and the reference to the bishop Romero and his “spirit” in the statutes of its association connect it with the field of religion. With this step the first generation working and living at the house wanted to show resistance to unjust oppressive structures within the church and to create a free space that provided the possibility for Christian life beyond established church structures.

The bond that keeps the groups located in the house and the members of the association together is the often-quoted expression “im Geiste Oscar Romeros”. The *Förderkreis*’s (“support group”) statutes still state today that the Romero House is available for people and initiatives who pursue civic engagement “in the spirit of Oscar Romero” and stand up “for the

needy and the politically, racially, and religiously persecuted”.⁸ As the main actors involved with the house changed over time, slowly moving away from Christian-based activism towards more secular social movements, there are ongoing processes of negotiation about what can be considered practices and ideological engagement “in the spirit of Romero”. On May, 28th 2015 the public critical talk “Oscar Romero – beatified for us too?” on the occasion of the beneficitation of Oscar Arnulfo Romero took place in the attic of the ORH. Under the question “what does Oscar Romero mean to us today?” different perspectives on Romero were discussed. Members (and former members) of the base communities who meet in the house and house residents discussed their perception of the figure of Romero from their (religiously confessing or secular) points of view. This was one of the rare occasions during which actors of the house explicitly discussed Romero’s significance.



Fig. 1: Oscar Romero's portrait in the hallway of the Romero House Bonn⁹

⁸ In the association’s statutes, in paragraph 2 the purpose of the association is described as follows: “to support students and trainees, education, training and public relations work, as well as to promote assistance for politically, racially or religiously persecuted persons, for refugees and displaced persons. This is achieved in particular through: (1) Maintaining and repairing the house at Heerstraße 205 as a student and trainee residence for residents who, in the spirit of Oscar Romero, support those in need of help, the politically, racially, and religiously persecuted. (2) development, social, church and socio-political as well as ecological educational work with the provision of offices and conference rooms in Heerstraße 205.”

⁹ This portrait of Romero was created in the context of the mobile exhibition “Romero. Voz y Mirada” that was displayed from May to June 2013 at the Oscar Romero House on the occasion of its 40th anniversary (officially opened by the Ambassador of El Salvador, Anita Cristina Escher Echeverria). The exhibition is a reproduction of the Romero exhibition of the “Museo de la Palabra y la Imagen” (MUPI) in San Salvador, El Salvador. It contains of a selection of private, previously unpublished photographs by (and with) Oscar Arnulfo Romero, before his appointment as Archbishop of San Salvador in 1977.

History of the building: From a prison to the Oscar Romero House Bonn

But how did it happen that the building, a former prison, was transformed into the Romero house? What's the history of the building and the development of the Oscar Romero House? The history of the building itself is connected with issues of dealing with marginalized people in society and traverses major shifts concerning its attributed meaning and function.¹⁰ When the building was constructed, its purpose was the imprisonment of people, which is mirrored in the architecture of the house. In 1867, the district bought a plot of land in Viktoriastraße 27 to build a new 'canton prison', colloquially called "Hotel Victoria". The object biography of the house starts on January 12, 1869, when the new prison was opened after two years of construction. Since the beginning, space for religious practices was included: a specific room for a chapel in the front building was the basis for the prison chaplaincy. The offenses of the prisoners who were held at the new prison fell within the range of transgressions, which could be punished with a maximum penalty of six weeks. More than two thirds of the prisoners were convicted of vagrancy and begging, the rest were imprisoned because of their children failing to attend school and for offenses against the forest.

From 1894 until 1930 the building served as a women's prison ("Königliches Weibergefängnis"). From 1930 on the larger prison in Wilhelmstrasse was used as a women's prison, and the Catholic Caritas Center was planning to convert the house in Viktoriastrasse into a homeless shelter.¹¹

When the paramilitary organization of the Nazi party, the SS, took over the house in 1933 it became a torture prison. The building became one of the dreaded "wild concentration camps" that existed throughout Germany since 1933. For many Bonn residents, the house became a place of horror during this time. There are numerous statements from men and women who were detained, tortured, and interrogated in the SS barracks. On July 12, 1933, the communist Josef Messinger (born 1907) from Beuel (today a municipal district of Bonn), died as a result of the torture he suffered there.

From 1938 until 1945 the building served as an air-raid shelter. After World War II the house serves as accommodations for homeless people and slowly started to decay. Until today the

¹⁰ The history of the house is described in the following publications: Binner, R., Bremm, U., Gerhards, T., Rother, C., Schnitz-Teske, R., Volpert, N. *Geschichte des Oscar-Romero-Hauses in Bonn*, Bonn 1989. Volpert, N., "Weit vor den Toren der Stadt". Die Geschichte des Hauses von 1869 bis heute' in: Förderverein Oscar-Romero-Haus e.V. (ed.), *Wo Spinner bunte Netze knüpfen – 25 Jahre Oscar-Romero-Haus Bonn*, Bonn: Informationsstelle Lateinamerika (ila), 1998, 25–41.

¹¹ Binner et.al., *Geschichte des Oscar-Romero-Hauses in Bonn*.

prison cells are visible in the cellar of the house. In the current form of the house the cellar has been remodeled into a party space.

I remember feeling extreme opposing sentiments when celebrating in the cellar: the dance floor and the bar next to the visible prison cells where torture took place. I remember the extremely uncomfortable feelings and the immersion in an atmosphere of violence while at the same time diving into the joyful and exuberant atmosphere of the parties. The ghosts of the house seemed be present.

Georg Milz¹² describes similar feelings when he lived in the house in the 1980s:

From the very beginning, people liked to celebrate in the cellar, and Martin also drank his beer with the house inhabitants after the house meetings there. When I lived in the cellar, I felt a tension between the house as an actual living space and as a place of remembrance.

When the charismatic students' chaplain Martin Huthmann (1931–2019), together with students of the Catholic Students Community (Katholische Studierendengemeinde, KSG), took responsibility for the decaying building in 1973 and began to renovate it, the history of the house took a turn towards a space that promotes social justice. Martin Huthmann was a member of the association of world priests "Unio sacerdotalis" (today: Priestly Community Jesus Caritas) in the tradition of Charles de Foucauld. In 1979 students initiated a *Basisgemeinde*, inspired by Latin American grassroots communities. Martin Huthmann was soon involved and offered the house as a place to meet. This religious community still exists today and celebrates masses at the attic of the house.¹³

In 1982 Huthmann was deposed by the Archdiocese of Cologne as student chaplain due to his political and liberation-theological commitments. This fact is a core element to understand his personality and legacy. Georg Milz states in his essay "The 'Oscar Romero House' Bonn. A chance of survival of the Christian awakening" in a volume on liberation theology in practice: "He did not want to accept this blow passively. In 1973 he had taken over the later ORH as a demolition-ready building from the city and founded a self-governing student dormitory. The rescuing idea came overnight to use this place, so that the new beginning could continue. And

¹² Georg Milz, born 1950, lived in the house for several years and is a former member of the base community Bonn. In his biographical inspired essay "The Oscar Romero House Bonn. Eine Überlebenschance des christlichen Aufbruches" (2002) he reflects on the development of the house and his experiences with marginalized social groups, especially homeless people.

¹³ In the first generation of residents of the Romero House, members of the base community also lived in the house. For example, in the 1980s, members of the base community, which was founded in 1984, lived in a shared flat on one floor of the house. The number of members of the two base communities and the number of people celebrating mass in the house dwindled more and more over the years.

what could be more natural than naming this project Oscar Romero House? He himself had experienced what it meant to challenge power, sacred power. That connects and obliges”.¹⁴

In the same year, 1982, the newly founded Förderkreis Oscar-Romero-Haus e. V. bought the building to provide a space for communal living projects and civic initiatives. That was the start of the Oscar Romero Haus Bonn – two years after the assassination of Oscar Romero in San Salvador. “With the foundation of a church-independent support association that was able to buy the house from the city of Bonn, the ORH left the territory of the official church (*Amtskirche*) and has not returned to the fold of the church since then. It has not broken with the church, but it has created a Christian and social space for its own. A prison has become an open, conflict-ready house”.¹⁵

The name choice “Oscar Romero” was used to negotiate the split from the official church. Martin Huthmann legitimized the act of buying a house theologically: He connected it to the passage in the biblical book Jeremiah 32,7–9. He sent a letter headlined with the bible reference “Buy a field in Anathoth as a sign of hope in this time!” to collect donations to buy the building and create an independent space.¹⁶ Further it was Martin Huthmann who chose the name of the house: “He had been my secret bishop for a long time”¹⁷ he writes in his memorial protocol “Buy a field in Anatot” on the genesis of the Oscar Romero House (1998). He described the processes of the decision making to name the house after Oscar Romero as follows: “There was no committee to decide that, I decided more or less alone. Of course, the base community and the people in the association had the same opinion, but there was no discussion, it was actually always clear that it should be called Oscar Romero House. People should live and work here who, in the spirit of Oscar Romero, work for the oppressed and poor in the world.”¹⁸

Phase 1 of civic engagement: Christianity-based activism

I try to highlight three phases of civic engagement within the history of the Romero House: The first phase of the Romero House can be described as a faith-based social activism leading to the establishment of religious grassroot communities and practices influenced by liberation theology. Since then, the attic of the house (transformed into a chapel) has served as an

¹⁴ Milz, ‘Das “Oscar-Romero-Haus” Bonn’, 14.

¹⁵ Milz, ‘Das “Oscar-Romero-Haus” Bonn’, 16.

¹⁶ The interview with Martin Huthmann with the title “... ein ständiges Suchen” vividly traces the stations of his life (Eisenbürger, G., “...ein ständiges Suchen”. Militärpfarrer, Studentenpfarrer, Befreiungstheologe – Stationen im Leben des Martin Huthmann. In: *ila* 178, September 1994, 68–72).

¹⁷ Huthmann, ‘Kauf einen Acker in Anatot’, 23.

¹⁸ Eisenbürger, ‘...ein ständiges Suchen’.

alternative space to perform Catholic rituals. Two *Basisgemeinden* are associated with the house, the older “Basisgemeinde Bonn” founded in 1979 and the “Gemeinde im Oscar-Romero-Haus” (existing since 1984). The latter is structured as an ecumenical and egalitarian community celebrating the mass without an ordained priest. The “Basisgemeinde Bonn” includes an ordained Roman Catholic priest as a member who performs the liturgy.

The history of the base communities is also shaped by the respective spirit of the times and is subject to profound changes. In the year 2000 the Roman Catholic theologian and long-standing member in the “Gemeinde im Oscar Romero Haus” Wolfgang Max Burggraf reflected on the term *Basisgemeinde* in his text “Of bushes and grass roots. *Basisgemeinden* as ‘fresh cell cure’ for the churches of Europe?”: “For some liturgical services there were only two, three, or four persons left. The services had not been prepared for a long time. Some think back to the ‘good times’ when twenty or thirty parishioners crowded into the chapel on the top floor of the Oscar Romero House for the service. Especially the parents are worried: The congregation is too small to be able to offer attractive youth work or children’s services to the children”.¹⁹

From 1980 till 2013, the ecumenical umbrella organization “Initiative Kirche von unten” (*initiative church from below* – IKvu) had its office on the ground floor of the house.²⁰

Georg Milz calls this time period the “Oscar Romero phase” of the house.²¹ For me this phase is expressed in the Latin American colorful cross displayed in the “chapel” in the attic of the house that is a souvenir from Guatemala (despite that we as inhabitants of the house thought it was “authentic Salvadorian”).

Phase 2: Solidarity with Latin American social movements

During the second phase a key interest of the house activists lay on the social and political situation in Latin America. In 1983, the founder of the house, Martin Huthmann, moved to Brazil to work, until his death, as a community priest in Jaciara, located in the Brazilian state Mato Grosso in the western part of the country. He served for several grass roots communities and supported the Landless Workers’ Movement (*Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Terra*, MST).

¹⁹ Burggraf, ‘Von Büschen und Graswurzeln’, 60f.

²⁰ IKvu (www.ikvu.de) is an ecumenical network of originally about 45 groups and initiatives with a critical approach towards the local church and society. It was founded in 1980 as a result of difficulties with the Roman Catholic Church at the Catholics’ Day 1978 in Freiburg im Breisgau.

²¹ Milz, ‘Das „Oscar-Romero-Haus“ Bonn’, 17.

Acts of solidarity with Latin American social movements based in the Romero House were for example the foundation of information agencies in the house e.g. concerned with El Salvador (Infostelle El Salvador), with Guatemala (Infostelle Guatemala) and the publication of the Journal *ILA* (Infostelle Lateinamerika). Today only the ILA has an office in the house and is still active.

Huthmann was in the last phase of his life engaged in the Brazilian ecological movement AEMA (*Associação Ecológica e Meio Ambientalista*: Ecological and Environmental Association) – this turn towards questions of environmental protection is a parallel to the following third phase of the Romero house in Bonn.

The activities of Martin Huthmann and the thematic focus of the house were somewhat connected developments: The influence of Martin Huthmann was of importance in the development of the house – even though he never gave instructions. In the first years the association of the house supported Brazilian projects initiated by him financially, for example a day nursery for children.

Phase 3: Activism for human rights and climate justice

Even if all the phases overlap, the third phase can schematically be described as focusing on activism for human rights and climate justice. It started with a focus on peace movements and support for the movement of total refusal of military service (“Totale Kriegsdienstverweigerung” – TKDV).²² Beginning with the reception of refugee families from Bosnia in the mid-1990s, the house was a safe space for people with unclear residential status in Germany. The Romero House also houses the office of “Medinetz”, an initiative for medical care for migrants without a legal residence status.

The ecological renovation of the house started with the installation of a solar thermal system (for hot water) in 1991, followed by a rainwater cistern in 1992. This work on the ongoing ecological maintenance of the house²³ also connects with one newer focus of the house, which is the support of anti-coal mining campaigns and grassroots climate action groups.

²² TKDV is the term used in Germany to describe the refusal of any public service obligation, in particular military service (conscription) and all conceivable alternative services (alternative civilian service).

²³ In 1999, a photovoltaic system was installed on the roof. In 2005, new windows were inserted and the façade was insulated (two of four sides of the façade, as the others were not allowed to be insulated due to monument protection). A new heating system (district heating) was installed in 2009. A cost-intensive roof renovation/insulation followed in 2015.

Processes of negotiation about the “spirit of Romero”

The three phases show that the interpretation of the “spirit of Romero” is diverse and dependent on the time and circumstances.

Visually this is expressed in the murals that decorated the façade of the house since 1983 and the accompanying negotiation processes.²⁴ In the last 40 years, the residents have twice started the process of conceptualizing a mural for the Romero House and painted the wall in response. The mural on the façade of the Romero House is a landmark that attracts attention. Situated on the edge of Bonn’s city center the almost windowless façade is easily visible, not only from the Victoria Bridge over which the broad B 56 crosses the railway, but also from the train windows on the route between Cologne and Mainz.

The symbols of the first mural that was designed as a mosaic are grounded in Christian iconography: a blue sword, a red cross, a green church building, and a net are visible. Wolfgang Max Burggraf describes the visual design as follows:

“A colorful ribbon runs from the top left above the façade, leaving monochrome ‘empty’ areas at the bottom left and top right. The colorfulness immediately evokes associations such as diversity or difference, but in its strong colors and clear net structure the band signals stability and determination at the same time. The structure is visually dynamic and changeable, but at the same time stable. The shape perhaps picks up the tradition of the Lenten and Hunger cloths, which cover the high altar of the traditional church interior during Lent. From the upper right corner of the façade, the colors recurring in the net initially emerge as the color bands of the rainbow.”

²⁴ This section of the essay was written together with Wolfgang Burggraf.



Fig. 2: The design of the first mural of the Oscar Romero House in October 1983

20 years later a decision-making process of residents and members of the association resulted in a renewal of the mural. After discussions and self-designed drafts²⁵ the second façade of 2003 is a almost 1:1 reminiscence of the original motif – except that the webpage address was added. Since around 2016 the house’s sovereignty over the design has been slipping away: Sprayers decorate the façade with their tags and their respective external perspective.

²⁵ One alternative draft which was available for selection (and information about the process of its creation) can be found online here: <http://unterwegs-suchen.de/im-aufbruch/wandbild-entwurf> (10.11.2020).



Fig. 3: The mural covered with sprayer tags

In 2020 the group Migrantifa NRW, a self-organized empowerment group “from and for Migras and BIPoCs” approached the residents wanting to redesign the façade. This was taken as an opportunity to initiate an internal discussion process on the redesign, the sovereignty over the façade, and the motives that seem appropriate for the positioning of the house.²⁶ On November 28th 2020 a virtual extraordinary general meeting of the association of the house took place to discuss different views about a vision of a new mural for the house. The following positions emerged as main differences: The group that has been associated with the house for a long time would like to see a reference back to Christian motifs and Oscar Romero. The younger generation sees the need to relate more to current issues (for example topics related to racism and the black lives matter movement).

In the following I would like to give another recent example which shows negotiations about the classification of the spirit of Romero: With the *Oscar Romero Prize* the Förderkreis Oscar Romero House honors registered association members and initiatives from the Cologne/Bonn

²⁶ A decision on the redesign of the façade had not yet been reached in November 2020.

area, who engage themselves in convincing way for the excluded and de-privileged of our society. The prize is endowed with 1000 Euro. Each time the association appoints a jury of qualified persons to award the prize. The Oscar Romero Prize was awarded five times since 2003.²⁷ In 2019 it was given to “Jugend rettet”, an organization that is engaged in the maritime rescue of refugees in the Mediterranean Sea, and the far-left group “Antifa Bonn/Rhein-Sieg” (“Anti-facist Action”). The press release states: “antifa Bonn/Rhein-Sieg has been fighting for thirty years against right-wing and neo-fascist structures. [...] One of the main concerns of antifa Bonn/Rhein-Sieg is the investigation and information about fascist and neo-Nazi structures in the region. A further concern is to encourage young people to get politically involved against right-wing structures. The organization of demonstrations is an important means of drawing attention to fascist structures.”²⁸

Within the association there were internal discussion whether the award to Antifa was in the sense of Romero and his legacy. This discussion was triggered by the question of non-violence. (Non)violence and opposition is a leading topic within the history and discourses of the house. Beginning with cruelties within the daily prison routine to the torture by SS-members. The murder of the communist Josef Messinger by the SS is connected and resonates with the violence of the association of the priest Oscar Romero, and the cruelty of Jesus Christ’s death is invoked in celebrating the mass in the attic of the house. Everyone living at, working at, or being connected with the house is challenged to deal with the issue of violence.

The example of discussions about appropriate prize winners of the Romero Prize returns us to the question asked at the beginning: What is the core identity of the activism associated with Romero? What is put up for discussion, what is negotiated under the label Oscar Romero? What practices and group actions can be described with the category “Romeroian”? For example: Is it *Romeroian* to provide space for organization XY in the house? Is it *Romeroian* to display a banner with the slogan XY on the walls of the house? Is it *Romeroian* to give a prize to group XY? Is it *Romeroian* to focus on organizing public parties at the house? Is it *Romeroian* to evict a roommate? Is it *Romeroian* to increase the rent for the rooms? These questions are negotiated between different groups of actors: the inhabitants at meetings of the residential communities, the board of the association, the association members at general meetings of the association, at house meetings etc.

²⁷ The journalist Siegfried Pater was the first person who received the Romero prize in 2003. The following prize winning organisations were: Sozialistische Selbsthilfe Mülheim (2006), MediNetzBonn (2010) and Informationsstelle Lateinamerika (ila, Bonn) in 2013.

²⁸ <http://antifabonn.blogspot.de/2019/06/18/antifa-bekommtoscar-romero-preis-2018> (10.11.2020)

From my point view these debates address different discursive areas: Different concepts of activism are negotiated as well as divergent understandings of religion and visions of a just society. And maybe it is also an interesting question to ask: what is *not* negotiated in regard to the name Oscar Romero? Answers could be: understandings of gender justice²⁹, feminist topics (within a house dominated by narratives about strong male leading figures: Jesus, Messinger, Huthmann, Romero) and postcolonial and critical race aspects? And what is the reason that these areas are not addressed prominently or is it just a question of time until these topics will be discussed?

Final remarks: Today's Oscar Romero House as a creative space

At present the Oscar Romero House is, to use the words of bell hooks, “a radical creative space”³⁰, located at the margin. In December 2012 I wrote for the so-called Christmas letter³¹ of the Romero Houses’ association: “The Romero House is an alternative space. It offers room for civil society engagement or simply freedom to take a deep breath and to reflect – at the margin of the capitalist hamster wheel. In addition, the house provides office space for socio-political initiatives in order to organize their activities so that they can act professionally. This at a time in which many voluntary initiatives have to end their commitment due to staff shortages and financial scarcity.”

Currently the microstructure of the house consists of the garden that serves as a space for festivals and a playground for children from surrounding areas. The attic is reserved as a space for public events and for base communities to celebrate the mass. Also it is temporarily used as a living space for people who visit the house or have nowhere else to stay. In the cellar of the house a work bench, a bicycle repair station and a pottery studio can be used by the inhabitants (and sometimes the wider public). On the ground floor, offices of NGOs like Informationsstelle Lateinamerika e. V. (ila)³², Medinetz³³, the Rosa Luxemburg library, a

²⁹ The gender balance in the house has been equal for at least the last 15 years. However, figures were never collected. In the early days of the house, there was a male dominance: for example the first board of the association consisted of three men. Currently, the staffing of the residential communities is oriented towards a 50/50 gender quota.

³⁰ hooks, ‘Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness’, 23.

³¹ The aim of the letter was to inform about the activities of the house network and to collect donations for the Buen Pastor hostel in Tapachula (Mexico) that provides medical care for migrants from Central America.

³² ila (www.ila-web.de) is a non-profit association existing since 1975 that publishes a magazine with the same name *ila*. The aim of the association is to publish critical and independent information about Latin America.

³³ MediNetzBonn (<https://medinetzbonn.de>) is a human rights initiative whose goal is to improve the situation for refugees and migrants who, because of legislation in Germany, are partly or completely denied access to medical assistance.

shared office and a for-free-shop are located. At the center of the house are still two flat-sharing communities on two floors.³⁴



Fig. 4: External façade of Oscar Romero House Bonn in 2018

My analysis showed that in the conflict-prone history of the Romero House multiple temporal layers overlap and “haunt” each other – symbolized in the significance of the basement of the house that was formerly a torture area and later was converted in its opposite, a party area. The case of the Romero House also shows various layers of negotiation about the meaning of ‘activism’ symbolized in different interpretations of *Romerorian*.

In sum, the Romero House in Bonn was and still is a focal point for a variety of civic engagement movements and networks. The changes during the history of the house are a mirror of socio-historical developments. The dynamics can be described as a process of marginalization of religion in the house networks: away from Christian-based activism toward

³⁴ On the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the house a publication was released, which presents different aspects of the house to a broad public: Förderverein Oscar-Romero-Haus e.V. (ed.), *Wo Spinner bunte Netze knüpfen – 25 Jahre Oscar-Romero-Haus Bonn*, Bonn: Informationsstelle Lateinamerika (ila), 1998.

more secular social movements. Still these processes are accompanied by negotiation processes about the question of the significance of the namesake of the house.

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