

My Name

In English my name means hope

10 Sandra Cisneros

Black Mother Woman
AUDRE LORDE

I cannot recall you gentle
Yet through your heavy love
I have become

grenzenlos und unverschämt –
ein Gedicht gegen die Deutsche Schreinheit

MAY AYIM

ich werde trotzdem
afrikanisch
sein

Aubade with Burning City
OCEAN VUONG

Milkflower petals on the street

ZWEISPRACHIGER LESEKREIS ALS POSTKOLONIALE/
DEKOLONIALE PRAXIS?
A COLLABORATIVE PERSONAL REFLECTION

Janna El-Daly, Eeva Langeveld, Rita Maricocchi

Audre Lorde, May Ayim, the “Rice and Shine” podcast, Frantz Fanon, Semra Ertan, Karo Akpokiere, 47 Soul ...

These are examples of texts, authors, and artists that we engaged with as part of our student-initiated zweisprachiger Lesekreis at the Universität Münster. The project, which ran from 2020–2022, was a space to read and discuss literary texts and different forms of media that offered topics, perspectives, and critiques marginalized by the syllabi and canons of thoughts typically circulating within our university. It became a way to practice a form of Institutionskritik, un-learning and re-learning, both individually and together. We tried to facilitate Zugang to texts that may not otherwise have been encountered in university spaces either because of the Aufbau of the akademisches Studium, where most students remain siloed in their own disciplines, because of the uniformity of Pflichtlektüre in terms of form (academic writing), and/or because of the confinement of authors from the Global South to specialty seminars.

We were reading, listening to, and watching works that were, in our view, not given enough attention in the curricula (in the humanities and social sciences). This meant both: texts by specific writers, from various political and geographical contexts, as well as different forms of “texts.” These included poetry, podcasts, academic writing, music, performance, etc., all of which we recognized as modes of knowledge production and sharing. While we were certainly not decolonizing the university or even an entire Studiengang, we did aim to go against the canon that prioritizes *white*, Eurocentric texts and to critically reflect on the production of knowledge within the university context and how this is tied to colonial structures and legacies.

The most experimental part of our Lesekreis, which will be discussed in more detail later, was the way we tried to foster a genuinely bilingual space. During discussions, participants were encouraged to express themselves using words from whichever language felt handier from moment to moment. Denglisch (a mixture of German and English) was encouraged, and the interplay between these two languages was much more visible than it usually is in discussions at German universities. In addition,

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the Lesekreis crossed the disciplinary boundaries of the university's structure, gathering many participants that came from fields outside of Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaften. For some, including me (Janna), it was unusual to spend so much time thinking about language and storytelling. The Lesekreis was a space to do so, valuing perspectives and ideas from different disciplines and embodied ways of knowing.

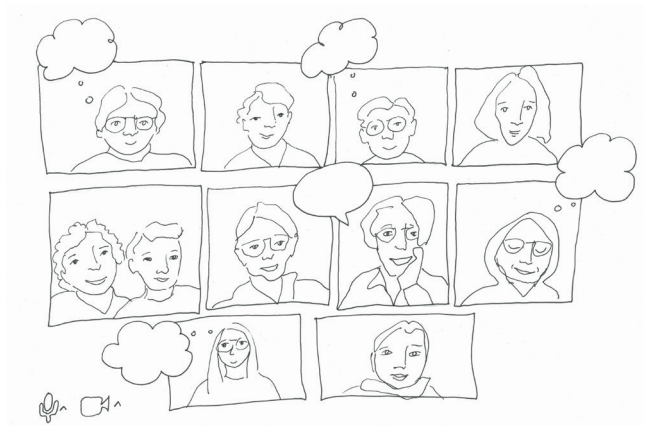
ZOOM ETIQUETTE AND PANDEMIC CIRCUMSTANCES

The Lesekreis formed during the COVID-19 pandemic and emerged, in part, out of a need to communicate and connect with other students and community members. The meetings were hosted via Zoom, in a time when it was in many ways an imposed communication infrastructure that caused fatigue, frustration, and even further isolation. The Lesekreis became a way to reappropriate this space. Part of this had to do with establishing an appropriate digital etiquette. Before opening up the conversation, we would introduce ourselves personally and explain the concept of the reading group as a whole. It was important to us that we created a respectful and open atmosphere for discussion, for instance by asking participants to use inclusive language and avoid reproducing racist terms. We encouraged participants to switch on their cameras and introduce themselves, which they generally did, so that everyone could see their conversation partners and begin to get to know them as individuals.

We also tried to emphasize our role as co-learners who had prepared the discussion, but who were not in the position of Lehrende. Especially then, during the three semesters in Münster where Lehrveranstaltungen were almost exclusively taking place online, it was not always easy to encourage discussion. After all, we felt it too—the experience of staring at the same screen that had functioned as a Vorlesungssaal and a Seminarraum all day. Trying to have a different sort of interaction could be challenging. We tried to structure the questions and discussions in such a way that it was possible to meaningfully participate without having fully read/watched/listened to the texts at all. We asked questions such as: What do you already know about the session's topic? How did you feel while reading the text? Could you relate to the experience described in the text? Did any word or phrase in the text stick out to you?

The chat was also a tool that we used to make the discussion as inclusive as possible. Participants could, for example, send us a private message asking for a translation if they had not understood something in English/German or if they had other issues following or participating in the discussion. In addition, we let participants know they could easily leave and come back to a Zoom meeting according to their wishes. Thus, we hoped it would create a safer space for discussion, where we could explore potentially triggering topics in a way that allowed people to be in control of their own experience.

→ Fig. 2:
A Lesekreis session on Zoom
© Eva Langeveld



LANGUAGE

A key intervention of the Lesekreis into colonial structures of the university was the decision to create a bilingual space where discussion flowed between English and German. This meant different things to each of us. While English often occupies a hegemonic role in international university contexts, it is also a means by which academic spaces can be more accessible and welcoming to international students in Germany. Studying and working at a university in Germany while having German as a foreign language, I (Rita) often observe uncomfortable and adverse reactions to non-native speakers sharing their ideas in an accented, grammatically incorrect German. The impression that such speakers are less intelligent and less accepted in German university spaces, especially in positions of power, illustrates the exclusionary role that the German language often takes on at the German university. At the same time, the hegemonic role of English as a lingua franca in an increasingly internationalized academic setting risks creating the same structures of exclusion for students with English as a foreign language. For me (Rita), the Lesekreis was a space in which multilingualism and accentedness were acknowledged and celebrated. It was a space where language imperfection and the need for translation were a source of inspiration and critical thinking.

In general, we tried to choose texts that existed in both the original and in English/German translation in order to reflect on the connotations and meaning of individual words and phrases. In one of our early sessions, we discussed May Ayim's poem "grenzenlos und unverschämt: ein gedicht gegen die deutsche sch-einheit," translated into English as "borderless and brazen: a poem against the German 'u-not-y.'" We spent some time discussing the translation from *unverschämt* to *brazen*, noticing a slight change in tone when we reflected on personal experiences with German phrases such as "Das ist ja unverschämt!" referring to rude or antisocial behavior that does not conform to societal expectations. These connotations allow Ayim's use of the word to communicate a certain resistance against the rules and expectations of German society, a society which Ayim exposes as

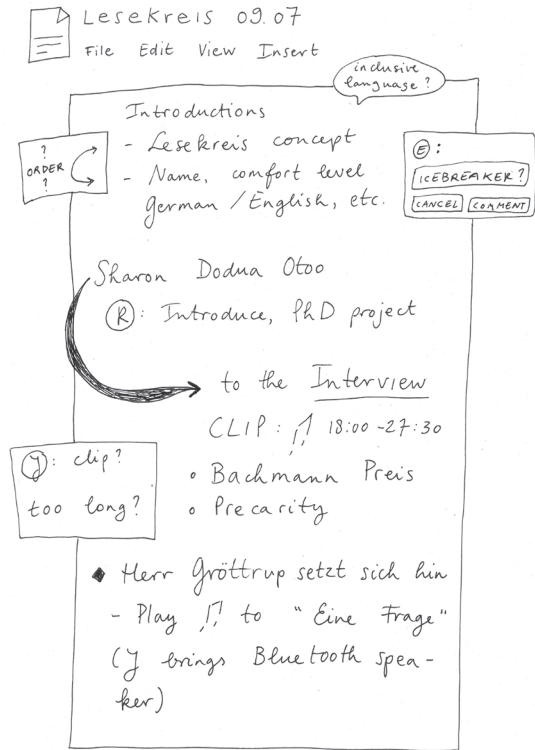
structurally racist and unable to recognize the existence of Afro-Germans like herself as Germans, a society which others in the Lesekreis had also experienced in different ways, depending on their individual identities and positionings.

The bi-/multilingual setting was at times challenging but allowed for new ways to use language in an academic setting. When are you ever in a situation when you can freely choose between English or German and your language skills are not evaluated? For me (Eeva), it felt quite empowering to use German to talk about such layered and serious texts without having to worry about not being able to meet the university's institutional standard—of course, this feeling of empowerment is potentially also connected to certain types of privilege when learning German, such as having Dutch as a first language or being *white*.

In my experience (Janna) as a racialized person in Germany, inside and outside the university, there is a suffocating onus to establish credibility through “flawless” unaccented German. At the same time, inside the university, proficiency in English—sometimes also French, in some fields even elementary Latin—is required. When I was studying political science and law, there was an expectation that these demands remain tacit. To admit “Ich kenne das Wort nicht” can feel like conceding inferiority; to voice a different interpretation of an English sentence can feel like an act of unacceptable condescension as a native English speaker. Even mentioning the language of a text as a factor in comprehension or communication can be something of a taboo. At German universities, at least in my fields of study, content and language are supposed to be considered as a whole; the effect of language on content is made invisible.

In that context, the Lesekreis' focus on language, and particularly on imperfectly beherrschte language (English, German, and sometimes other languages brought in by participants) felt genuinely new to us. The non-judgmental atmosphere in terms of proficiency allowed us to use varying degrees of fluency as an *Auslegungsmethode* for the texts. On occasion, the three of us would learn during a session that we had a completely different interpretation of a German text than some people who had lived in Germany their whole lives, who were more familiar with German literature or history, or who simply had a broader German vocabulary. Instead of seeing these as misinterpretations, however, we treated them as valuable contributions to the session's overall comprehension of the texts and the broader questions we were discussing.

→ Fig. 3:
 Planning ideas © Eva Langeveld



In other words, we really wanted to question the assumption that higher levels of proficiency in a language confer the authority to interpret texts in that language more definitively. As discussed above, the two languages in question are both hegemonic, in different ways, at German universities. Was the bilingual concept, then, itself decolonial? It is difficult to say and, on some level, it is a nonsensical question given the actual scope of our project. We see it more as anti-hegemonic in terms of method in the context of our university, with the subject being decolonial and post-colonial thought.

POSITIONALITY

Choosing to talk about racism and postcolonialism inherently raises questions about the speakers' expertise, positionality, and legitimacy in terms of lived experience. I (Janna), was not interested in lending the whole Unternehmen an air of authenticity by virtue of my origins in a country that suffered deeply under French, British, and American imperialism, zumal we were rarely even talking about my parents' country—something that had sometimes been implicitly asked of me in similar groups, à la "Wir sind weiß und können nichts dazu sagen." From my perspective, the point of whether we could talk about something would have to be settled differently.

For me (Janna), it first had to be established and re-established that we are not experts, as has also been discussed above, but students with an interest in the topic of anti-colonialist theory, art, and literature. A frustration for me, especially among progressive-leaning *white* German political science students, is

the willingness to engage with nearly any topic—war and peace, welfare policy and taxation, immigration, and refugee law—but to plead out of discussions on racism due to lacking lived experience. By insisting that only racialized people can talk about racism, *white* students prevent themselves from engaging critically with works about race. Our Ausgangspunkt was that it is likely that we begin with no more knowledge than other participants in our sessions, that we are usually lacking the specific knowledge that comes from lived experience, but that we can learn with and from one another all the same.

At the same time, it is true that lived experience translates to a type of knowledge that we, in the context of most sessions, did not have access to. I (Janna), think of it as a similar limitation to my lack of access to knowledge of biochemistry or playing the trumpet, but, of course, with far more significant personal implications for the people who do have access to those forms of knowledge. We did not want to become a group specifically for *white* people to talk about race. The Lesekreis was organized in what was also a time of increased discussion around personal and collective responsibility to read, think, and talk about structural racism in our own communities. For me (Rita), it was important to reflect on my own positioning as a *white*, American-born person living in Germany, to create a space to confront questions of knowing and not knowing, and to learn from my co-organizers and fellow reading group participants. Our different positionalities as organizers, and those of participants, were thus factors, but not Ausschlussfaktoren.

Whilst creating a safe and inclusive room for discussion was one of our key priorities, we received some valid criticism after uploading a chapter from the children's book *Pippi Longstocking* in preparation for a session on (anti-)racism in children's literature. Our intention was to discuss the problematic history of racism in children's literature, taking *Pippi Longstocking* as an example of a text that many have read as children but perhaps not yet engaged with critically. We received criticism that we had uploaded the text, which contains the N-word, without a content note or intervention into the text, such as redacting the word. These types of moments made us discuss to what extent we are really an open environment for discussion (and for whom) and whether we would be able to or should still host this specific session, which we did in the end. In addition, it made us extra-aware that none of us faces anti-Black racism and that additional work and reflection is required on our parts in order to engage with these topics.

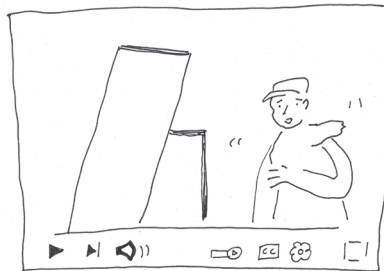
That same session was also criticized on the basis that none of us were ausgebildete Erziehungswissenschaftler*innen, which was presumed to be a requirement to host a public discussion on children's literature at all. To me (Janna), that illustrates the line our group walked very well: Because we chose to talk about issues that have deep, vital implications to people who are not us, we had a responsibility to be open to criticism, to question ourselves, to accept our limitations. We could not, however, concede that only people with certain educational or personal backgrounds can have these conversations.

→ Fig. 4:
 Texts of the session on *Kunst und Kultur der Diaspora* © Eeva Langeveld

The need to acknowledge from what positions we were discussing texts was often thematized in our sessions through the texts themselves. In our final session, for example, we discussed *Deutscher Kolonialismus in Comics* through several works, including Illi Anna Heger’s comic “Herero Ecke Waterbergstraße.” The comic, which can be scrolled through online, depicts the author themselves learning about the history of German colonialism in present-day Namibia starting with the name of a street sign. Throughout the panels, Heger draws themselves into the comic in order to foreground that the history is being told through their perspective. We discussed whether this was a successful strategy, whether it facilitated reflection on positionality or whether it allowed the *white* author to take up too much space in a comic about colonial history. The discussion made room for differing opinions and also acknowledged that positionality and self-location require ongoing reflection.

DER PODCAST FÜR VIETDEUTSCHE PERSPEKTIVEN

Rice and Shine



47 SOUL - Border Ctrl.

ODE TO SUGARIG

Safia Elkillo

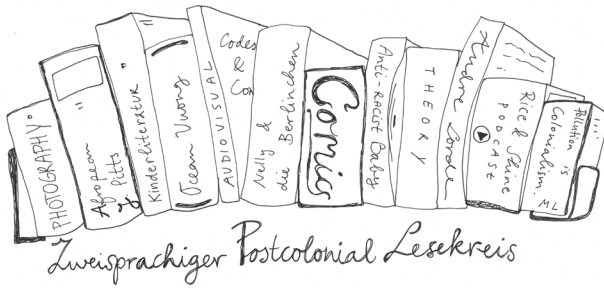
golden drip of sugar was pressed

CONCLUSION

In sum, the bilingual Lesekreis was a way to practice knowledge production in a collective and inclusive way. It drew on decolonial and postcolonial ideas, concepts, and ambitions, but foregrounded their actual practice. Thinking with James Baldwin, it was education with a lowercase “e” as opposed to Education with an uppercase “E” (Baldwin 2018, 5). It emphasized the creation and sharing of knowledge amongst individuals in relation with one another, working toward the subversion of the power structures informing university education. The texts were varied, reaching

across national, disciplinary, and generic boundaries, and created unexpected resonances between each other and with participants. Thinking, for example, of our first session dedicated to the short story “Recitatif” by Toni Morrison and one of our later sessions to the short story “Herr Gröttrup setzt sich hin” by Sharon Dodua Otoo, these stories, while both deeply embedded in historical and political contexts, offered connections to participants in different ways. “Recitatif,” which thematizes race and class in the mid-century US, is set in a context that is culturally familiar to Americans; “Herr Gröttrup,” about the twilight years of a bürgerliches Ehepaar, reminded several of our German Diskussionsteilnehmer*innen of their grandparents. Being able to read texts that different people could connect to in different ways, to teach and learn from one another in a collective setting where knowledge in its different forms and genealogies was valued, and being able to communicate with each other across and between English and German was the decolonial/postcolonial work of the Lesekreis.

→ Fig. 5:
 Texts discussed in the Lesekreis
 Illustration by Eeva Langeveld.
 Courtesy of the authors.
 © Eeva Langeveld



P.S.: The Lesekreis is currently not active; our last meeting was on April 25, 2022. Graduations, moving, new jobs, and new responsibilities have all been a part of choosing to pause this project. Yet, the experiences we outlined above have influenced us in different ways. I (Rita) am now a PhD candidate and lecturer, still at the University of Münster, and find myself thinking back to the open, inclusive atmosphere of exchange established in the Lesekreis as I consider what kind of classroom environment I want to create with my students. I also treasure all of the wonderful texts Eeva and Janna introduced to me throughout our discussions and have even had the chance to introduce some of them to my students.

Also, for me (Eeva), the project still has professional and personal effects. Firstly, the discussion on comics in the earlier mentioned session on *Deutscher Kolonialismus in Comics* still directly influences my writing as a PhD student, and the working process has been of great value for my Freundschaft with Rita and Janna. But on top of that, the Lesekreis has introduced me to new texts, perspectives, and ways of exchanging ideas that keep inspiring me and make me question hegemonic practices in the university and beyond.

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For me (Janna), the Lesekreis was like working a muscle I had not used since high school: analysis of literature and other texts on their own terms, as political vehicles and as works of art. I learned so much about that kind of approach from Eeva and Rita. Having left the academy, at least for now, I look back at the Lesekreis as one of the most enjoyable and meaningful parts of my Studium.