

Independent Studies: Love, Power & Academia. An Event Report about a Student Project at the *WortLaut* Festival 2022

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In the 2022 summer term, Anna-Lena Oldehus and master students of the English Department at the Leibniz University of Hannover (LUH) conceptualized a student project that was later realized in the context of the annual *WortLaut* festival (fig. 1) – an event that aims to showcase Hannover’s literary, linguistic, and intercultural diversity and seeks to inspire enthusiasm about language, reading, and words. The festival took place in October 2022 and offered an opportunity for Hannover residents to actively shape the festival program – and also for the students participating in Anna-Lena Oldehus’ independent studies course.

The seminar participants eventually conceived an evening at the local community center Freizeithem Linden that included an exhibition of several different creative and interactive student projects as well as an interview with porn scholar Madita Oeming. Overall, the evening set out to explore the relationship between love, power, and academia, seeking to answer questions like: How does academia address love and where does love find its place in the academic field? Where does love become problematic and where is it indispensable? The evening’s exhibition included installations made by the students that engaged with the complexity, ubiquity, and emotionality of love, power, and academia. These included a videotaped dance performance, posters, personal stories, and interactive parts designed to involve the festival audience and their opinions, ideas and perceptions. All installations emphasized different facets of the interplay between these evening’s central concepts. The aim of a video installation by one of the seminar participants, for instance, was to draw attention to the sensitive issue of emotional abuse (fig. 2). Flanked by explanatory posters, the pre-recorded video tried to portray emotions and struggles caused by abuse and asked the audience to reflect on their own experiences and feelings regarding the topic. While this exhibit dealt with themes of (self-)love and power, other students chose a different approach to portray the (sometimes problematic) relationship between love and power in academia. Another set of posters, for instance, was dedicated to queerness in academia and showcased the lives and struggles of a few famous scientists: the astrophysicist and first American woman in space Sally Ride (1951-2012), the British mathematician and father of modern computer sciences Alan Turing (1912-1954), and the American physician and pioneer of X-ray photography Alan L. Hart (1890-1962) (fig. 3). Using the examples of queer scientists like Ride, Turing, and Hart – who had to pretend to be heterosexual and live a double life in order to escape discrimination and pursue their careers – the posters called attention to how queer love was, and still is, subject to discrimination, hate, and persecution.

Another project explored the relationship between academia and power by collecting snippets of conversations of about work from academics all over Germany. This project positioned itself in the context of the grassroots initiative *#IchBinHanna* (“I am Hanna”) that has been addressing and publicizing the precarious working conditions in German academia since 2021. The hashtag emerged in response to a promotional video by the German Federal Ministry for Education and Research (BMBF) explaining the alleged benefits of the notorious *Wissenschaftszeitvertragsgesetz* (the Academic Fixed-Term Contract Act). Under *#IchBinHanna*, thousands of academics have reported their experiences with fixed-term contracts in German academia. Many of them shared that permanent positions at German universities have become extremely scarce and are mainly available to candidates at the professorial level. Yet, highly skilled scholars and scientists are still needed to do teaching, research, and lab work. As a result, these specialized, highly educated researchers at the doctoral and postdoctoral levels find themselves in a cycle of moving from institution to institution without ever signing a permanent contract. The snippets presented at the event raised awareness for the *#IchbinHanna* campaign and the underlying problems by connecting them to some personal thoughts and anecdotes of academics who struggle with work under the present conditions.

Some student projects also actively involved the visitors of the exhibition. For one project, for example, guests were invited to enter a room full of mirrors. To do so, visitors had to pass through a black curtain decorated with notes that represented insecurities, fears, and self-doubts that had to be actively pushed aside in order to reach the safe place within (fig. 4). Once inside, visitors were invited to write down on a sticky note what they loved about themselves or something they were proud of and leave it on one of the mirrors (fig. 5). In this manner, the installation invited visitors to physically leave negative thoughts behind and step into a safe space in which they could feel accepted just the way they were.

Some of the questions about the relationship between love, power, and academia raised by the students’ installations were also picked up again in the final event of the evening: an interview that Anna-Lena Oldehus conducted with porn scholar Madita Oeming (fig. 6).



Figure 1. Anna-Lena Oldehus (second from left) and WortLaut festival organizers Verena Pape, Isabell Petter, and Thimm Bubbel (from left to right).

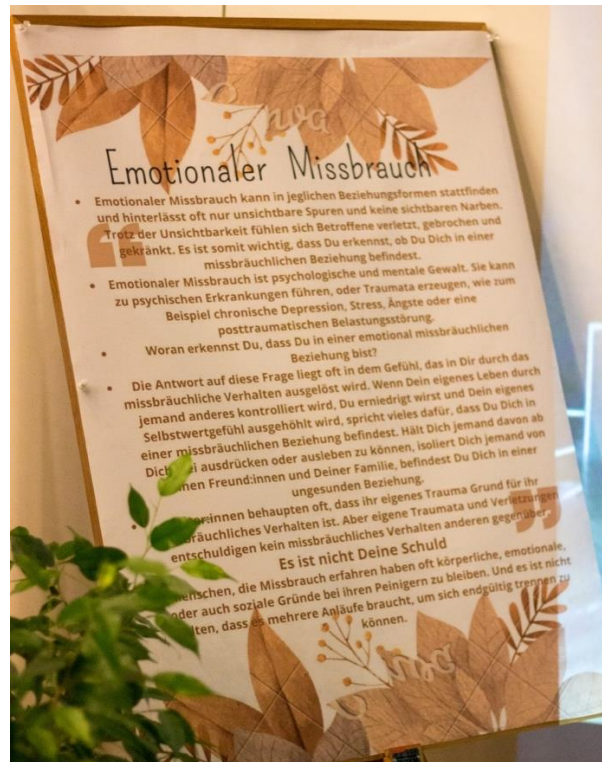


Figure 2. Introductory text to the video installation about emotional abuse.

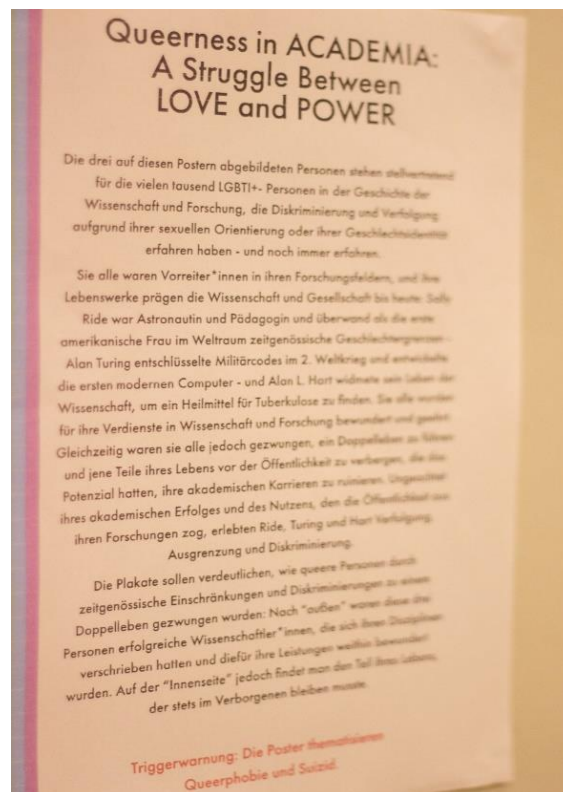


Figure 3. Queerness in Academia – A Struggle between Love and Power. Introductory text to posters about Sally Ride, Alan Turing and Alan L. Hart.

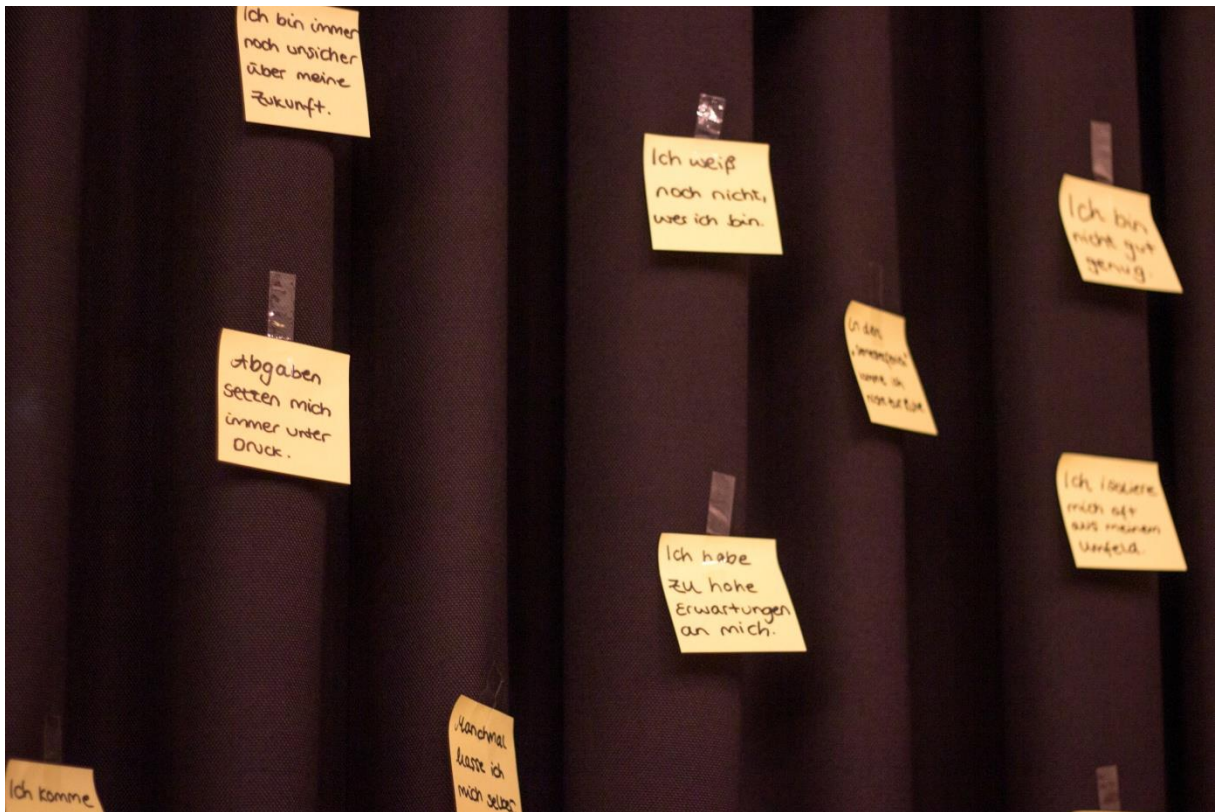


Figure 4. Pushing through fears, insecurities, struggles, and self-doubts in order to reach the safe space within.

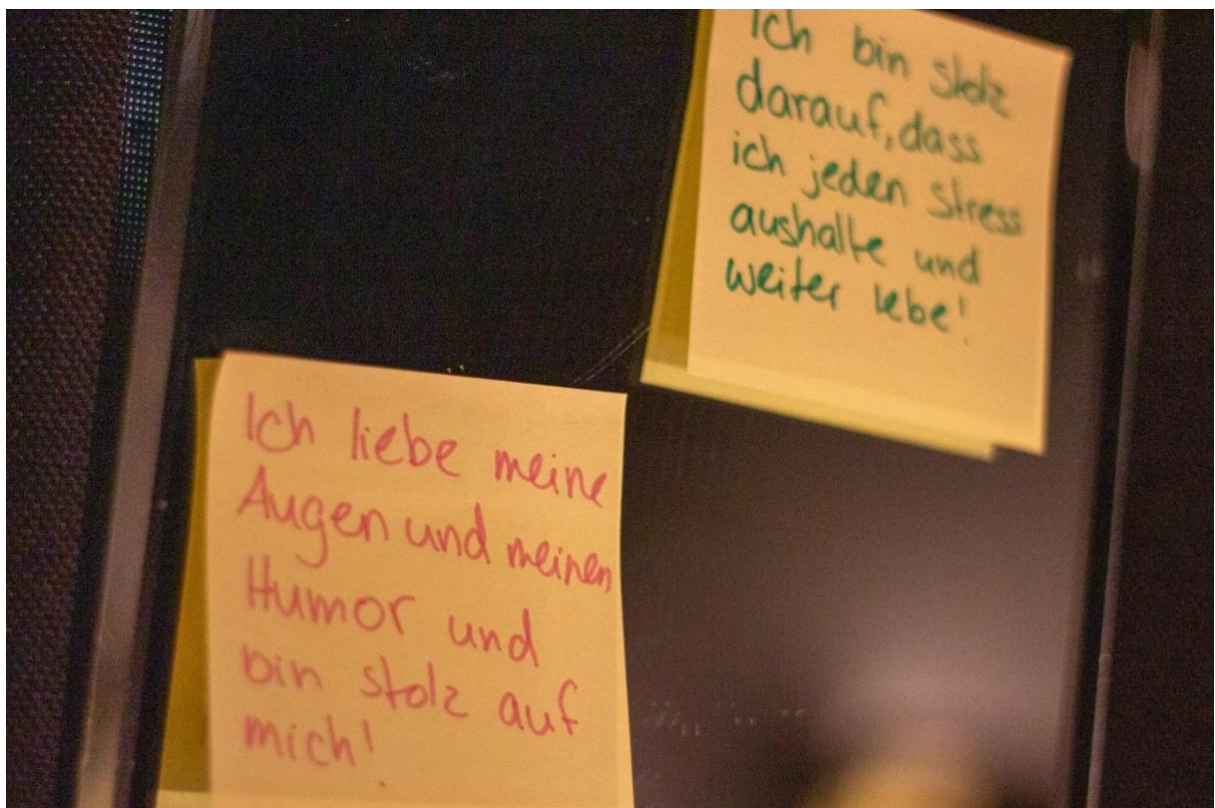


Figure 5. Involving the audience – self-affirming statements on a mirror.