



## **Beyond Alternatives Decentering Knowledge in Asia**

Noorman Abdullah, Kelvin Low, Thomas Stodulka, and Ferdiansyah Thajib

In-Person Workshop ZiF Bielefeld / 25-26 September 2023



This workshop addresses current debates on the tensions between critical and decolonial pedagogies as allied yet diversely positioned attempts of producing ‘alternative’ knowledge. It also attempts to engage with these appraisals critically in relation to the broader concerns revolving around knowledge production and circulation, and its concomitant discourses, practices and cultures. The proliferation of such initiatives and interventions in learning within the region has a target of personal and large-scale transformation within different key domains of life: from issues of economic, environmental, and social justice, from structural inequality

to local empowerment, pedagogic resistance, or religious reformation movements. What does 'alternative' mean, to whom, and in what temporal and situational context? What are the limits and dilemmas of alternative discourses that can be problematised? How can we extend knowledge production, circulation, and learning in the name of 'good' social science? More recently, scholars have engaged in making sense of and theorising processes of 'silencing' (Alatas, 2018) as a method and how they have been institutionalised in academic settings through publications, research, and teaching.

## **Day 1 DECOLONISING KNOWLEDGE AND GRASSROOTS PRACTICES**

**09.30 – 09.45 Introduction and Welcome**

**09.45 – 10.45 Day 1 Keynote**

### ***The Practice of Decolonising***

Syed Farid Alatas, Department of Sociology & Anthropology, and Department of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore, [alatas@nus.edu.sg](mailto:alatas@nus.edu.sg)

**10.45 – 11.15 Coffee Break**

**11.15 – 13.00 Grassroots Movements and Pedagogies of Hope**

### ***Recycling Public Institutions: Social Practice and Alternative Knowledge Production of the Grassroots***

Nuraini Juliastuti, Kunci Study Forum & Collective / HKU University of the Arts, [njuliastuti@gmail.com](mailto:njuliastuti@gmail.com)

### ***Re-enchanting the World through Place-based Pedagogies***

Aarti Kawlra, International Institute for Asian Studies, Leiden the Netherlands, [a.kawlra@iias.nl](mailto:a.kawlra@iias.nl); [aartikawlra1@gmail.com](mailto:aartikawlra1@gmail.com)

### ***Implementing Permaculture Gardens as a Living Laboratory in Timor-Leste's Primary Schools***

Eugenio Lemos, Permatil Timor-Leste, [ego.lemos72@gmail.com](mailto:ego.lemos72@gmail.com), and Thomas Stodulka, Freie Universität Berlin, [thomas.stodulka@fu-berlin.de](mailto:thomas.stodulka@fu-berlin.de)

**13.00 – 14.30 Lunch**

**14.30 – 16.00 Thematic World Cafés on Teaching and Learning**

moderated by Thomas Stodulka, [thomas.stodulka@fu-berlin.de](mailto:thomas.stodulka@fu-berlin.de)

**16.00 – 16.30 Coffee Break**

**16.30 – 17.00 Closing Day 1**

## Day 2 DECOLONISING KNOWLEDGE AND ACADEMIC PRACTICES

### 10.00 – 11.00 Day 2 Keynote

#### ***Decolonising Pedagogy: Epistemic Expansions as Ethical Practices***

Vineeta Sinha, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, National University of Singapore, [socvs@nus.edu.sg](mailto:socvs@nus.edu.sg)

### 11.00 – 11.30 Coffee Break

### 11.30 – 12.45 Rethinking Knowledge Production and Circulation

#### ***On the Decolonising Process in Teaching and Pedagogy: Pitfalls and Problematics***

Noorman Abdullah, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, and Department of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore, [socnooa@nus.edu.sg](mailto:socnooa@nus.edu.sg)

#### ***Widening the Ambit of Sensory Scholarship: Theorising from Asia***

Kelvin E.Y. Low, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, National University of Singapore, [kelvinlow@nus.edu.sg](mailto:kelvinlow@nus.edu.sg)

### 12.45 – 14.00 Lunch

### 14.00 – 15.15 Rethinking Methods and Sources

#### ***The Fugitive as Method: Devising an Escape from Imperialist Logics on Kinmen***

Junbin Tan, Department of Anthropology, Princeton University, [junbint@princeton.edu](mailto:junbint@princeton.edu)

#### ***Colonial Photographs: (Un)Covering Gender and Family in the Malay and Indonesian World***

Suriani Suratman, Department of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore, [mlsss@nus.edu.sg](mailto:mlsss@nus.edu.sg)

### 15.15 – 15.45 Coffee Break

### 15.45 – 16.15 Publication Discussion and Closing Remarks

19.30            **Dinner at Glückundseligkeit** (Artur-Ladebeck-Str. 57, 33617 Bielefeld)

## ABSTRACTS (DAY 1)

### ***The Practice of Decolonising***

Syed Farid Alatas, Department of Sociology & Anthropology, National University of Singapore  
Department of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore

In this paper, I discuss a number of broad issues that relate to the practice of decolonising knowledge. First of all, I raise the problem often encountered by those sympathetic to the task of decolonising knowledge of not knowing how exactly to engage in decolonised theory and empirical work, with the application of decolonised methods. It is often the case that many academics who are exposed to the discourses on the decolonisation of knowledge in the social sciences and humanities, and who have even taken an interest in such discourses, are often perplexed when it comes to the actual practice of decolonising knowledge. They have an abstract and perhaps even vague understanding of what decolonisation entails, which they find difficult to apply to the process of knowledge creation. To my mind, this problem stems in part from the lack of precise and elaborate definitions of Eurocentric knowledge, resulting in a vague understanding of what decolonised knowledge should look like. It is unhelpful to merely state that Eurocentrism refers to the construction of non-European/non-Western realities from a biased, European perspective. This paper attempts, therefore, to provide an elaborate definition of Eurocentrism, which in turn suggests what decolonisation of knowledge means. I then turn to a discussion on the need to teach in the decolonised mode, suggesting that the work of decolonisation of knowledge cannot be limited to the realms of research and conference papers. Finally, I make some remarks on the ultimate aim of the decolonisation of knowledge, that is, the recognition of the Eurocentricity of the world itself, not just knowledge, and the effort to make transformations, in however small ways.

The paper begins with a statement of the problem of knowledge creation from a decolonial perspective, with reference to the foundational events in the development of the modern world between 1492 and 1522. I then turn to the elaboration of the traits of Eurocentric knowledge, suggesting that decolonised knowledge creation be seen as the elimination or reversal of those traits. Examples of what decolonised knowledge looks like in terms of theory building and concept formation are provided. The paper also discusses the need to teach in the mode of decolonization with some examples given from theory and methodology. The paper concludes with some remarks on the relationship between the Eurocentricity of knowledge and the Eurocentricity of the world.

### ***Recycling Public Institutions: Social Practice and Alternative Knowledge Production of the Grassroots***

Nuraini Juliastuti, Kunci Study Forum & Collective / HKU University of the Arts

My presentation explores the layered dimensions of alternative knowledge production at the grassroots level in the times of crisis. I will show the making of non-extractive attitude of producing knowledge through mutating the cultural infrastructures and training sensibilities for talking back and identifying diverse knowledge producers in

multiple contexts. The presentation is a work in progress and based on my ongoing research about independent art and cultural organisations which are situated at the intersection of village schools, free art schools, community archiving, circular economies and popular media. I use the following initiatives as case studies: Pagesangan School in Yogyakarta, Lakoat Kujawas in Mollo (Indonesia), Arte Moris (Timor Leste and Tiny Toones, Cambodia), Photo Circle and Nepal Picture Library (Nepal).

In thinking about what it means to decentering knowledge in Asia, I extend my conceptualisation on 'commons museums,' a concept that I conceptualised to define a counter-authoritative cultural institution and a set of strategies for worlding, modelled on alternative spaces and community organisations (Juliastuti, *Commons Museums: Pedagogies for Taking Ownership of What is Lost*, ICI Berlin Press 2023). I will show the organisation of alternative schools and public learning spaces as a productive path of producing archives and knowledge of different senses and urgencies which always evolve along with the community's lifeline inquiries. At once, it emerged as a new way of doing social practice in contemporary art and culture in multiple contexts. This includes the development of sustainable cultural infrastructure to share the thinkings about remaking life with the others, in self-organising manner. The potentials of these schools to become sites of social transformation lie in the possibilities to democratise public spaces and to disrupt the hierarchical knowledge production. Part of this presentation will be allocated to theorise the meaning of doing research and going back to theories. I observe that research emerged to be part of the development of tools to restore part of the communities' histories which have been lost, repressed and forgotten. Research becomes a site to pay debt to the local cultural ecosystem through building reciprocal relations, narrating the stories of the ecosystem, reflecting on various self positioning and creating a more workable and just living environment.

### ***Re-enchanted the world through place-based pedagogies***

Aarti Kawlra, International Institute for Asian Studies, Leiden the Netherlands

The massive expansion of information and communication technologies like mobiles, internet, and the worldwide web, since the last century, has provided new opportunities for youth to be globally connected, and opened a variety of unforeseen or unimagined educational modalities. At the same time, young people everywhere are faced with subtle forms of isolation and disconnection from their own origins, be it defined by place of birth, family, community, language, culture, or nation. The growing numbers within the 'NEET' category (not in employment, education, or training) of young men and women in their twenties, shows how entry into adulthood is a vulnerable life-stage for them, especially if they must also navigate obstacles of structural and historical disadvantage such as race, caste, class, or gender. At home, school and even at work, many struggle with issues of self-confidence, lack a sense of belonging, and often feel bound and/or suppressed by cultural, social, and religious norms. Many children and young adults live amidst everyday expressions of subtle and overt violence that often scars them for life and robs them of their freedom to think and act freely. New dependencies on social media and virtual technologies, not only promote social and physical distancing but also, intensify the psychological exhaustion,

disillusionment and despair among youth. Their alienation from the real world of living beings and nature has only been accelerated since the pandemic. Can locally grounded, globally connected, critical pedagogies counter the crisis among youth caught between the grip of ubiquitous internet technologies on the one hand, and climate emergencies on the other?

This presentation is a reflection on some explorations in place-based pedagogies in vastly diverse contexts. I will share my experience in conceiving and implementing a high school project in Chennai, South India; writing a text-book chapter for India's open university for distance learning; co-designing and teaching a graduate school in Chiang Mai, Thailand; and another one in Leiden, The Netherlands. My aim will be i) to discuss the potential for learning-in-context as a collaborative endeavor and an exercise in meaning making; and ii) to direct our attention towards educators (and students) working in conditions of political instability, cultural fragility and deeply entrenched social inequities, both in the Global South and the North.

### ***Implementing Permaculture Gardens as a Living Laboratory in Timor-Leste's Primary Schools***

Eugenio (Ego) Lemos, CEO-Permatil and Permatil Global Goodwill Ambassador for Art, Culture and Environment, Timor-Leste, and Thomas Stodulka, Freie Universität Berlin

Timor-Leste is a small half island nation with a total area of only 14,000 square miles. It is a country with potentially abundant local resources. However, with intense population growth, with limited land resources and youth not wanting to work in the agricultural sector, poor educational facilities, and enormous pressure to survive by satisfying economic imperatives over which communities had little control, land was cleared to concentrate on monoculture produce that was faster and easier to cultivate in the immediate term. As the decades since independence have shown, this monoculture-driven endeavor does not contribute to the long-term future of Timor-Leste. Traditional knowledge of food and agriculture, including protection of land, water, seeds, animals, indigenous foods, natural medicines and arts are starting to disappear, thus impacting on cultural destruction of the environment with escalating malnutrition rates for mothers and children in particular.

Education is a fundamental basis to increase people's knowledge and skills. Education can form people's way of thinking, character as well as attitude. However, education cannot stand aloof from important decisions that need to be made. We face a future of declining oil supplies and a climate change that is set to affect our lives in significant ways. Schools will be called upon to embrace the national goal of environmental education for sustainability, a preparation and empowerment of students to assume responsibility for creating and enjoying a sustainable future. Teachers will be expected to design teaching and learning strategies to achieve these outcomes. The challenge is enormous because it is transformative on many levels. Teaching in school gardens will help to facilitate better learning processes that have so far only been based on theory. In collaboration with local communities, they embrace the social and cultural practices of its people and foster a learning for both local and global futures.

## ABSTRACTS (DAY 2)

### ***Decolonising Pedagogy: Epistemic Expansions as Ethical Practices***

Vineeta Sinha, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, National University of Singapore

Taking a historical perspective, this talk focuses on the emergence of anthropological perspectives in Britain and the USA as well as the modes in which the disciplinary practices were institutionalized in the former colonies in parts of Southeast Asia and South Asia. Starting with intellectual biographies of anthropologists (some more familiar than others) like - Koentjaraningrat, G. Obeyesekere, Lucy Mair, Edward Tylor, W. H. Rivers Rivers, Elsie Clews Parsons, Franz Boas, Syed Husin Ali, Irawati Karve and G. S. Ghurye - from different world regions and the socio-cultural and institutional contexts is critical for mapping complex histories of anthropological thought globally. Here, the intention is to emphasize that the interface of individuals, ideas and institutions, mediated by colonial and post-colonial contexts, is critical in the process of anthropological knowledge production. While the historical lens offers a critical starting point for engaging the discipline's past, the continuities between anthropological legacies and contemporary disciplinary logics are far from surprising. I argue that critiques of inherited anthropological traditions (through the lens of a decolonization project) and the curation of alternative disciplinary and pedagogical norms and practices entail rethinking given epistemics and ethics – processes which are necessarily framed by these received histories – something that practitioners thus need to critically engage with and transcend in, and through their practice.

### ***On the Decolonising Process in Teaching and Pedagogy: Pitfalls and Problematics***

Noorman Abdullah, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, and Department of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore

The decolonising processes at the level of the curriculum and university structures have recently occupied public and scholarly scrutiny in many societies, including Asian contexts. Concomitantly, institutes of higher learning (IHLs) in these milieux have been actively involved in crafting an “Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion” (EDI) framework as part of its wider curricular and pedagogical agenda and reform. Both scholars and university administrators alike have acknowledged the imperative to critically appraise the manner in which knowledge is produced and circulated as part of its process of ‘decolonising’. By that extension, proponents of such a framework insist on revisiting alternative curricula and discourses in the pursuit of diversifying, pluralising, and transforming the classroom. Yet, what does ‘diversity’, ‘plurality’, ‘inclusivity’ and ‘decolonisation’ mean in the classroom? How are these concepts, important as these may be presented to be, translated into meaningful pedagogical strategies and interventions that resonate with both students and teachers? What are some of the pitfalls, pushbacks, and problematics that teachers and administrators in IHLs need to confront when they invoke the language of ‘decolonisation’? What transpires in the classroom and the space within which this curriculum is delivered between learners? This paper critically reflects on some of the pitfalls and potholes of ‘decolonising’ ways of thinking and teaching, and the manner in which these can be possibly sidestepped. A commitment to engaging in decolonising the curriculum and the teaching involved in

doing so affords for more accessible, less hierarchical, inclusive and collaborative spaces for both teaching and learning experiences, while at the same time, recognising the salience afforded to reflexivity and uneven power asymmetries.

***Widening the Ambit of Sensory Scholarship: Theorising from Asia***

Kelvin E.Y. Low, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, National University of Singapore

While the field of sensory studies has burgeoned over the decades and gained further traction in such disciplines as anthropology, sociology, geography, history and others, this domain of scholarly inquiry remains dominated by academic attention paid mainly to Anglo-Western contexts as cases for analysis. A common point of departure in these sensory writings deals with the imperialism of sight and the Western pentad sensory model. These are critiqued as being centred in specific North American and European contexts that limit the exploration of various other sensory orders across different societies and sense hierarchies. Primary and secondary sensory research on non-Western contexts (Smith 2006, 2007) is largely incipient; this observation still holds true today. While most anthropological scholarship on the senses have typically focused on societies in North America and Europe or in non-industrial societies, more recent works have lately begun to draw attention to societies in the non-West, including industrialised contexts in both historical and contemporary milieu. More can and should be accomplished with respect to crafting deeper and further sustained explorations and examinations of sensoria in the non-West.

The paper draws from my recent book on *Sensory Anthropology: Culture and Experience in Asia*, and deliberates upon how social actors and institutions employ and accord meanings to the senses which can be located in the fabric of everyday life experiences spanning different social encounters in Asia. Its connected historical contexts serve as a fertile cross-cultural site for developing newer theoretical interventions in examining sensory knowledge and practice. By taking Asia not merely as a geographical location but as a site of theory (Sinha 2003; Yue 2017), my endeavour therefore aims to produce sensible knowledge (Strati 2007) about the region across historical milieu. Sensory cultures of Asia comprise sensory modalities that go beyond and are distinct from the Western pentad sensory model. My approach is therefore also a critical appraisal of the model that I develop herein. The investigation is supported by empirical material that I corral from a range of ethnographies and other works that are accompanied by sensory accounts. The data include my archival research on media reports dating between the 1800s and 1900s, as well as oral history materials. Additionally, the pool of data contains sources such as travel writing, oral history accounts, literature (including poetry, myths, folk-tales and legends), and letters written to the press in colonial periods that highlight sensory encounters among different social groups or classes.



### ***The Fugitive as Method: Devising an Escape from Imperialist Logics on Kinmen***

Junbin Tan, Princeton University

My grandparents left Kinmen, Fujian for colonial Singapore in the 1940s in search for work. My family saw ourselves as descendants of a diaspora community, believing that my grandparents migrated in order to support their families. These grounds for loyalism crumbled when I was at Kinmen for fieldwork in 2021, when a relative revealed that my grandfather had *fled* from Kinmen for fear of being drafted as a soldier when the Chinese Civil War resumed in 1945. In this paper, I reclaim this revelation for thinking about one's belonging to polity, nation, or empire by mobilizing "the fugitive" as an analytical trope. Kinmen became the Republic of China's battlefield against Fujian from 1949 to 1992, but the collapse of its wartime economy after 1992 forced local governors to forge economic relations with Fujian. The "mini three links" started in 2001, which enabled commerce and travel between Kinmen and Fujian, and transformed the ex-battlefront into a border crossing. These relations became frowned upon as Taiwanese increasingly advocate Taiwan's autonomy against China's claims to Taiwan. In turn, Kinmenese experience Taiwan nationalism as alienating and imperializing. I place my struggles at coming to terms with my grandfather's fugitiveness in dialogue with my interlocutors' struggles between pragmatism and nationalism, and China and Taiwan.

This paper examines the chasms between imperializing expectations to loyalty—my family's to Kinmen; Kinmen's to Taiwan; and Taiwan's to China—, and one's desire to escape these expectations. Empirically, it treats migration from southeast China to colonial Southeast Asia not as economic but political migration, and compares a "returning migrant's" experiences with the non-migrants', embroiled in their own political struggles. I advance three arguments: One, "the fugitive" echoes Chen's (2010:ix) insight that "a negation of nationalism is nothing but escapism," but treats "escape" affirmatively. Two, taking Wang's (2013) critique of the post-loyalist seriously, "the fugitive" urges a rethinking of the manner by which subalterns speak (Spivak 1987). The fugitive sees escape not as avoidance but solution; I provide examples of my interlocutors' and my attempts to "refuse" (Simpson 2007) the pressures and languages of nationalism and loyalism. Three, in turning a revelation I tried to escape from into material for conversations that leave spaces for disagreement, I set the grounds for dialogue with my interlocutors while stopping short of assumed "intimacies," methods, and certainties (Lowe 2015). Ever in transit, "the fugitive" treads through unpredictable paths to unknown destinations (Vimalassery 2016).

### ***Colonial Photographs: (Un)Covering Gender and Family in the Malay and Indonesian World***

Suriani Suratman, Department of Malay Studies, National University of Singapore

Colonial photographs especially those that have entered collecting institutions are almost always sites of intersecting histories of encounters and relationships. Images framed in these photographs can create stories that distort identities and appropriate cultures. Yet, these same photographic images also afford the possibility to uncover the workings of power and structural violence behind them. In this presentation I share my recent experience as a member of a research project funded by the National

Heritage Board, Singapore. A component in the project is the curation of an exhibition based on archival sources of photographic collections mainly from the Singapore National Library and the Singapore Archive. The virtual exhibition titled "Being and Becoming: Of Femininities in the Malay World through 50 Images" was on from 12 May 2022 to 31 August 2022. Based on three broad themes of Body, Space and Activity, these 50 images were selected "to raise questions, in the eyes of contemporary viewers, of received ideas on femininities, as they intersect with social class, place, race and empire in the Malay world". Coming from my interest on family lives and gender relations in households in the Malay and Indonesian world, I engaged with photographs of women's involvement of activities in and outside of the household. The photographs cover a range of everyday tasks of caring for children, washing clothes, preparing for meals as well as a variety of activities that generate income for the household including peddling, waged work in plantations as well as working as singers and dancers in music and dance troupes. The intent of this presentation is to move away from the expectation that photographs bring "the real, the truthful" (Edwards 2001). I share the view of Edwards (2003) with regards to the power of photographs because they seldom have "closed meanings" and that meanings are "mutable and arbitrary". As sites of ambiguity, colonial photographs have the potential to disturb, disrupt dispute and decentre singular narratives and knowledges that are reproduced from dominant practices of representation. In this regard as a pedagogical tool, photographs have the potential to provoke inquiry and to invite viewers to reflect on their assumptions, interpretations and knowledge.

## Travel Directions to Workshop Venue

### Address

Zentrum für Interdisziplinäre Forschung (ZiF) (Centre for Interdisciplinary Research)  
Universität Bielefeld (Bielefeld University)

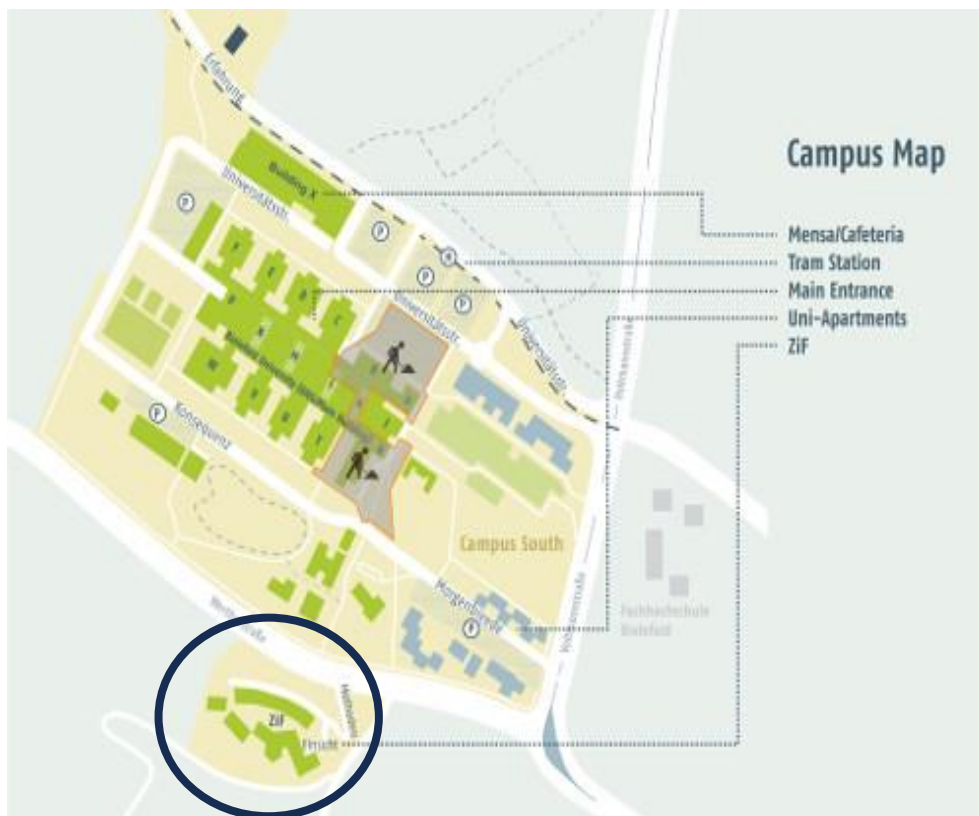
Methoden 1  
33615 Bielefeld  
Germany

### By Tram/Subway

- Take the subway/tram from Bielefeld Hbf (Hauptbahnhof), Line 4 (destination Universität or Lohmannshof, approx. 7 minutes).
- Alight at Universität or Bültmannshof
- You can reach ZiF by walking up the hill behind the main building of the university

### By Taxi

- Taxis are available directly in front of the main station (Bielefeld Hauptbahnhof) (approx. 10 minutes).
- The fare to the university is about 16 euros.



## Travel Directions to Workshop Dinner

### **Address**

*Glückundseligkeit  
Artur-Ladebeck-Str. 57,  
33617 Bielefeld  
Germany*

### **By Tram/Subway**

- Take the subway/tram from Bielefeld Hbf (Hauptbahnhof), Line 1 (destination Brackwede Bahnhof, Senne, approx. 8 minutes).
- Alight at Bethel
- Walk to the restaurant (in a former church) for about 2 minutes