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Open Letter to the Klett publishing house

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Dear management of the Klett publishing house,

The German governmental commissioner for migration, refugees and integration, minister of state Aydan Özoğuz, has just recently called the German population to “occasionally mistrust their textbooks“. She used this famous quotation by Erich Kästner in the introduction of the “Textbook Study on Migration and Integration“. We take our minister of state at her word and express our disapproval of the new series *Meine Indianerhefte*, published by Klett. We are a group of civil society organizations, teachers, academics, educators and individuals from Germany and abroad.

The booklets are intended to serve as an addition to regular teaching materials and have been designed to support primary school kids in their learning activities. They do so by offering playful writing, reading and calculating exercises. These individual exercises are interrupted by child-friendly ‘Indian’ pages for motivational purposes. In all booklets the children meet Anoki, a young Native American with a feather headdress. On individual pages there are random designs of tomahawks, tipis, totem poles and feathers, as well as a mixture of images – from German everyday situations up to a knight’s castle and lonely tropical islands.

We criticize these new learning booklets because they use Native Americans as little mascots for promotional purposes and at the same time discriminate against them by using a highly stereotypical representation. The way Anoki and his family are presented in these booklets has nothing to do with either historical or present realities of Native Americans. These realities were and are shaped by racism, colonial conquest, landgrabbing, genocide and the struggle against these forms of oppression. The representation of Anoki, however, stems from an originally white European imagination based on a specifically German yearning for all things ‘Indian’, a fascination with American ‘Indians’ and a romanticization of some supposedly ‘Indian’ essence (German: “Indianertümelei“, Hartmut Lutz 2002). Accordingly, the booklets use terms like ‘chief’ or ‘tribe’ throughout, as well as external designations like

‘Indians’. All these terms were developed in the context of colonialism and its effects must be called racist. It is a violent colonial tradition to designate people with terms that are not chosen by them. This effectively lumps people together into one big homogeneous group, classifies them on a racial hierarchy (at the lower end), and controls them. We see no reason why a leading German publishing house for educational materials in the 21st century should want to follow this tradition.

In German schools, it would be high time we approached the issue of colonial violence against Native Americans and its continued effects in North America – particularly considering the infamous roles played by German emigrants. On the contrary, what Klett does in the *Indianerhefte* is a romanticization and exoticization of Native Americans as ‘noble savages’. This creates a single story of a racist cliché. In the booklets, Klett invites the children to copy Anoki, dressing up and playing an ‘Indian’. On the 2015 *didactica* exhibition in Hannover, the leading German school materials trade fair, Klett employees presented themselves with feather headdresses next to a tipi. Clearly, the publishing house ignores and dismisses current political campaigns by Native Americans: “We are a culture, not a costume!” Rather than entering into a dialogue with Native Americans, Klett invents its own ‘Indians’ to represent. It can only be read as an irony of history that of all people, a young Native American is now being put in the role to teach children European knowledge in Germany (the Latin alphabet and so-called Arabic numbers). The destruction and oppression of indigenous knowledge systems by colonial conquest is effectively concealed and centuries old struggles for (cultural) self-determination are silenced.

In the booklets, the construction of Native Americans as “traditional“, nature loving and “backward“ is contrasted with images and texts from a white German storybook reality. A quote like “When I grow up, I will buy a big red car. My car will be the most beautiful and the fastest in the whole world. Cars were invented by Carl Benz more than a hundred years ago. Everyone will be so impressed by my fancy red car.” stands in direct opposition to a previous page portraying an image of Anoki with a horse. The booklets also use texts about Robinson Crusoe or Safari-travelogues like: “Dear Anton, warm regards from Africa. It is very exciting here. We went on a Safari for the past two days”. White supremacy and stereotypical thinking seem to be the essential learning goals of such texts. Robinson Crusoe is a symbol of the European colonialist that supposedly ‘discovers’ an uninhabited terra nullius, cultivates it, and in that process brings civilization to the ‘savages’ symbolized by Friday. Africa is presented as a unified whole, first and foremost a place to admire animals (and not as obviously diverse continent, shaped by urban as well as rural life). Furthermore, such texts suggest that it is completely normal and reasonable that white German kids can travel the world, while at the same time Europe does everything that is possible to prevent young people from Africa, Asia or Latin America from coming to Europe.

There is no educational or thematic value behind the character of Anoki and the whole topic of ‘Indians’, rather, it primarily serves decorative and promotional purposes. With this, Klett joins a line of companies

(e.g. tobacco multinationals) who use a collection of racist fantasies and imaginations to create Native Americans (or People of Color or Black People) as consumable objects that serve their own financial interests. However, while customers of other products can usually choose to buy or not to buy certain products, children will be presented with the Klett booklets in class by their teachers. Furthermore, the booklets are part of current developments to commercialize teaching materials in schools and to supply extra exercise books at a price. The idea of free teaching and learning materials for all children is being pushed into the background. This is a development that we strongly oppose.

We call on you to accept responsibility as one of the leading publishing houses for school materials to promote prejudice-conscious and education free of discrimination in German schools. Therefore, we urge you to discontinue the *Meine Indianerhefte* series and to publish a public apology on your website. In your market position, we consider it appropriate to show a clear sign that you truly aim to fulfill your educational mandate by making an effort to become the pioneer textbooks aware of discrimination in Germany. To reach this goal, an important stepping stone would be training sessions for your staff, illustrators and authors to develop anti-racist and diversity aware materials. As a matter of course all trainings concerning Native topics should be given by professional Native trainers. The road forward is rewarding: Millions of children in Germany would be spared the experience to actively learn discrimination, dominance and oppression through their textbooks. Native American children as well as children of Color in Germany would be granted their right to proper schooling.

Yours sincerely,

glokal e.V. and all first signatories