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Title

Bordering on Names: Strategies of Mapping in the Prose of Terézia Mora and Peter Handke

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4xx374qk>

Journal

TRANSIT, 7(1)

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Publication Date

2011

DOI

10.5070/T771009757

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Within certain pockets of contemporary (post-2000) German-language fiction, one can notice a common strategy of *circumlocution*, where narrative intrigue is fueled by the continual and nimble avoidance of any proper place-names. Such evasion may seem intended to transpose particular narratives (e.g. of “people in Berlin” or “children in Zürich”) into an ahistorical or even archetypal variety of narrative (of “Dwellers of the City”), and thus could easily earn accusations of escapism. Yet in prose works by Terézia Mora and Peter Handke, what I will call a strategic *circumlocution* of names serves to draw attention to the implication of narrative literature in processes of geo-political mapping. Mora and Handke strive for an exceedingly fluid means of mapping, which follows the varied paths of thought by which names are embedded in narration. Seen in the context of a literary tradition that is proximate to these authors’ prose, their circumlocution of names evinces not so much *escapism* as an idiosyncratic pathos of *creative resistance to the given world*. To better understand this pathos, I now turn to the line of a German-language poem from the 1960s, in which a strategy of avoidance or circumlocution is shown to have utopian potential:

“I am still bordering on a word and on another land” (Bachmann 168).¹ This difficult image that mixes the actions of *mapping* and *speaking*, from the Austrian writer Ingeborg Bachmann’s 1964 poem “Bohemia lies on the sea,” offers an extremely cautious utopian hope: the hope that an altered stance toward language could open up new worldly space of coexistence. The “I” can maintain the hope for a shared land of refuge, so long as the “word” for this refuge is not breached, overstepped. To perpetually border on a word, for Bachmann, preserves the possibility of place that would give “ground” to the outcasts and downfallen, who might all become “Bohemian.”² Bachmann’s utopian hope, rather than precipitating the concrete

¹ The original German line reads: “Ich grenz noch an ein Wort und an ein anderes Land.” Translation is my own.

² The word “bohemian” in Bachmann’s poem functions less as a proper name, than as an index of literary

description of an ideal society, instead preserves the desire for a shared space of coexistence in the vaguely defined poetic practice of *bordering*.³

In this short paper, I hope to show the ways in which some “experimental writers” (this being my own chosen phrase) after the year 2000 are building upon Bachmann’s notion of *bordering*. In a tenuous but substantive affinity, the prose-focused writers Peter Handke (b. 1942, Austrian-born and Paris-based) and Terézia Mora (b. 1971, Hungarian-born and now Berlin-based) both adopt narrative strategies that can be most succinctly described as evasive, restrained practices “bordering on word and land.” In Mora’s 2004 novel *Alle Tage* and Handke’s 2007 novella *Kali*, the dual movement of *grenzen* from Bachmann’s poem reappears as an idiosyncratic strategy of narrative mapping, where the *avoidance of breaching a word* (“Ich grenz an ein Wort”) goes hand-in-hand with the imagination of *spaces beyond given geopolitical boundaries* (“ein anderes Land”). More precisely, these authors *map* by way of omission and negation, through a rigorous and artful circumlocution that continually avoids—or bends, breaks—the rigid designators that are proper names.

In order to get a better grasp on the mapping and naming strategies of these still very different authors, I will venture to consider their aesthetic strategies in formal terms: as the deployment and reiteration of a poetic device. By “formalist” I do not mean a normative rationalization that would place these texts’ narrative strategies into a kind of culinary art-

imagination, as the title derives from the Shakespeare’s *A Winter’s Tale*.

³ “Bordering” must also be thought of as a facet of an uprooted writing that exists beyond fixity in one national locality. The expatriate Bachmann can be considered part of the emergent “literature with no fixed abode” described by Ottmar Ette (*Literature on the Move*), and her nomadic reformulation of “homeland” as an epiphenomenon of language must reflect this biographical circumstance of geographical dispersal. But contemporary literature, finding itself unmoored from place in new ways, still (“noch”) finds use for Bachmann’s notion of *bordering*, in articulating experiences of homelessness and statelessness that subsist in the unmapped margins of Europe. Clearly, a migratory or nomadic literature that is attached to multiple domiciles and localities is not new, but as Ottmar Ette writes, “daß die Vielzahl dieser sehr unterschiedlichen Formen der Literaturen ohne festen Wohnsitz im Verlauf der zweiten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts rasch angewachsen ist und im 21. Jahrhundert weiter anwächst, steht außer Frage” (Ette, *ZwischenWeltenSchreiben* 14-15).

catalogue, but rather the sort of approach advanced by the Russian theorist Victor Shklovsky (1893-1984) when he claimed that poetic language is “impeded, distorted speech” (13) that de-naturalizes ingrained patterns of expression, effecting “a violation [...] that can never be predicted” (14). The impediment *qua* violation, in this case, is focused on the embedding of proper names in narratives of place; wherever a place-name would be expected, it is circumvented. A formalist description of these texts’ strategies of non-naming as a (Bachmann-like) *bordering-on-words* will then serve as a springboard for examining the unpredictable effects of this estranging prose device on the narration of space, language and subjectivity. While the circumlocutory ‘bordering’ of names in these texts may not precipitate the very same ecstasy of refuge in Bachmann’s “Bohemia” poem, Handke’s and Mora’s prose works strive for a continually fluid practice of mapping that questions its own fixity at every juncture. Instead of a “sense of place” or “local color,” these narratives aim to capture the erratic and contingent processes that would lead up to the identification of place. Both writers describe “heterotopias” (Michel Foucault’s term for “other spaces”) beyond the governmentality of the nation-state, hidden in unexplored margins of Europe.

The fluid mapping pursued by Handke’s and Mora’s experimental novels might be designated with a neologism that emphasizes the link between wandering utterances (circumlocution) and narrative locale: *circumlocation*. I imagine the term *circumlocation* as a small tool for the refining of narrative poetics today, connecting its formal aspects to the cosmopolitical questions that permeate these novels of 21st-century Europe, which anxiously and self-consciously reflect on their own complicity in reproducing exclusionary geographical and demographic demarcations.⁴ Their rhetorically evasive representation of spaces may, then, be as

⁴ I write “21st-century Europe” as a way of evoking the various changes brought about by economic globalization, the redefinition of diplomatic zones and national boundaries, the technological interconnection of disparate locales,

much about the *self-critique of narrative practices* as it is about a *genuine striving to think towards "other" spaces* where a radical (broad and non-exclusionary) social inclusion is possible.⁵ Those two possibilities will be reconsidered at the end of this paper, following the readings of Handke's and Mora's novels.⁶

When isolating a single aesthetic strategy within the recent (and "late") works of the Austrian-born and Paris-based writer Peter Handke, one should consider the literary critic Fabjan Hafner's warning that "Handke is to be enjoyed with great caution" (14). Hafner is referring to the fact that, since the 1970s, Handke's works have been permeated with the desire for a lost primordial homeland, which as often as not seems to be an essentialized conception of Slovenia, and of the lands of the former Yugoslavia in general.⁷ But several of Handke's most recent works are marked by an apparently opposing tendency: rather than conjuring the quasi-mystical particularity of a Balkan (most often Slovenian) homeland, they often vigorously interrogate notions of geographical particularity and locality. In other words, Handke's controversial,

and the accelerated migration of people to and around the nation-states marked as European.

⁵ The idea of a "genuine striving" towards common coexistence is derived from Bruce Robbins' elaboration of cosmopolitics as "a name for the genuine striving towards common norms and mutual translatability that is also part of multiculturalism" (Robbins 13).

⁶ If the negative moves of this fluid mapping appear to be an aesthetic conceit that only allows for maddeningly self-referential narratives, then a return to Bachmann might help articulate the hopes embedded in these works. Another crucial line of Bachmann's Bohemia poem advances an estranged notion of grounding, according to which the stabilizing base of *land* is only to be had through the fluid groundlessness of *water*: "Und glaube ich den Meeren wieder, so hoffe ich aufs Land" (167). By perpetually "bordering" on proper names, Mora's and Handke's prose works precipitate sprawling reflections upon the labor of grounding in and attaching to a particular diplomatically or culturally recognizable *locality*. Let us now look at what sort of *land* is hoped for, in this abandonment of narrative discourse to fluidity.

⁷ When seen in the context of Handke's public appearances, this literary fascination appears as the careless revival of a virulent strand of exclusionary nationalism, based on an essentialist idea of origin. The most controversial facets of this interest appeared not in Handke's writing, but in his public appearances and statements, for instance in his attendance of the funeral of the war criminal Slobodon Milosevic. The defensibility of Handke's actions has been the subject of much debate, and Handke himself has claimed that he has aimed only for a more differentiated picture of the conflict (and ensuing genocide) in the former Yugoslavia. He claims to have attended Milosevic's funeral not because he admired Milosevic, but because he saw him as a tragic figure, and because Handke is "a lover of Serbia" (Solomon 2006). The debate continues today, and it is difficult to write about Handke without tackling this question. Just at the end of 2010, his extremely controversial visit with the Serbian war criminal Radovan Karadzic was shown by a biographer to be a humanitarian mission, with Handke presenting a list of missing persons to the man who was likely responsible for their disappearance ("Die Gedichte des Dr. K."). It is my hope that a formally driven analysis of Handke's works will outlive the particular stages of this ongoing debate.

publicly expressed geographical ideology stands in tension with one of the dominant aesthetic strategies of his late works. More exactly, Handke's recent works tie back to the practices of modernist experimentation. Through a poetics that perpetually voids the proper name from narrative discourse, Handke appears (within certain texts) less attached to ideas of an originary homeland, and more attached to some of the practices of late modernism, in particular to Bachmann's poetics of *bordering*.

Pages into Handke's 2002 novel *Die Bildverlust*, it is announced that the work is written in accordance with a pact that forbids the inclusion of proper names. From here, the persistent absence of any *one* name precipitates a proliferation of self-reflexive description, strongly emphasizing the creation of fictional geography with each successive moment of the narrative utterance, which is continually succeeded by another. Thus, the initial setting of *Die Bildverlust*—"Eine klare, frostkalte Nacht Anfang Januar an der Peripherie einer nordwestlichen Hafenstadt"—unfolds into an array of paradigmatically associated places:

Doch dann ließ sie sich überzeugen, daß »Hafen« auch ein »Flußhafen« sein konnte, im Binnenland, weit weg von der wärmenden Küste in einem halb schon kontinentalen Kaltgebiet. Basel. Köln. Rouen. Newcastle upon Tyne. Passau. Was zählte: daß sich in einer solchen Stadt der Zentralsitz ihrer Bank befand. Aber auch der Name der Bank durfte in ihrer Geschichte nicht vorkommen. (11)

As each proper place-name is temporalized—first suggested, then revoked a moment later—the engendering act of creativity that would have “propered” the proper name in the first place, is to be made visible. The primary determining aspect of geographical designations is shown to be erratically and as if magnetically linked to different traits of place: the place-names first address weather factors, lining up as those places subject to a climactic tendency, but then

climate ceases to count and the determinant of this geography becomes economic distribution, transcending temperature fluctuations and coastal proximity.

In Handke's short novel *Kali. Eine Vorwintergeschichte*, published in 2007, the same absencing of proper names is deployed to imagine an unheard-of space: the circumlocution of names leads up to the mapping of an elusive, non-national space of refuge for the homeless and stateless, called Kali, which subsists marginally amidst the known boundaries of European nation-states, and whose name "Kali" precipitates an array of dissonant associations, from the mineralogical (*Kalialz*) to the religious (the Hindu goddess Kali) to the geographical (there is a municipality of the same name in Croatia). The peculiar semantics of this name will be discussed further below.

At the beginning, the novel introduces a Western European technological-metropolitan setting as the protagonist's point of departure. The narrator shuffles through a series of questions that fail to narrow down a list of proper names: "Wien kann das also wohl nicht sein? Zürich? Oder, warum nicht, Innsbruck? Oder vielleicht Perpignan? (Aber da würde ich das Meer spüren und zumindest die eine oder andere Palme gewahren [sic].) Oder, Gott bewahre, gar Salzburg?" (35). The narrator only ever borders on saying *where* the starting point of the novel is, orbiting around a number of possible European cities, and implying that any of these starting-points is as good as any other. Such circumlocution suggests that the ensuing narrative is a latent, unrealized possibility with regard to *any* of these European sites. *Kali* should then not be a novel that describes a given world, but which inaugurates a changed form of subjectivity that would allow *any urban space* (though apparently predominantly European ones) to serve as a springboard into a non-exclusionary refuge-space (resembling Bachmann's linguistic "Bohemia"). This refuge-space called Kali "borders" directly on the everyday, can crop up in a space that has

remained unconsidered and unrecognized in everyday perception. Fittingly, then, Kali has been given by outsiders the unflattering title “blind spot” or “dead corner” (“toter Winkel”), which subsists vaguely amongst the de-militarized diplomatic borders of contemporary Europe, and yet is no nation-state, is subject to different weather patterns, and engenders an elective, eclectic form of social coexistence (75). For the novel’s protagonist, it was a place that was “just behind” her own supposed homeland: the first hints of Kali’s existence were rumors, remembered from her mother’s warnings of the uselessness of the “dead corner” or “blind spot”: “Nichts los bei denen dort. Nicht einmal einen kleinen Abstecher wert war nach der übereinstimmenden Meinung der tote Winkel hier. Kein Staat war mit ihm zu machen, und das mitten im vereinten Europa” (75). Finally aiming to look behind her mother’s warning, the protagonist journeys into this land that borders imperceptibly on the everyday. Her shift in cognition seems to run parallel to the circumlocutory strategies of the narrator, which unlocks new geographies through altered perception. This altered perception extends to the processes by which Kali achieves its “name.” Although the word “Kali” teasingly evokes a village of the same name in Croatia (and thus reminds one of Handke’s Yugoslav complex or fetish), Handke’s fictional “Kali” is markedly named for its location upon an enormous mountain of *Kalisalz* (potash salt, a heterogeneous mix of different salt crystals), which could either be a remnant of industrial mining, or a geographical contingency. In this fictional fantasy, the name *Kali* seems to function less as a conventional icon (a proper name that rigidly designates a decided-upon place), and more as an index of the physical environment that incidentally gives ground to an outcast society. Kali’s special status, then, apparently derives from the special practices by which it is designated; the narrative voice suggests that the locale Kali is first and foremost created and reproduced through a particular *alternative* mode of speaking, which recalls Handke’s proximity to the “situationist” movement

of the 1960s that sought to create a new society by effecting a swerve in language use.⁸

As an “AUSWANDERER-Ort,” Kali is the imaginative modeling of a margin that can be stepped into from anywhere (63). Kali’s residents, too, suggest that the refuge they have found results from a flight away from proper names, and thus from a language that does not permanently fix locality: “Weg von den [...] Fahrzeugkennzeichen, den Straßennamen, den Künstlernamen, den Spitznamen, den Vor- und Nachnamen” (67). Names *do* figure into this name-negating discourse, however, as a means of continually and fluidly re-defining *what* and *where* Kali has the potential to *not* be: “Weg von Adelaide. [...] Weg von Europa. Weg von Afrika. Weg von den Kontinenten. Weg von den Inseln” (67). Handke’s utopia is mapped only through the movements of a constantly negating, renouncing but at the same time laudatory voice. At a festival celebrating the start of winter, the emigrant-residents sing praises to a life not only without a state, but without a fatherland, without a mother tongue, and without property—Handke establishes a utopian image of a society that is defined with negative reference to the given world. This negativity, however, consists not in an alternate form of governance, but in an elusive language use that refuses to fix property lines, national lines, and even continental division lines.

But can this novel convincingly imagine a social coexistence in a space that is distinguished in this manner? The protagonist’s tour guide through Kali shows it to be a place of

⁸ As pointed out in a recent retrospective volume on the movements around 1968, Handke’s earliest works showed an affinity with the situationist method of liberation devised by Guy de Bord, who ascribed a greater importance to ideology and language than previous Marxisms and suggested that a revolution could be brought about through the creation and adoption of a new language; a concern with the controlling mechanisms of acquired language provided the dramatic framework of the 1968 experimental play *Kaspar* (which was still pessimistic about the possibility of speaking in a way that would escape domination) (Gilcher-Holtey 74–79). Unexpectedly, in 2007 one finds Handke echoing earlier, tenuous affinities with anarchist-liberationist movements of the midcentury. *Kali* is rigorously *situationist*, in that it suggests that we can engender a positive, liberated existence beyond property and statehood by changing the way we speak (even if the will to such a liberation is, for Handke, nearly gone from Europe, and from this planet). For an extended discussion the relationship between Handke’s work and Austrian postwar language critique, see Theisen (117-126).

emigrants from all corners of the world. In the present, refugees arrive to Kali from all cardinal directions (including “west” and “north,” those traditionally associated with affluence and political stability), and although the newest arrivals have changed the sociality of Kali by withdrawing more and more into domestic isolation (à la suburban insularity), the protagonist soon learns that a certain degree of non-communication is what facilitates the harmonious coexistence in Kali. All residents speak languages that are not immediately grasped by others in instrumental, practical terms. Traveling deep into the salt mine, the protagonist is told that the miners, exiles and emigrants all of them, achieve a preliminary (“vorläufig”) understanding of their mutually opaque languages, deep in the dark under the earth (125).⁹ For Kali is not a place meant to simply replace the geographical modeling of the nation-state as a horizontal spread of land filled by a single community of language-speakers. It extends on another axis entirely—the vertical axis, underneath the earth—and sets the stage for an altered “understanding” of voices. In an estranged reiteration of Bachmann’s idea of a utopian *bordering*, Handke’s *Kali* envisions a form of social coexistence based around an understanding that is *vorläufig* (preliminary, temporary, valid for –the –time being), and which permits a mutual bordering of different languages and subject-positions on one another. The inhabitants of the “other land” of Kali are defined by how they *border* on the sense and meaning of each other’s words, but do not seize

⁹ If Kali is more than a precipitation of Handke's escapism, it is because the sheer marginality of this imaginative setting allows an alienated, and thus critical look back onto the processes of speech that engender exclusion and marginality. A case in point: the man who leads the protagonist-singer through Kali expresses at length a pessimistic view of the most recent wave of refugees to transplant there. Here, certain familiar clichés of “new” versus “old” immigration are retreaded in a reduced form: the refugees of the new century, the man says, “werden ganz und gar nicht mehr heimisch. Und sie kommen inzwischen aus sämtlichen Erdgegenden, wie aus dem Osten, später dem Süden, genauso, mehr und mehr, aus dem Norden und dem Westen,” whereas these more recent immigrants are increasingly isolated, traumatized into silence and unable to engage in a social life extending beyond the locked-away sphere of domesticity. The complex ambiguity of the passage, which first appears as an anti-modern or xenophobic rant, is embedded in such a way that it becomes more of a reflection on the arbitrariness of imputing social meanings to the cardinal directions. Where Handke's novel appears to risk voicing a binary notion of the “modern, alienated Westerner,” and the “traditional, social Easterner,” it focuses instead on the non-correspondence of these descriptions to the surrounding reality: “Was er ihr so erzählte, mußte nicht immer mit dem übereinstimmen, was sich ihnen beiden auf den Weg zum Werk zu sehen gab” (112).

that sense or meaning permanently.

But Kali is nevertheless tinted by a sobering pessimism, subtly planted in parts of the work, and primarily evoked in certain residents' laments that Kali will not much longer be allowed to exist as such. For instance, many of the miners in Kali are migrant workers who do not live there, suggesting that the salt industry in Kali imposes an undiscussed form of exclusion. Upon her first arrival by boat, the protagonist notices a man being escorted out of Kali in handcuffs. And so, although the novel's final scene, in which a lost child is found and returned to the community, is vaguely celebratory, Handke's novel shows signs that it is weary of its own utopianism, and it marks the present moment of storytelling as a kind of "last stand" before the inevitable dissolution of Kali as such. In this way, the unclarity of a setting established through circumlocution begins to appear as a misty, clouded vision of a nostalgia that cannot get too close to its object of desire without making it vanish.

In order to better define the limits of Handke's vision of an alternative society, and the forms of conflict that it avoids narrating, I now turn to Terézia Mora's 2004 novel, which employs a similar practice of bordering-on-names, or of *circumlocation*. It would be impossible to do justice to the narrative complexity of Mora's novel in this short article, but some features of its style of narrative rendering can be briefly sketched out here. Unlike *Kali*, Terézia Mora's novel *Alle Tage* (meaning "Every Day," but translated into English as *Day in Day Out*) is less the story of an *outside*, and more exactly that of an *outsider*. Whereas Handke's novel contains a biographical narrative only on its periphery (of a "singer" fleeing from the traumas of the urban everyday), Mora's novel attempts to imagine something like the "way of life" in world whose geography is fluidly—but also often painfully—defined. Here, life is imagined not only in terms of the intersubjective coexistence of "outsiders" in a derelict space (as in Handke), but also in

terms of the contested and erratic biography of a character who is perpetually opaque to all others.

Abel Nema, the protagonist of *Alle Tage*, is nicknamed “Rasputin” by acquaintances, marking him as a derelict with a superlative ability to influence those around him, to elicit their desires and curiosity while remaining psychologically impenetrable, both to the other characters and to the various narrating voices. In rendering the world in which Abel is continually uprooted and displaced, *Alle Tage* commits to an unwritten pact forbidding the inclusion of proper names. But Mora’s motivation to adhere to this practice of circumlocution is bound up with a thematic complex very different from that of Handke’s *Kali*. While Handke’s elusive “other space” presents a non-national, non-ethnicized, and non-originary homeland for the refugees of the modern world, Mora is concerned with narrating the experience of a character who perpetually evades attachment to any particular locality. The narrative voice mimics (and perhaps tries to do justice to) this non-attachment by never localizing the novel’s narrative, but only ever bordering on saying *where he comes from* and *where he is*. In this sense, Mora offers another iteration of Bachmann’s idea of *grenzen*; the protagonist remains irreducible in his outsider status in the sense that the narrator only ever *borders* on saying where he is a refugee from, and where he now subsists as an outsider (and for some time as an “undocumented alien,” to quote the American bureaucratic vernacular). Abel does not just border on one hoped-for and chosen utopia, he borders on *many* lands and languages, but belongs to none of them duratively.

Stylistically, the strategies of evasion in *Alle Tage* differ from Handke’s circumlocations of *Kali* in that they more directly cite the medial, institutional and governmental discourses that produce diplomatic “outsiders” in a Europe of nation-states. Abel’s cloudily envisioned homeland is continually imagined through the filter of perceptual archetypes: at times it is

referred to generically as “Transylvania,” though it does not appear to correspond the historically contested region of Transylvania, today in Romania, which was once in the Austro-Hungarian empire and is still identified by some in Hungary as a lost territory. For Abel’s “Transylvania,” unlike the Romanian Transylvania, has been the site of an undescribed war, and thus appears at other times to be an stand-in for a stereotypical Balkan land with shifting borders, which subsequently ceased to exist. Elsewhere in the novel, Abel’s “homeland” is referred to simply as “dem und dem Land” (430). The novel’s use of clichés as empty placeholders extends to how the origins of its constitutive *stories* are described. In the novel’s epigraph, “scurrile und extreme” narratives are promised, and possible origins for such material are given: “Die lateinischen Länder sind besonders ergiebig. Gutes altes Babylon. Und natürlich Transsylvanien. Der Balkan etcetera” (5). These designations are foregrounded as clichés based in an acquired repertoire of images (this is the meaning of etcetera, this “you know” gesture). As such, the novel only examines the *gestures* that might point to the origins of Abel’s stories—and not to these origins themselves.

Such narrative evasions emphasize that the proper name is important only insofar as it creates cognitive or social bonds and barriers when it is uttered; on a trip with friends into a foreign country that is neither their current land of residence nor Abel’s original birthplace, Abel meets a young woman named Elsa, who has married a local and secured her own diplomatic presence. She and Abel discover that they are both from the city of S., while Abel’s friends are from B. Elsa tells of how she married a local man after becoming pregnant, and resolved to stay in the country, gaining residence through the marriage. The scene, stripped of any proper place-names, highlights the structures by which names become significant—rather than allowing B. or S. to ascribe a particular character to Abel and Elsa as they wander through the night. The precise

identities of B. and S. do not matter until one needs to secure diplomatic-bureaucratic attachment to one of them over the other (236-237). The novel repeatedly refuses to openly participate in such an attachment, always obscuring or multiplying the origin of Abel's position in the world.

The novel's evasive strategies of naming are announced already in its first lines, with these enigmatic injunctions standing in for a designation of setting: "Nennen wir die Zeit *jetzt*, nennen wir den Ort *hier*. Beschreiben wir beides wie folgt" (9). The *here and now* is immediately fluid, in the sense that the ensuing description provided by the narrator (of a metropolis divided by train tracks) is contestable in terms of what context it should be matched with. That is not to say that these opening lines affirmatively invoke the interpretive freedom of a reader to fill in the gaps (i.e. "You say what the place is"). Rather, they foreground the establishment of setting as the site of various conflicting processes of decision-making that go into the identification of place and time.

Restless contestation also marks the description of Abel's ethnic character, which unfolds through an ongoing circumnavigation that precipitates ever more creative associations, while heavily emphasizing the sonics of utterance. Abel's father was "Ein halber Ungar, die andere Hälfte ungewiss" (61). The triplet of letters *ung-* branches off into a proper name (*Ungar*) and a rigorously indistinct adjective (*ungewiss*).¹⁰ We cannot simply import extra-literary geographical knowledge in order to understand *where* this protagonist comes from, as was foreshadowed by his father's trickster-like identity claim: "er sagte, er trug das Blut *sämtlicher Minderheiten in der Region* in sich" (61; emphasis in the original). Fittingly, Abel's last name denotes no ethnicity, but rather is a cipher for an undefined outsider: "Nema, der Stumme, verwandt mit dem slawischen Nemeč, heute für: Der Deutsche, früher für jeden nichtslawischer Zunge, für den

¹⁰ This associate chain cannot be exactly recreated in English; it involves a mutation of the first three letters of the word "Hungarian" (UNGar) into the word "uncertain" (UNGewiss), with the narrative voice laboring to disassemble and reassemble chains of letters as it cycles through different possibilities of ethnic identity.

Stummen also” (14). Beyond these explicit associations, *Nema* in Hungarian (which is one of Abel’s language and the author Mora’s other language besides German) conjures up the word *nem* or “no,” simply denoting negation; *Nema* is a name that negates the name. Nema, too, is a character who would only be identified through a collaborative and politically charged process of interpretive elimination.

More clearly than in Handke’s *Kali*, in Mora’s novel a circumlocutory narrative style, with a continual *bordering* on and avoidance of names, serves to mimic this *one* particular character’s subject-position as it relates to a complex social and political world. That is to say, Abel Nema is hardly a member of any existent collective (though he tends to frequent chaotic parties, and lives for a time in an anarchist commune), and the narrative device of circumlocution effectively emulates his particular indeterminacy, his un- and up-rootedness.¹¹ It should be stressed, however, that the fluidity (or precariousness) of Abel’s position is not simply due to the indeterminacy of his ethnic heritage. Mora’s novel is not so deterministic. On the contrary, what makes Abel such a unique character—and this is one of the narrative conceits that have made *Alle Tage* compelling to so many readers—is that by his early adulthood he cognizes the world around him in ten separate languages simultaneously, all of which he has acquired from cassettes in a language lab in the city where he arrived first as an undocumented immigrant, then took up residency as a student.¹² Each time Abel sees an object, all its various names occur to him simultaneously. And such exceptional cognitions through language lend him a certain *utopian* aspect, in the sense that his inner linguistic life is marked by a sheer *liminality*, which allows him

¹¹ In an interview, Mora describes the complexity of Abel’s foreignness, which does not consist in any *one* particular “foreign” origin: “Und die Fremdheit der Hauptfigur ist ja auch sehr mannigfaltig. Er ist nicht nur objektiv fremd, also ein Exilant, sondern ist auch ein Charakter, der leider damit geschlagen ist, mit dieser Fremdheit als Konstitution” (Mora and Biendarra 4).

¹² Melanie Fröhlich also notes this multilingual “gift” as one of the defining traits of Abel’s character: “Die Gabe macht ihn jedoch nicht nur zu einem hoffnungsvollen Talent, sondern auch zu einem einsamen Menschen und Sonderling.”

to stand always between one language and another. This is, moreover, the condition that most closely links Mora's novel to Bachmann's "Bohemia" poem. Abel's murky biography shows a figure that perpetually borders not only on *one*, but on *many* words.

This liminality becomes retroactively utopian—in that it proves to be impossible in the given world—at the novel's end, where the ten languages that Abel has learned are all lost through amnesia after he is mugged and hospitalized. Abel's peculiar cognition must be violently reduced, so that he can adopt a stable middle-class domestic existence with a spouse and child. He is restricted to basic sentences, such as "it is good," in the unspecified *Landessprache*, and lives a functional family life with Mercedes, a citizen of the unnamed country to which he has emigrated, whom he had initially only married in order to gain a residence permit (430). Abel no longer cognizes the world through a wide array of interchangeable pseudonyms in the ten languages he has learned from audio cassettes: he is restricted to one language that is only useful for basic instrumental purposes. The novel's main span of narrative time, during which objects could be fluidly attached to and detached from different words, molded and re-molded through associations, must come to an end, along with its accompanying fluid experience of space.¹³

It might overwhelm the particularity of Handke's and Mora's works to assume that their narrative strategies are affiliated with an earlier German-language author such as Bachmann. Yet this question of literary tradition must necessarily enter into a discussion of the "cosmopolitical" aspects of literature, as it declares or evades particular linguistic or cultural affiliations. Mora

¹³ This ending constitutes Mora's appraisal, or critique, of the "everyday." The new, domestic Abel comes into existence through a traumatic and invasive process of reshaping. Moreover, is not until the frenzied hallucinations that lead up to this reshaping that Abel achieves something like his "own" single internal voice, as he is stricken by visions of a courtroom where he is finally forced to speak up and defend himself. This is where Abel-as-*individual* begins, and Abel-as-outsider ends, and where another strong affinity to Bachmann's work is asserted. Mora's interest in the violence and contestation that undergirds the adoption of a named identity is already signaled in the novel's title, which refers to the 1953 poem "Alle Tage" (also by Ingeborg Bachmann), which can be read as a reflection on the violent conflict that undergirds our idea of the everyday, with the lines: "Der Krieg wird nicht mehr erklärt, / sondern fortgesetzt" (46). In Bachmann's poem, the "everyday" now always coexists with "the unheard-of," implying that the two mutually constitute one another.

and Handke, uprooted as their prose is, do appear tenuously attached to a certain strand of central European, German-language modernism. And it is within the orbit of this tradition that they ask—to different ends and by different means—whether it is possible to imagine a way of life that *borders* simultaneously on a multitude of cultural spheres and geo-political spaces without being firmly identified with any of them: the village-like urbanity of the place “Kali” and the emigré city-dweller “Abel Nema” both represent attempts to imagine such a life of exhaustive and emphatic *bordering*.

While a circumlocutory movement of discourse *around* naming is not new to German-language prose,¹⁴ in the 21st-century narrative prose examined here, the dance around the name—and the subsequent mapping that is thereby achieved—can be called a cosmopolitical intrigue. Cosmopolitical, because the evaded act of *naming* always approaches a potential attachment to a particular geographic, political and/or cultural locality (a nation, a language, an ethnicity, even a continent).¹⁵ The narrative voice does not only *cross* or *negate* boundaries, but (for as long as is tenable) strategically evades, ducks, side-steps, and subtly negates the act of enclosing territories of inhabitation through any fixed designations.¹⁶ Handke and Mora write novels that worry about how a literary work—like the nation-state—could become an exclusionary “filter” (Hardt 310) of life, persons, and experience, by defining their imaginative space with a conventionally operating

¹⁴ Already in European romanticisms and realisms, it was common practice to “censor” the place-names within a novel, the putative authenticity of which necessitated that the identity of the places and persons involved would need to be masked over. In the work of Franz Kafka, this “minus device” of the unnamed setting contributes to an allegorical sensibility that endows the novels *The Castle* and *The Trial* with a threatening ubiquity or universality—they might be taking place anywhere, for they are not said to take place anywhere. For more on the “minus device,” see Lotman (51).

¹⁵ For a concise articulation of the idea of cosmopolitics as the contested processes of attachment to and detachment from localities, see Mani (1-43).

¹⁶ For a discussion of the role of literary narrative in furthering or subverting the practice of “enclosure,” see Marzec (8). For Marzec, enclosure—also its literary precipitates—are antithetical to ecological modes of being, and colonial in nature.

“rigid designator” (Dolezel 18).¹⁷ But, as I have also shown, these works do not only *worry* about their own implications in processes of exclusion and inclusion. Along their diverging paths, Mora’s and Handke’s poetic visions both strive for a narrative language that performs a state of existing *in-between*, of *bordering*, in a way that—at least within the late European literary modernism unfolded by their predecessor, Ingeborg Bachmann—suggests traces of utopian thinking. And utopian thinking, as Klaus Berghahn has pointed out, is about the critique of existing circumstances. The challenge left for a reader of Handke’s and Mora’s works is to decide what these circumstances are, and on whom they press the most urgently.

¹⁷ For Mora in particular, these narrative gestures of *bordering-on-names* constitute a creative response to the ever-present political and cultural borders that still induce fear, and still control lives. In 2004, Mora criticized the cliché that European borders (for instance the so-called Iron Curtain) are now only “former” borders, and argued that they still have the capacity to induce horror, even when transit between Eastern, Central and Western Europe has increasingly become an *everyday* fact. “Wie lange,” Mora asked in 2004, “wird es noch dauern, bis ich mein Gruseln beim Überschreiten dieser dann ‘ehemaligen’ Linien verloren haben werde? Jemals?” (quoted in Prutti 82). With such statements in mind, the problems investigated in this paper appear in a somewhat different light: Handke’s evasive narrative gestures—and their geographical precipitate, Kali—appear as the stylistic accompaniment of a mostly happy hallucination, whereas Mora’s barely hopeful prose appears as the filter of a nightmare.

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