Notes

[1] For further discussion, see Huyssen and Young.
[2] For an extensive discussion on the Waldheim-affair, see Mitten 65-73.

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Colonizing Bodies in Ingeborg Bachmann's "Ein Schritt nach Gomorrha"

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In her first collection of stories, *Das dreißigste Jahr*, Ingeborg Bachmann introduces "moments of reflection, lyrical impressions, monologues, tightly composed images to suggest a radical rebellion against that 'worst of all possible worlds' in which the protagonists find themselves" (Achberger 10). "Ein Schritt nach Gomorrha" is one such story that exemplifies this yearning for renewal, for another order, for "salvation," which, though glimpsed for a moment, is clearly unattainable (Achberger 11). Classified as a feminine *Schöpfungsgeschichte*,[1] Bachmann's story also lends itself to feminist interpretation.[2] Further, it points at the uncomfortable traces of colonialism, politics, and power from the former Austro-Hungarian Habsburg Empire, which are still present in the culture and politics of everyday Austrian life in the early 1950s.

An accomplished piano player and the wife of an influential academic, Bachmann's protagonist Charlotte has tried in vain to find fulfillment and purpose in the norms and values of the Viennese aristocracy. The increasing apathy of this culturally sophisticated though decadent class has a suffocating effect on Charlotte's desire for love, which, due to its intensity and unusual passion, collides with the self-sufficiency, indifference, and pride of her husband and friends. Although on the outside Charlotte has learned per the rigid rules of aristocratic etiquette to act as the accomplished and refined woman en vogue, she remains on the inside a little mysterious girl, whose untouched heart is desperately struggling with lack of purpose and fulfillment. The emptiness and meaninglessness in Charlotte's life are reflected by the bareness of her apartment: "Im Zimmer: die verrückten Stühle, eine verknüllte Serviette auf dem Boden, die gedunsene Luft, die Verwüstung, die Leere nach dem Überfall" (143). This void is abruptly filled as Mara, a Slovenian[3] studying in Vienna, offers

herself and her love unconditionally in an unconventional fashion.

Mara's unusual proposal occurs at the end of yet another routine party held at Charlotte's apartment. Bachmann's "Ein Schritt nach Gomorrha" suggests an inverted process of colonization of the body set against the background of historical facts. As a Slovenian, Mara is a representative of one of Habsburg Austria's former occupied territories, who becomes the new colonizer as she decides to enter and occupy Charlotte's cultural milieu. The former colonized, however, has different reasons for pursuing her conquest: in opposition to the historical colonizers who were searching for material profit, Mara's search is for love and identity. In the process, Charlotte realizes with surprise that she could learn a lot from Mara, a former subordinate, as she discovers that her need for love and fulfillment is identical with Mara's. Despite the fact that of the two protagonists Mara is the least "fully realized character" who "remains a figure determined by her various functions in the gradual unfolding of Charlotte's consciousness" (Horsley 278), it is Mara's invasion into Charlotte's life and her proposed lesbian experience that shatter the pianist's world.

Critics like Karen Achberger and Ritta Jo Horsley support opposite views regarding Bachmann's treatment of Charlotte and Mara's homosexual relationship. Both Achberger and Horsley recognize that the relationship of the two protagonists, as anticipated by Charlotte, is based on Charlotte's abstract ideas and dreams of a new order (Horsley 278, Achberger 104). If for Horsley the utopia envisioned in "Ein Schritt nach Gomorrha" is a "grotesque distortion, a reversal of the traditional dichotomy" (292); Achberger finds positive connotations in Charlotte/Bachmann's quest for female identity. In this respect, Achberger suggests that even if Charlotte does not have clear *Gegenbilder* and alternatives for her life with Mara, she, nevertheless has taken "ein[en] einzige[n] mühsame[n] Schritt— aber doch ein[en] Schritt" towards a new consciousness and life (109). This is also evident, Achberger insists, in Charlotte's changed view of her heterosexual past: "[Charlotte] sieht die Vergangenheit deutlich und schließt sie aus, lehnt sie ab, erklärt sie für tot" (108-09). Moreover, Achberger also positively interprets the story's open ending with the two sleeping women as if waiting to be resurrected to a new life (108).

Even so, one cannot disregard the fact that Charlotte's vague and utopian dreams of a new world contain powerful images of dominance and power, which she envisions projecting upon Mara. Yet, I disagree with

Horsley for blaming Charlotte, and implicitly Bachmann, for their supposed inability to challenge the "structures of power and exploitation" promoted by the patriarchal society (292), and accede with Achberger who proposes that: "die Entscheidung [liegt] nicht buchstäblich zwischen Hetero- und Homosexualität, sondern zwischen Unterwerfung und Autonomie, zwischen Anders-Sein und Primat" (105). The will to power is not gender-determined, nor is specific to a certain type of behavior, language, or social status. It is not only men that oppress women, or the rich who manipulate the poor, but, as Bachmann shows, women can also dominate each other.

"Ein Schritt nach Gomorrha" introduces an ambiguous yet complex play of power, in which Mara and Charlotte colonize various territories (apartment, language, body, future) as they alternatively assume both the role of the oppressor as well as that of the oppressed. In her endeavor to establish contact with Charlotte, Mara tries to communicate by employing physical touch as language. After all the guests leave Charlotte's party, Mara, perceived by Charlotte as "von da unten, [. . .] von der Grenze" (144-45), decides (to Charlotte's utter annoyance) to stay behind on foreign territory, thus forcing closer contact with her: "Drinnen schlang Mara im nächsten Augenblick, die Arme um ihren Hals. [. . .] Ich bleibe. Hörst du? Ich bleibe" (151,155). This represents the first step to colonization, but perhaps the most potent symbol of colonization is the image of hands in this narrative. In Bachmann's story they become the tools which construct and master a secret language meant to communicate love and tenderness, at the same time underscoring the attempt of the two women trying to establish bonds between their hearts, cultures, worlds, and bodies.

Charlotte's hands convey the station of her class: they are "weiß und kalt nebeneinander auf dem Tisch" (150). Their whiteness suggests a carefree life in which Charlotte is not forced to earn a living performing rough manual labor. Although she works with her hands, she does so primarily when playing the piano. Her hands produce music— i.e., culture— an implicit indication of supremacy and power. It is not a coincidence that Charlotte gives solo recitals. Western classical music is a stereotypical symbol of opulence and civilization not only for Austria, but also for any Western culture that has the means to indulge itself by spending time and money on music and art.

Mara, on the other hand, embodies the typical image of the intel-

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ligent, gifted, but confused Eastern-European newly arrived in the West who is overwhelmed by many choices, a dehumanizing materialism, and its inability to respond to the deep emotional and intellectual needs of those long suppressed by the colonizers. Mara adopts a "gleichgültige" (173) attitude towards the privileges offered to her in the former capital of the empire. Initially she seems to convey that she is not only unprepared for the West, but also unwilling to look into its opportunities, an attitude which disturbs and yet intrigues Charlotte. Mara expresses an unexpected indifference and ingratitude expressed towards a univeristy stipend: "Aber aus mir wird nichts. Und überhaupt: es interessiert mich nichts" (173). Such comments continue to arouse Charlotte's curiosity and attract her to Mara.

It is contact with the hands that moves Mara to communicate with Charlotte. The touch becomes an intimate source of knowledge. In their communication process, the two women start with childhood emotions, holding hands like two schoolgirls: "Sie hielten einander an den Händen und gingen noch rascher, als verfolgte sie jemand. Mara fing zu laufen an, und zuletzt liefen sie wie zwei Schulmädchen, als gäbe es keine andere Gangart" (146-47). Later, Mara, "greift" for Charlotte's hand, completing the image of "[i]neinander verschlungene Hände" (149). As a sign of power and supremacy, Charlotte's hands are initially on top of Mara's, but it is not a forced action; rather, Mara's gestures ostensibly indicate her willingness to engage as a subordinate in their relationship: "[Mara] tauchte, heimkehrend, mit ihren Händen unter Charlotte's Hände, die weiß auf dem Tisch lagen" (150). Thus, Mara is still "unten" in a double sense: as the reminder of the empire's past, with its former colonial system, she comes geographically "von da unten" (144), but in her attempt to communicate love, she places her hands underneath Charlotte's as if to surrender, but in actuality, only to conquer.

Charlotte's epiphany is made possible when she understands the language of the hands and responds to it: "[Charlotte] spürte den Druck von Maras harten Fingern und erwiderte ihn, ohne zu wissen warum und ohne es zu wünschen" (150). In contrast to Charlotte's delicate and helpless hands, Mara's fingers are "hart," and thus convey determination and firmness. However, her hands are at the same time "klein" and "klettenhaft" (149), like those of a child searching for love and acceptance.

The system of communication established between the two women through their hands contrasts with that of the heterosexual flirtation of a couple at the bar, who "sich gegenseitig mit den Fingerspitzen berührten" (147-48). Their touch is minimal, superficial, and rigid, while Mara is teaching Charlotte another type of intimacy through touching or "Berührung" which to the two women is significantly more meaningful than their previous intimate experiences with men. Charlotte gradually surrenders to Mara. Initially, she is confused because the Slovenian girl wants from her something other than her money and her connections in Vienna. Charlotte is also surprised to discover that Mara has turned to *her* in her desperate and obsessive search for absolute love and acceptance.

Charlotte's inner change does not come easily. The characteristics of her class are too deeply engraved in her; they are part of her nature. She is the refined aristocratic product of generations of sophisticated and well-educated colonizers. Her value system, although irrelevant to her personal needs, is still her only source of security and balance. Thus, she is caught between her culture and Mara's: between an arid system of norms which is not truly hers and the chance to establish her own, self-made order.

As she struggles to explain to herself what she is about to discover through Mara's love, Charlotte finds herself painfully vacillating between distancing herself from and getting closer to Mara. At first, she rejects Mara by using strategies that are typical of her class. One of these schemes is an advanced use of etiquette: "Ich werde uns einen Kaffee kochen. Und dann rufe ich ein Taxi" (145). Another is the excuse of time and business: "Charlotte sah auf ihre Armbanduhr; es reizte sie plötzlich, auf die Uhr zu sehen, und wünschte, daß Mara es merke" (155). But gradually she loses "Boden unter den Füßen" (146). Consequently, by giving in, Charlotte finds herself colonized by the one who was once colonized.

The inverted colonizing process also takes the two women through a revolutionary phase. As Mara is incapable of realizing the inner changes and the cost which Charlotte must consider if she accepts Mara's love proposal, the girl revolts by destroying the objects and the order in Charlotte's room. In so doing, she symbolically destroys the order in her life:

> Mara wischte ganz langsam, und während der Aufregung aus ihr schon zu wichern begann, das Glas vom Tisch, dann das andere, sie griff nach einer leeren Vase und warf sie, weil die Gläser auf den Teppich gerollt waren, gegen die Wand, dann die Kassette, aus der Muscheln und Steine mit Getöse herausflogen und über

die Möbel rollten. (156-57)

The scene depicting the moment just before Mara's tirade strikingly resembles a standoff between two armies or officers on the battlefield: "Charlotte konnte nicht mehr weiterreden, sie stand taumelnd auf. Mara stand auf. Sie standen sich gegenüber" (156).

The language used to describe the devastation of the room would apply just as effectively to the siege of a city: "Die Zerstörung schien lange zu dauern wie ein Brand, eine Überschwemmung, eine Demolierung" (157). This scene echoes the revolutions of oppressed people in the colonies of a strong empire. Throughout history, destructive acts of rebellion target the culture, edifices, and art of the dominant class. In her rage, Mara destroys both the culture of the former "dominant class," and, implicitly, Charlotte's culture— materials which show that Charlotte was once also colonized by Franz, her husband, through his patriarchal manner of exercising power: "Aber sie konnte nur dann einen Wunsch äußern, wenn Franz Fragen stellte. [. . .] Jetzt lebte sie in der hellen Ordnung, die Franz gehörte [. . .] die nicht die ihre war" (161).

While Charlotte is, from a historical standpoint, still a colonizer, the male ownership of the decorative objects in her apartment indicate that she is at the same time also colonized and subdued by male dominance. That Franz bought all the objects with the exception of the lamp in the bedroom, "und ein paar Vasen, Kleinigkeiten" (160), proves that he has imposed his taste and will upon Charlotte and their home. The text does not indicate Franz's class; however, the contrast between Charlotte's items and the rest of the decorations provided by her husband, can be interpreted as signs of oppression. Discussing the dynamic between popular culture and oppression, John Fiske suggests that "the culture of everyday life works only to the extent that it is imbricated into its immediate historical and social setting," and that "this materiality of popular culture is directly related to the economic materiality of the conditions of oppression" (154-55). Fiske goes on to say that the material density of a habitat is "packed with concrete meanings" (156). Thus, the presence of the lamp and of a few "Kleinigkeiten" (160) in the apartment indicate not only Charlotte's state of oppression, but also perhaps her aristocratic taste, which emphasizes quality over quantity. The lamp could also be interpreted as the symbol of a timid attempt to establish some type of balance both in the house and in her relationship with Franz. Without the lamp and its light, regardless of their value, the house and the objects cannot be seen or appreciated.

Although unexpected, Mara's devastating act is necessary for Charlotte. Surprisingly, her hands do not stop Mara's actions nor do they engage in counting the loses: "[. . .] genauso gut hätte alles in Trümmer gehen können. Denn sie hatte zugesehen, keine Hand gerührt, bei jedem Krachen, jedem Splittern stillgestanden" (157). It seems as if Charlotte has realized the futility of stopping a transformation for which she longed, but did not know how to initiate it: "Immer hatte sie davon geträumt, die Welt überliefern zu können und hatte sich geduckt wenn man sie ihr überlieferte" (167).

While cleaning up the devastated room, Charlotte also symbolically clears away relics of her dead culture. This act leads her to experience both a social and inner liberation: "Sie war frei. Nichts mehr erschien ihr unmöglich" (158). This type of freedom is for Charlotte unusual and frightening because she has no emotion or memory from a previous experience to explain her present situation: "Sie suchte in ihren Gefühlen nach einer Anweisung, in ihren Händen nach einem Instinkt, in ihrem Kopf nach einer Kundgebung. Sie blieb ohne Anweisung" (154-55). While contemplating, contrasting, and analyzing her previous love experiences, Charlotte realizes that none of the signifiers that used to operate in the past could possibly be transferred into the new love.

As she dreams about a life shared with Mara, Charlotte makes a short-lived discovery that the female can be seen as a resource and not only as a destiny (Showalter 251) and becomes not only an object of pleasure and fulfillment, but also a resource for complete *wissen* and *erkennen* both of the self and of the universe. Also, the communication established through the hands of the two women, seems to construct a new language system, which goes beyond words and their limitations of deferred reality.[4] In spite of the fact that Charlotte is usually considered the main character of the plot, the structure of the story introduces Bachmann and/or the narrator as main character(s) as well— throughout the text one can "hear" the intricate mesh of voices creating the *Erzählung*. Like intertwining hands, the textual structure of "Ein Schritt nach Gomorrha" makes it hard to distinguish Charlotte's voice from both Bachmann's and from the narrator's voice. In fact, all three voices could speak at the same time, operating like facets of the "sameness." In his article "The Paradox of Difference and Sameness" Bruno G. Just notes that "paradoxically, in tan-

dem with the experience of difference, there comes that of sameness" due to the acknowledgment that humans experience the same struggle toward self-actualization, regardless of gender and economic condition ("Paradox").

When Charlotte investigates the origin and function of language, gender, love, sexuality, power, and culture, she can be viewed both as the narrator and the writer of the story. Indeed, Charlotte acts as a feminist critic discussing "the four models of difference" that are present at biological, psychoanalytic, and cultural levels.[5] In this respect, the reader is also able to enter as a fourth voice because the structure of the story is an interesting combination of written and unwritten language: of words and images *in absentia* and *in presentia*. The abrupt change of the voice and background calls for the reader's imagination to fill in the "gaps" or "interruption" created in the absence of the text (Iser 53). Throughout the text, there are distinct shifts from the third person singular to an unaccounted for but nevertheless quite palpable *ich* voice, which could be any of the voices proposed thus far— including that of the reader. The story is thus created both on page and outside of the page, calling for a new and unconventional perception and interpretation of colonial reality and history, all imbedded in questions raised on the structure of gender and sexuality.

As she considers Mara's offer, Charlotte criticizes the system or *Bild* into which she was born: "Wenn sie Mara lieben könnte, wäre sie nicht mehr in dieser Stadt, in dem Land, bei einem Mann, in einer Sprache zu Hause, sondern bei sich" (167). In contrast to Charlotte's "gute Ehe" with Franz in which "er von ihrem Körper nichts verstand" (169), a love relationship with Mara seems to promise absolute fulfillment, a need Charlotte first encountered in her childhood:

> Als Kind hatte Charlotte alles lieben wollen und von allem geliebt sein, von dem Wasserwirbel, von einem Fels, vom heißen Sand, dem griffigen Holz, dem Habichtschrei— ein Stern war ihr unter die Haut gegangen und ein Baum, den sie umarmte, hatte sie schwindlich gemacht. (168)

This type of passion and desire for love and life corresponds to Mara's obsession with love: "Lieben— lieben, das ist es," she says, "lieben ist alles" (173). From this point on, Charlotte is shocked because Mara's touch stirs

in her a very deep and curious emotion, which indicates that the Slovenian knows her and that she and Mara are made of precisely the same material (153).

In spite of her strong desire for a new order in life and love, Charlotte falls prey to patriarchal power practices. After condemning the attitude and the habits of the men with whom she has lived, she slips into the role of the typical dominant male lover. H. Aram Veeser notes that "every act of unmasking, critique, and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practices it exposes" (11). In this sense, the title of Bachmann's story "Ein Schritt nach Gomorrha" could be interpreted as having a twofold function: it serves both as a challenge and as a warning. On the one hand, it challenges the reader to reevaluate the *status quo*, the role of tradition, and authority. On the other hand, by looking at the doom of the biblical city, the title seems to anticipate the impossibility of establishing a new order using the principles of the old one. Analyzing "Ein Schritt nach Gomorrha" whithin a biblical frame, Karen Achberger remarks that

> mit dem Wort „Gomorrha" [. . .] evoziert die Autorin das Böse und seine Zerstörung, das Böse, das im Alten Testament mit Recht zerstört wird, damit das Gute gedeihen kann. [. . .] Der „Schritt nach Gomorrha", den die Protagonistin Charlotte in dieser Nacht tut, setzt den Auftakt zur Zerstörung des Böses in ihrem Leben. (97)[6]

As Charlotte is planning a future for herself and her new lover, she adopts the role of a masculinized woman: "[Charlotte] fuhr Mara noch einmal zaghaft durchs Haar, hätte ihr gern etwas vesprochen. Etwas Süßes, eine Nacht oder eine Kette" (159). Charlotte envisions herself determining not only the house in which she and Mara would live, but also the language they would use: "[Mara] würde [Charlotte] das Haus richten [. . .] die Wahl treffen für das Haus, für die Gezeiten, für die Sprache" (167). The impossibility of stepping out of the symbiotic traditional dynamic of man and woman is evident as Charlotte does not even refer to Mara as "das Mädchen" anymore (167), but "das Geschöpf" (175), indicating both her desire for a new order and her dominance over the girl. In her fantasies about a new world and a new order, Charlotte talks like a divine figure, a creator who wants to incarnate ideas into time and space for selfish pur-

poses: "Ich will mein Geschöpf, und ich werde es mir machen. Wir haben immer von unseren Ideen gelebt, und dies ist meine Idee" (167). However, Charlotte's own "Reich" (171), in which she seeks to get rid of "den Mordversuch an der Wirklichkeit" (171) through "ein neues Maß" (171), is actually a mere copy of the patriarchal order that she loathes.

Charlotte cannot escape the system which demands the pairing of a dominant and a subordinate. Consequently, the Mara-Charlotte couple cannot be viewed as an absolutely new solution for a way out of the traditional male-female hierarchy. Although almost colonized by Mara, Charlotte ends up becoming the colonizer. Thus, as in history, the vicious circle of colonizing and being colonized continues; the roles of the two opponents all the while interchanging.

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Notes

[1] See Achberger.

[2] See Horsley.

[3] Slovenia has a long history of Austrian Habsburg domination, which started in the late thirteenth century when the monarchy established suzerainty over this country. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, sporadic peasant uprisings occurred. In the eighteenth century, living conditions of the Slovenian peasants somewhat improved under the reign of the Habsburg empress Maria Theresa and that of her son emperor Joseph II. The rule of the Austrian Habsburg Empire ended only in 1914, the year which marked the beginning of World War I (1914-1918). See *Britannica: Micropædia* 884-85.

[4] See Derrida.

[5] See Showalter 249.

[6] Karen Achberger finds it ironic that "im Alten Testament Homosexualität mit Sodom und Gomorrha als ine ihrer Hauptsünden und als Grund für die Zerstörung verbunden ist, während in Bachmanns Gegenentwurf es eben die heterosexuellen Beziehungen sind, die als verworfen gezeigt werden" (110).

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