

---

DOI: 10.1111/gequ.12451

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

---

# Knowing Gender in Kim de l'Horizon's *Blutbuch*

Sophie Salvo

Department of Germanic Studies, University of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, USA

**Correspondence**

Sophie Salvo, Department of Germanic Studies, University of Chicago, 1010 E 59<sup>th</sup> Street, Chicago, IL 60637, USA.

Email: [ssalvo@uchicago.edu](mailto:ssalvo@uchicago.edu)

---

**Abstract**

This article reads Kim de l'Horizon's award-winning novel *Blutbuch* (2022) as a contribution to the epistemology of gender. Amid philosophical debates about internality and externality in the construction of gender, about the feasibility of gender identity as a coherent concept, about gender feels and gender as process, de l'Horizon's novel offers something else: it shows the foolishness of attempting an etiology of gender and the compulsion to attempt one anyway. Instead of setting the ultimate knowability of gender aside, the typical move of today's gender theory, *Blutbuch* dwells within this impasse. In the novel, I argue, gender appears simultaneously as an empty signifier and an essential aspect of the self.

---

“Beispielsweise habe ich ‘es’ dir nie offiziell gesagt” (de l'Horizon 9). With this sentence, we are thrust into the narrative world of Kim de l'Horizon's 2022 *Blutbuch*. It is a disorienting way to begin a novel, though de l'Horizon soon resolves some of the ambiguity. The “es” is revealed to be the narrator's nonbinary gender, the “dir” their grandmother, the family matriarch. Rather than disclose their gender to their grandmother directly, the narrator, also named Kim, has left her to draw her own conclusions, coming “einfach mal geschminkt zum Kaffee” or “in einem Rock zum Weihnachtsessen” (9).

Yet despite these clarifications, the opening of *Blutbuch* remains confusing. This is more than the confusion of beginning *in medias res*. The first word seems to point back to an earlier statement, but—since this is the start of the prologue—there is nothing prior to it on the page. It is not clear what the word *beispielsweise* refers to. Exemplary in what regard? An example of what? Perhaps of the general category “other things we never spoke about,” which is mentioned later, but we cannot

---

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

© 2024 The Author(s). *The German Quarterly* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC on behalf of American Association of Teachers of German.

know for sure, since the “for example” lacks a preceding concept and thus a conventional semantic context. There are several ways to interpret this *beispielsweise* that refers to nothing. On the one hand, it aligns the reader with the perspective of the grandmother, the second-person addressee of the novel. The temporary destabilization elicited by the novel’s first word mimics the grandmother’s experience of Kim’s gender, where no introduction or explanation is provided. On the other hand, and more significantly, the unanchored *beispielsweise* initiates us into one of *Blutbuch*’s chief concerns: the unstable referent of gender expression. Gender appears in the novel like the *beispielsweise* of the opening, as a signifier in search of its meaning. For even as the text deconstructs any biologically-based understanding of gender, including the male/female binary and its attendant norms and mythologies, it constructs exemplary narratives of non-normative genders, looking for historical precedents, inherited causes, corollaries in nature: any kind of explanation, anchor, or connection. Sometimes ecstatically and sometimes in anguish, *Blutbuch* asks a pressing question of our age: What is gender, and how do we know?

As it explores these questions through its expansive and searching form, *Blutbuch* offers an alternative to the rather limited accounts of gender found in contemporary theory. It is common for philosophers of gender to declare that it may not be possible to know what gender is because the term has been made to hold so many different meanings. The nature of gender can only be parsed and addressed piecemeal, with some major aspect bracketed out. For example, the philosopher Sally Haslanger has argued in a series of papers for an “ameliorative” approach to defining race and gender, which means that instead of asking what gender *is*, we should consider “what work we want these concepts to do for us; why do we need them at all?” and endeavor to make them better (33-34). Elizabeth Barnes writes in a 2020 essay that “social position accounts” of gender can’t “give us a metaphysical analysis of what it is to be a man or a woman,” and thus we should not attempt total theories of gender (714). Similarly, while Robin Dembroff acknowledges in a 2007 article abstract that “we want to know what gender is,” they do not address this want in the text that follows, despite meticulously diagramming the “Western dominant gender ideology” into “four distinct but interconnected and mutually reinforcing axes” (15). The provocatively named *What Even is Gender?*, published in 2023 by the philosophers G. R. George and R. A. Briggs, states at the outset that it will not provide an answer to its titular query. This is because, they contend, it is the wrong question to ask: trans people have been told “again and again, that the legitimacy of our needs, and possibly our legitimacy as persons, depends upon a particular account of the metaphysics of ‘gender’” (1). Instead of investigating what gender is, George and Briggs favor a functional definition that promotes equal respect and rights: “We ought to gender someone as an F if and only if they sincerely express a wish to be gendered as an F” (152). They advocate for an understanding of gender that takes seriously people’s diverse “gender feels,” or attitudes and dispositions “about the fact or possibility of one’s possessing [a gendered] trait” (38).

Politically and pragmatically, it is easy to agree with such a statement (unless one adheres to the retrograde idea that a person's gender must conform to their sex assigned at birth, and that the public regulation of this is some sort of moral imperative). But as an account of the complex experience of being human, such philosophies do leave something to be desired. What a theory like George and Briggs's does not easily accommodate is any kind of individual questioning. It does not allow a person to interrogate where their sincere "wish to be gendered as an *F*" comes from, or to analyze their "path to gender-becoming," as the psychoanalysts Avgi Saketopoulou and Ann Pellegrini have put it (xxviii). Amid academic debates about internality and externality in the construction of gender, about the feasibility of gender identity as a coherent concept, about "gender feels" and gender as process, de l'Horizon's novel offers something else: it shows the foolishness of attempting an etiology of gender and the compulsion to attempt one anyway. Instead of setting the ultimate knowability of gender aside, the typical move of today's gender theory, *Blutbuch* dwells within this impasse, so that gender appears simultaneously as an empty signifier and an essential aspect of the self. It is this accumulation of meaning, this poetics of accumulation, that drives the novel's formal innovations, including its constant discursive shifts and its embrace of polysemy.

## GENDER AS PARADOX IN CONTEMPORARY THEORY

Since the mid-twentieth century, when *gender* developed into the term we now know—a name not just for grammatical categories but also for human ones—scholars have twisted themselves into knots defining it. In earlier eras, when men's and women's social roles, habits, and dress were assumed to derive from inalienable biological differences between the (two) sexes, gender was so self-evident that no term was needed to name it. "This orthodoxy," as Robert Nye succinctly explains, "was undergirded first by religious and philosophical and later by scientific authority in ways that preserved a remarkable degree of continuity" (198). What should ground an account of gender if this account does not rely on divine law or on anatomy? In what follows, I provide a brief overview of how pivotal theories of sex/gender from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have answered this question. In doing so, I aim to show how *Blutbuch*, in presenting its narrator's nonbinary gender as both necessary and contingent, addresses a key issue in contemporary thinking about gender.

Sexology was the first discipline to systematically de-couple what we would today call *sex* and *gender*. In his early twentieth-century work on *sexuelle Zwischenstufen*, for example, the sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld suggested that "all human characteristics, whether physical or psychological, occur in feminine or masculine form—or, in exceptional cases, androgynously" (Dose 18). Every person is a mixture of these masculine and feminine characteristics. This meant, as Dose observes, that "a 'full man' with exclusively masculine characteristics never occurs, and likewise a 'full woman' with exclusively feminine characteristics is a product of fiction." Although

Hirschfeld's classification system upholds a binary that today seems outdated, his argument that "masculine" and "feminine" psychological characteristics can occur in a diversity of bodies was revolutionary for his time. "Jeder Geschlechtscharakter ist in der befruchteten Keimzelle präformiert, eingeboren," he explains (18). According to Hirschfeld, it is "genogenetics," rather than reproductive organs, that determines one's gender.

With the declaration that "one is not born, but rather becomes, woman," Simone de Beauvoir offered a counter perspective, contending that the condition of being man or woman is not determined by any "biological, psychic, or economic destiny" (283). Instead, the subordination of women to men is the result of history, a condition that "served males' economic interests; but it also suited their ontological and moral ambitions" (159). Man flees "from himself by alienating himself in the other that he oppresses for that purpose" (756). The historical reality of woman's subordination does not mean that it is inevitable or unalterable. For men as well as women, the condition of being "sexually specified" (283), or what we would today call being gendered, requires a bad-faith relation to the self.

For John Money—the sexologist who claimed to have first put forward the contemporary meaning of *gender* in the 1950s (Germon)—on the other hand, existentialist diagnoses of the human condition were not top of mind. While Money contributed to advances in what we would today call gender affirmation care, he also grossly mistreated patients (Colapinto). Money distinguished between "gender role" and "gender identity" and linked the two through the concept of performance (Sullivan 21–22). As Nikki Sullivan explains, in Money's writing, "gender role is performative in two senses: it is an action or set of actions one articulates corporeally in a world of and with others, and, at the same time, it is constitutive of the self. In other words, gender role makes one be(come) male, female, neither or both [...] the more we repeat certain actions, the more naturalized or habituated such actions become, and the more they come to appear (both to others and to ourselves) as external expressions of who we 'really' are" (22). Money called a person's sense of their gender their "gendermap," which he defined as

the entity, template, or schema within the mind and brain (mind-brain) unity that codes masculinity and femininity and androgyny. [...] The gendermap is a conceptual entity under which are assembled all the male/female differences, and similarities also, not only those that are procreative and phylogenetically determined, but also those that are arbitrary and conventionally determined, such as male/female differences in education, vocation, and recreation. (qtd. in Sullivan 25)

Where does a person's gendermap come from? In other words, what orients someone toward "masculine," "feminine," or "androgynous" actions? For Money, differences in genes constitute the primary answer, although environmental factors are also important ("nothing is purely nature, and nothing is purely nurture" [Money 95]).

Sullivan describes his theory as “biological foundationalism” rather than “biological determinism” (27). Nevertheless, in Money’s account, biology plays a crucial role in establishing gender.

With *Gender Trouble* (1990) and the work that followed, Judith Butler provided perhaps the most important reconceptualization of gender in the twentieth century. While Butler’s account of gender performativity is now well known, it is important to specify that in Butler’s theory, what is being “performed” is not a person’s preexisting masculine, feminine, or otherwise gendered identity—as it has sometimes been interpreted—but rather the compulsory construction of the subject through gender. As Butler would write in *Gender Trouble*, “gender ought not to be conceived merely as the cultural inscription of meaning on a pregiven sex (a juridical conception); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established” (7). This notion of gender as the *apparatus of production* is crucial to Butler’s thinking. In *Bodies that Matter*, published three years later, they further explain that “construction is neither a single act nor a causal process initiated by a subject and culminating in a set of fixed effects” (10). In other words, there is no prior subject who controls or initiates this construction—no “I” who acts as deciding agent and also no all-powerful, personified “Discourse” or “Society” that determines everything (9). The “I” of the subject exists only in and through the “matrix of gender relations” (7). And yet, Butler also insists on the contingency of the current configuration of this matrix. As they write in *Undoing Gender* from 2004,

Gender is not exactly what one “is” nor is it precisely what one “has.” Gender is the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place along with the interstitial forms of hormonal, chromosomal, psychic, and performative that gender assumes. To assume that gender always and exclusively means the matrix of the “masculine” and “feminine” is precisely to miss the critical point that the production of that coherent binary is contingent, that it comes at a cost, and that those permutations of gender which do not fit the binary are as much a part of gender as its most normative instance. To conflate the definition of gender with its normative expression is inadvertently to reconsolidate the power of the norm to constrain the definition of gender. (42)

What Butler does not address is what *causes* the many permutations of gender—what prompts a person to express normative masculinity or femininity or to challenge this binary. Butler writes that the agency denoted by the performativity of gender (and sex) runs “directly counter to any notion of a voluntarist subject who exists quite apart from the regulatory norms which she/he opposes” (*Bodies that Matter* 15). Indeed, “the subject who would resist such norms is itself enabled, if not produced, by such norms. Although this constitutive constraint does not foreclose the possibility of agency, it

does locate agency as a reiterative or rearticulatory practice, immanent to power, and not a relation of external opposition to power” (15). Butler repeatedly refers to this agency as a “paradox” (variations on the word “paradox” occur approximately twenty times each in *Bodies that Matter* and *Undoing Gender*). To wit: “that my agency is riven with paradox does not mean it is impossible. It means only that paradox is the condition of its possibility. As a result, the ‘I’ that I am finds itself at once constituted by norms and dependent on them but also endeavors to live in ways that maintain a critical and transformative relation to them” (*Undoing Gender* 3). What makes an “I” want to live in one way or another? Who, or what, catalyzes this endeavoring? Moreover, once we have developed “within law, within psychiatry, within social and literary theory, a new legitimating lexicon for the gender complexity that we have always been living” (*Undoing Gender* 219), how will we know what gender(s) are right for us?<sup>1</sup>

*Blutbuch* understands itself to be in dialogue with the work of Butler and those who have inherited Butler’s theoretical framework. In the novel, references abound to poststructuralist, queer, and gender theory, which the narrator has relied on to understand their own queerness; they are also indicted as status symbols: “Meine Ego-Aufspritzung waren die Meter an Foucault, Bourdieu und Butler, die ich in meinem Büchergestell präsentierte. Wir spuckten auf das ökonomische Kapital, aber leckten das kulturelle Kapital umso gieriger auf” (143). Despite the references to Foucault and Butler, *Blutbuch*’s understanding of gender actually aligns most closely with the therapeutic approach developed by Saketopoulou and Pellegrini in their 2023 *Gender without Identity*. It is perhaps not a coincidence that both works were published within a year of each other, as they speak to a current need to understand gender, particularly the individual development of gender, in new ways.

In *Gender without Identity*, Saketopoulou and Pellegrini argue against the idea of gender as “some truth at the epicenter of the self” (xxi). “At stake is not essence [...] but how the subject is self-theorized at any one particular moment” (xxii). What is distinctive about their work is not that they eschew an identity-based model of gender—this has been done many times before—but that they are interested in thinking about what factors play a role in constructing someone’s gender. Drawing on their clinical experience, as well as the writings of Jean Laplanche, Saketopoulou and Pellegrini suggest that we should understand gender as always being influenced by “traumatic intrusions, by adult interventions, [and] by the emotional debris of intergenerational pressures.” “No gender,” they write,

is unspoiled by trauma or uncontaminated by parental conflict. It is what the child *does* with those experiences (of trauma, intergenerational transport, etc.), how they are *spun into gender*, and whether that spinning acquires some autonomy from the original intrusion, that determines whether one’s gender will feel viable, whether it will acquire the density of feeling like one’s own. (29-30)

Understanding the path to one's gender has the goal of helping patients "inhabi[t] gender as an idiom of their own forging, even if their gender may have originated through the other, *as gender always does*" (55). This is also the perspective of de l'Horizon's novel, although Saketopoulou and Pellegrini focus solely on psychic factors, whereas *Blutbuch* entertains the possibility of gender being influenced by genetic inheritance. There is, of course, another crucial difference. In *Gender without Identity*, the process of retrospectively considering one's gender formation is a task for psychoanalysis, a joint project between analyst and analysand. In de l'Horizon's novel, there is no outside party. The only conversation is the circular discussion the text has with itself.

### **BLUTBUCH'S SEARCH FOR THE SELF**

Written in the first-person, *Blutbuch* tells the story of Kim, a nonbinary young adult living in Switzerland, and their interactions with their friends and family, in particular their mother and grandmother, who is in the early stages of dementia. An aspiring writer, Kim spends much of the novel trying to make sense of their childhood, a time from which they remember very little except for a feeling of profound unease. The world of the novel is both mundane and profound; nothing and everything seem to happen at once. Lindt & Sprüngli share the page with meditations on grief and identity; the plot circles over repetitive scenes of reading, writing, talking, and sex, yet centuries of history also unfold, revealing adventures, discoveries, violence, and trauma.

*Blutbuch* is a self-proclaimed work of autofiction and there is much that its narrator/protagonist shares with its author. Both are named Kim; both are nonbinary; both are Swiss writers. Upon its debut in 2022, *Blutbuch* garnered prestigious awards, winning the Swiss as well as the German Book Prizes. This success, coupled with the convergence between author and subject, as well as the general popularity of the topic of gender, "turned de l'Horizon into a symbol for a broader discussion about the status of nonbinary people in the German-speaking world," as Thomas Rogers put it in the *New York Times*. While there have been relatively few academic studies of the novel, given its recent publication, there has been an explosion of newspaper and magazine coverage in and even beyond German-speaking countries. Despite its regional setting, *Blutbuch* seems to have been "born translated," to use Rebecca Walkowitz's term for novels that "emphasize production and multilingual reception" (Walkowitz 46). It has already been published in Catalan, Czech, French, Italian, Polish, Spanish, and Swedish, and more translations are on the way.

One of the many challenges that translators must contend with is the book's title. In German, "Blutbuch" conjures up a variety of different meanings, including the copper beech tree, which stands in Kim's grandmother's yard; record-books of punishments from the early modern period<sup>2</sup>; genealogy (as in, a book about a family bloodline); autobiography (as in, a book documenting the author's pain and trauma);

some primordial form of writing (the novel mentions how parchment used to be made from animal skins); and the magic trees of fairy tales (as in the Grimms's "Juniper Tree," where drops of blood spilled next to a tree beget a dark story of intrafamilial violence). The form of the novel is as capacious as its title. *Blutbuch* incorporates multiple discourses, registers, and even languages. The text regularly moves between the Bernese dialect of Swiss German and High German and includes some French, while the final chapter is written entirely in English (an artificial-intelligence translation of this English section into German also appears, upside down, at the novel's end). Each chapter has at least four epigraphs. The chapters themselves make use of different forms of writing, such as *Märchen*, pop literature, scientific history, the epistolary novel, genealogical narrative, and poststructuralist theory. The third chapter is composed of a research review and report on the natural and cultural history of the copper beech tree. The text also includes a lengthy manuscript, ostensibly written by Kim's mother, which provides a detailed account of the family's matrilineal history going back to the fourteenth century. This manuscript is distinguished from the rest of the novel by its typewriter-like font.

Threading together these diverse aspects of the novel is the theme of Kim's identity, and their gender in particular. Kim's gender is repeatedly presented as a question rather than a straightforward fact. For as many times as their nonbinary gender identity is depicted as an essential facet of their self, this essential quality is also called into question. As such, the novel lays bare a tension in today's thinking about gender: gender expression as a compelled performance vs. gender expression as the manifestation of an inherent and/or personally-chosen identity.

On the one hand, the novel seems to endorse demonstrably the "born this way" model of gender insofar as it describes its protagonist, who was assigned male at birth, as feeling an intrinsic discomfort with the male/female binary throughout their life. As a child, they had an "unendliche Lust [...] [einen] Ohrenring anzuziehen" (9) and would put on girls' clothes at their grandmother's house until the grandmother prohibited it (39). Instead of adhering to one side or another of the male/female divide, the narrator recognizes that they are "etwas Flüssiges" (101). This can be a source of pride for Kim—their power, they write, comes from "eine Wassermagie [...] ein Strömen, ein Fliessen" (115)—but it is more often a source of great pain, given the discrimination that nonbinary people face. Hiding in the raspberry bushes, for example, a young Kim pleads for succor: "Könnt ihr mir helfen? Die Kinder in der Schule machen sich lustig über mich. Manchmal bin ich ein Jung und manchmal ein Mädchen. Aber du kannst nicht beides sein. [...] Und wenn ihr da keine Hilfe seid. Könnt ihr mich unter die Erde ziehen? Könnt ihr mich unsichtbar machen?" (101-02). This feeling of invisibility follows the protagonist into adulthood, as they face the difficulty of finding the right pronouns: "in der Sprache, die ich von dir geerbt habe, in meiner Meersprache also, gibt es nur zwei Möglichkeiten, ein Körper zu sein. Das Aufwachsen im Gaumen der deutschen Sprache zwang mich stets in diese Kindergartenzweierreihe hinein" (17). The narrator knows "keine Sprache für meinen Körper. Ich kann mich weder in der Meersprache noch in der Peersprache



bewegen. Ich stehe in einer Fremdsprache” (58). Erased by a language without nonbinary pronouns, Kim cannot articulate their experience.

For the child, the socially forced “choice” between femininity and masculinity appears as a choice between mother and father, both of which contradict Kim’s existence as genderfluid. Kim tries on their parents’ different clothing, lipstick, and aftershave, and contemplates becoming one or the other (85). Yet they repeatedly chafe under the confines of the gender binary. Referring to themselves in the third person, as “das Kind” and “es,” the narrator explains,

Das Kind fragt sich. Wann muss man sich entscheiden. Ob man Mann oder Frau wird? [...] Das Kind weiss: Es darf kein Mann werden. [...] Es darf aber auch keine Frau werden. Was würde der Peer. Aber Frauen haben so schöne Haare. [...] Das Kind muss sich bald entscheiden. Die Leute fragen. NA DU. WAS BIST DENN DU? BUB ODER MEITSCHI? Es schaut die anderen Kinder an. Die meisten haben sich schon entschieden. [...] Das Kind fragt sich: Wie funktioniert diese Entscheidung? Ist das ein magischer Vorgang? (86-87)

The child attempts a magic spell to make themselves into either a man or woman, but this proves unsuccessful. Later, an older Kim tries out a different kind of transformation, attempting to fit into an urban gay scene:

Es war einmal ein Ich, Ich war einmal ein Es, ich bin einmal als Mensch geboren worden und aufgewachsen, ich bin einmal volljährig geworden und in die grösste Stadt meines Landes gezogen, und *damals gab es ja nur zwei Geschlechter, also meinen Körper gab es damals noch gar nicht*, und so stürzte ich mich eben neonfarbenen Schuhen in die Schwulenkultur rein, wo mein Körper—dachte ich—am ehesten ins Dasein kommen könnte. Ich hatte genug von Menschsein, ich liess mir ein Fell wachsen, ich riss meine Kleinstadtfreund\*innen aus, ich wollte niemenschen mehr kennen, wollte neu anfangen [...] ich wurde ein Werwolf, ein Wenwolf, ein Wenfickichheute-wuff [...]. (123, my emphasis)

In Berlin and Zürich, the narrator writes, they would open their veins and “mir das Mainstream-Gaydom beider Städte intravenös [geben]” (123-24). They grow a beard; they make their body look like those of the men around them. But this does not quite solve the problem of Kim’s feeling of unease, of unhappiness. All of this suggests that the narrator understands their nonbinary identity to be a settled and stable fact—a fact that they may, under social pressure, attempt to cover up, but one that can never be totally effaced.

In this way, the novel appears to present Kim’s gender as a core and unchangeable identity. Yet the text also interrogates this very idea. In the quotation above, the “es” seems to refer to the narrator’s nonbinary identity in a language that lacks an otherwise

adequate term (“Es war einmal ein Ich, Ich war einmal ein Es”; in other words, neither “sie” nor “er”). However, by borrowing from the opening convention of the fairy tale, a convention that serves to initiate a fictional world, the text also playfully implies that this “es” may have something constructed about it. We see this possibility of social constructivism in more detail in chapter 3, a self-reflexive chapter that includes extensive research on the history of the copper beech in Europe. Here the narrator writes,

Ich frage mich, wie viel meiner spezifischen “Queerness” wirklich essenzieller Ausdruck meiner ureigenen Persönlichkeit ist und wie viel dabei auch bloss die Verkörperung einer von den USA beeinflussten, metropolitanischen, weltbürger\*innenlichen Queerness ist, mit der ich mich identifiziere—auch weil sie cool und edgy ist. Ich meine: Es gibt ja verschiedene Arten, queer zu sein, und ich habe DIESE Art gewählt. (139)

The narrator then extends the doubt communicated in this striking passage even further, wondering if their entire self-expression is rooted in a desire to distance themselves from how their grandparents would have acted, had the grandparents been young today. The novel provides no clear answer to this radical self-questioning. The paragraph simply ends as the narrator realizes that they have lost a stitch—both in the sweater they are knitting and, presumably, in the story they meant to tell of the copper beech. Yet the uncertainty clouding the passage above seems to roll into the passage that follows, even as the novel switches its subject. The next paragraph begins with a survey of the different epistemological approaches that Kim has so far employed in their investigation into the tree: “das biologische, botanische, soziologische, klasstische, historische, nationalistische Wissen,” they enumerate, as if embracing a typology of scientific knowledge could ameliorate the radical skepticism they have just articulated about the existence of an “ureigen[e] Persönlichkeit” (139).

The narrator has, by their own account, a multitude of selves: there is “[das] Homo-Macho-Ich,” the “protestantisch[e] Ich,” the “wässrig[e] Ich,” the “Eiskunstlauf-Ich,” the “Geschichtsstudiums-Ich,” the “Two-Spirit-Ich,” the “appropriert[e] Ich,” the “More-than-human-Ich,” the “Darmbakterien,” the “inner[e] Kind,” the “geschrieben[e] Ich,” the “Voguing-Ich,” the “psychoanalysiert[e] Ich,” the “zwangsheterosexualisiert[e] Ich,” and the “Sexdate-Ich,” to list just several of the many registered in the novel (146). With a seemingly endless supply of different identities, how could there be such a thing as an inherent self, an inherent gender identity? And yet Kim cannot let go of the hope that this essential self might not only exist, but also be recoverable. Earlier, they had described their body as a “Möbel, ein Kommölli für Ausrangiertes” in which others have deposited their expectations, ideologies, and traumas (49).<sup>3</sup> “Exorzier mir all die Stimmen aus, die mit meiner Stimme sprechen/ Und mit meinem Fleisch begehren,” they beseech about halfway through the novel (174). The narrator longs to fix their identity to a singular and stable meaning,

to differentiate *my* voice and *my* flesh from the external influences that would shape it.

## SEMANTIC INCONSISTENCY AND THE NOVEL FORM

The novel, too, seems to long for this stability. Like its protagonist, the text is preoccupied with tracing things back to their beginnings, fixing them to an original cause—no matter whether this requires unearthing centuries of human actions or millennia of natural history. *Blutbuch* traces the distinct Bernese vocabulary, for example, back to Napoleon’s conquest (14–15), as well as the origin of life itself back to “das Urmeer, dem die ersten Bakterien entsprangen, das ziemlich genau siebenunddreissig Grad Celsius warm war” (18), and the origin of human life on land back to the human adaptation to carry water in the body (287). Whenever Kim asks about the source of something within the diegesis, the text seems to respond by generating an answer a few chapters later. Kim asks about their family origins (““Und wir? Woher kommen wir?””); within the next hundred pages, the novel has brandished Kim’s mother’s manuscript, which details the family’s genealogy. Similarly, after studying the *Herkunft* of the geranium plant (a connection to their grandmother), Kim wants to know about the origins of the copper beech; chapter 3 provides this wished-for botanical-historical overview, despite Kim’s insistence that they have no “Schreiblibido” to conduct this research or write about it (119).

The novel is particularly invested in finding an origin for Kim’s non-normative gender. One place it looks for this origin is in Kim’s family. Kim’s grandmother and mother, we learn, do not easily conform to expectations of femininity. The grandmother has large “Männerfüsse” (21) and also grew a beard while pregnant with Kim’s mother, though she tried to hide it (10). Kim’s mother, on the other hand, “wäre gern ein Mann geworden” (76). She wanted to be able to be aggressive, to study and have a man’s career. She has to give up her professional dreams when she has Kim, while the grandmother attempts to stamp out the aggression: “Du solltest sanfter sein. Eine Frau soll sanft sein” (92). Kim’s grandfather, on the other hand, is less “masculine” than his wife and daughter: “Er war fein, sensibel, zeigte seine Gefühle, hörte zu und nahm sich zurück” (49). Whereas a young Kim viewed their mother and father through the simple binary of female/male, the adult Kim, the narrator, recognizes the multiple gender positions that their parents have inhabited.

The familial precedent for queering the gender binary extends back generations. The manuscript detailing Kim’s family history is full of women who do not meet the demands of normative femininity. We learn, for instance, about Kim’s ancestor Maria Euphemia from the fifteenth century, who dressed as a man while she worked as a midwife. Then there is Michelle (Gfeller, geb. Zurbuchen) (1818–1841), who had, like her own grandmother, an “übermässigen Haarwuchs” (240). Michelle ironically made her livelihood helping men conform to masculine ideals they otherwise could not reach: she “finanziert sich, indem sie ihre eingelegten Barthaare an Männer

verkauft, wo zu wenig Bart- oder Kopfbehaarung haben” (241). Other gender-bending ancestors include Rosmarie Aeschi (1884-1944), who had a “Frauenbärtchen,” and Ida Sägesser (1900-1989), who liked to dress in men’s clothes (253-54).

One could argue that the main thing this history demonstrates is that conventional markers of sex and gender exist on a spectrum. Some women have beards, some men can’t grow beards, and the male/female binary is fantasy rather than reality. But the way that de l’Horizon locates these specific gendered traits within a single *bloodline* (in a novel whose title makes this an overdetermined topic), suggests that the text is considering here the role that biological inheritance may play in deciding a person’s sex and gender. The reappearance of beards among women in the family makes Kim’s grandmother’s beard seem—at least in the world of the novel—pre-determined. With this extensive history, the novel seems to ask whether gender is determined by genetics.

Or perhaps nonbinary gender is a random expression of the diversity of nature. In addition to establishing ancestral precedents of gender nonconformism, *Blutbuch* also explores examples of nonbinarism from natural and cultural history. An adult Kim realizes that chestnut trees, whose fruit they thought were magical as a child, is “ebenso magisch wie zuvor—dass Kastanien seit jeher magisch sind, dass jeder Baum männliche und weibliche Blüten trägt” (127). Joan of Arc, we read a few pages later, was “not that girly, binär fraulich, sondern eher inter” (131). The copper beech tree, as Theresa Sambruno Spannhoff writes, is similarly perceived to be a “role model” of an “in-between entity” (13). These examples function to bolster nonbinarism as a recognizable category. Like Joan of Arc and the chestnut tree, the narrator may be understood as an example of someone whose gender does not fit the male/female binary. In this regard, the problem initiated by the novel’s opening line, the *beispielsweise* in search of a referent, seems to be resolved. We *can* know what gender is: it is a necessary expression of natural diversity, either spontaneously occurring or inherited within a family line.

And yet the novel is also not satisfied with such a pat resolution, which would fix gender into a clear concept. Even as it attempts to anchor Kim’s identity within a determined tradition or lineage, it also performs a dazzling display of semantic instability, mimicking the instability that it had earlier ascribed to gender. This instability happens on multiple levels of the text. First, there is a kind of playful narrative unreliability typical of the postmodern novel. Kim tells of their grandmother in an *Altersheim* and announces her death, only to reveal later that she has not died at all: “I invented part four of this text. I wrote you into the home for demented people, although you still live at home, although you still know who I am” (270). Elsewhere, they criticize the authenticity of their narrative voice: “Es ist eine zynische, aufgekratzte Erzählstimme, die da ganz plötzlich und angestrengt popliterarisch über diesen Teil schwubuliert, und dafür entschuldige ich mich auch, echt, entschuldigend” (124). Kim repeatedly waxes self-reflexive about their text’s shortcomings and omissions, making us wonder what we should take seriously.

Then there is the semantic multiplicity of the novel's key terms: not only the ambiguity of the word "Blutbuch," as I discussed earlier, but also "Meer" and "Grossmeer," the Bernese terms for "mother" and "grandmother." Kim writes, addressing their grandmother,

In der Sprache, die ich von dir geerbt habe, in meiner Muttersprache also, heisst "Mutter" MEER. Mensch sagt DIE MEER oder MEINE MEER, aus dem Französischen abgeschielt. Für "Vater" PEER. Für die "Grossmutter" GROSSMEER. Die Frauen meiner Kindheit sind ein Element, ein Ozean. (16)

De l'Horizon exploits this double-meaning of "Meer." It means "mother," of course, from the French "mère," but also appears an inordinate number of times in the novel in its German meaning, "sea." Two pages after introducing this maternal vocabulary, for example, the narrator is discussing the "Urmeer," that primal sea out of which life first emerged (18). Water is a trope throughout the text, most prominently in the final chapter, which begins with the unattributed epigraph, "Water, water, take me where I cannot walk me" (265). The novel ends with a plunge into a river pool, and with a declaration that "my tongues are dripping, dropping, blurring, streaming, rooting, flowing" (298). All the while, the word "Meer" also appears again and again to refer to the narrator's mother.

There are arguably good reasons for this double meaning of "Meer." The connection between maternity and fluidity was a popular topic of late-twentieth-century feminist theory, a discourse referenced in *Blutbuch*.<sup>4</sup> One could say that working with polysemy is, at a basic level, the project of all literature. But there is something particular, and particularly extreme, about the way that *Blutbuch* cultivates the multiple meanings of "Meer," constantly teasing the reader back and forth between two poles without offering a final interpretation, leaving us to wonder what—if anything—this confluence of terms might mean. As Xiaohu Jiang observes, "Meer" also conjures up another meaning, the German homonym "mehr"—as in *more* (3).

The novel furthermore performs this semantic instability, which it has thematized through the term "Meer," by having words migrate between sections and, in doing so, change their meanings. Consider, for instance, a scene in which Kim has sex with a closeted Jewish man (Grindr handle: Needygreedy27). They meet in secret, under cover of a food delivery job. Kim asks him why he doesn't leave his unaccepting family, and he retorts, "Nur weil ich Schwänze mag, ist das noch lange kein Grund, den Ort und die Menschen, bei denen ich einen Platz habe, zu verraten, zu verlassen. Wo soll ich denn hin? In deine ach so tolle Kultur? Um jeden Abend alleine Fast Food zu fressen?" (140). The paragraph ends, and the next one begins with a description of Kim's life after their encounter: "Ich ging zur Arbeit, forschte zur Blutbuche, schlief, ass." After a day spent working and researching, Kim eats, presumably fast food, alone, like the man had derided their culture for just above. Placed at the end of the sentence, however, the word "ass" reads not only as the simple past of the German

*essen*, but also as the English vulgarity. Especially in the context of a book that makes use of fluent English—a book that has just recounted a scene of anal sex—a focus on the polysemy of the word seems deliberate. Drawing our attention to the multiple meanings of “ass,” the novel confuses its referent.

This kind of language play happens repeatedly. For instance: “Meer schrieb mir eine SMS. ‘Grossmeer geht es schlechter, sie steht vermutlich vor dem grossen Schub.’ Ich brauche eure Hände, boys, ich brauche eure aus Protein und Instagram geträumten Arme” (143). The “Hände” of boys evokes the “Handy” of the SMS, bridging the two seemingly unconnected sentences while also destabilizing the word’s meaning. Something similar happens with “father,” which links two otherwise unrelated scenes. The term migrates from a lover’s dispute with Kim—“I’m just trying to help. I could be your father” (150)—to, a page later, a description of “Vater Franz,” Fürst Leopold Friedrich Franz von Anhalt-Dessau, the “Vater der Humanität” who brought the English garden to Germany (151). Later, the semen from an ecstatic sex scene becomes, by the next page, the seeds (“Samen”) of the copper beech, which are mentioned in a description of nineteenth-century arboreal propagation techniques (164-65). As it changes the definitions of words from page to page, the novel gives stability only to take it away, performing formally a tension that it ascribed to gender in its plot.

Finally, there is the question of the novel’s overall structure, which it describes as an ever-widening spiral. “Ich strebe keinen Punkt an, der einen Satz abschliesst,” divulges the narrator,

sondern ein Semikolon, das sagt: “Hier ist eine Grenze, aber es geht weiter,” das den Satz weiterfliessen und doch zwischen seinen zwei Zeichen eine leere Stelle lässt; ich möchte diese schmale Spirale, auf der ich mich um das Loch im Zentrum bewege, weiterführen. (248)

Indeed, they confess a distaste for “gewisse totalitäre Tendenzen in der Klassik: die Idee, dass DER Autor vollkommene Souveränität über seinen Stoff hat, dass er ‘alles im Griff hat’, Form und Inhalt in absoluter Harmonie zusammendingsbumselt. Dass Kunst formvollendet und ‘schön’ zu sein hat” (152). This kind of banal pronouncement might make us question the novel’s intelligence if it were not for what surrounds it: a page and a half worth of footnotes and sub-footnotes, all of which give lie to the narrator’s proclamation that they are against a poetics of sovereignty over the material, of having “everything under control.” For what is the function of sub-footnote 15-1—where the narrator covers the history of the genre of the novel in the context of the rise of the bourgeoisie in Europe (153)—if not to demonstrate the author’s absolute mastery over their material? Further on the subject of coherence and control: that the text hits us over the head with its motifs of water, fluidity, floating—as if it is worried we might not catch on—suggests that *Blutbuch* is attempting some kind of harmony, or at least congruence, between the literal and the figurative, the fluidity of water and the fluidity of gender identity. What’s more, in the end, the novel does not

conclude with a semicolon as promised, but rather with that tired old punctuation, the period.

Such contradictions arise because *Blutbuch* follows a poetics of accumulation. For every position it incorporates, it also considers its opposite, and refuses to synthesize them. It argues against the ostensible mastery and coherence of the Weimar Classicists, but performs this coherence and mastery nonetheless, for example in its lengthy displays of historical knowledge. Ambitiously, the novel tries to incorporate everything into itself: natural history, myth, family, nation, the author's life. The result is destabilizing—we can never rest long on one approach or meaning—but it is also thrilling in the possibilities it unfolds. In this way, the novel is constitutionally opposed to the approach of the philosophies of gender I discussed in the beginning of this article. Whereas contemporary theories of gender are engaged in an endless parsing, drafting categories and shrinking potential meanings via numbered criteria, *Blutbuch* amasses alternatives, gathering more explanations instead of whittling them down. Rather than sidestepping the question of what gender is, de l'Horizon's text embraces it, and takes seriously our desire for an answer. In addition to its literary merits, *Blutbuch* has been praised as a politically timely representation of gender diversity. It is, as I hope to have shown, also more than this: it is a provocative investigation into the gendered categories that structure our lives, how we know them, and how they signify.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Magnus makes a similar point (90). In Butler's most recent work, they similarly write that "becoming" is the "temporality of gender itself," but leave aside the question of what instigates this becoming (*Who's Afraid of Gender?* 202).

<sup>2</sup> Early-modern record books of crimes and their punishments sometimes bore the name "Blutbuch," such as the *Esslinger Blut- oder peinliche Urtheilbuch* and *Das Rote oder Blutbuch der Dessauer Kanzlei*. The punishments recorded therein were often more violent than the crimes. According to Jablonowski, the sixteenth-century Dessau *Blutbuch* documented "die Verfolgung und Verurteilung von Straftätern (Dieben, Mördern, Sexualstraftätern, 'Hexen') und ihre 'Rechtfertigung' durch Schwert, Strang, Rad, Feuer, oder auf die Bestrafung durch dauerhafte Landesverweisung" (9). This cataloguing of transgressions is echoed in de l'Horizon's discussion in the novel of the punishments meted out at a women's "correctional facility" (288-89; 292-93). Crimes of witchcraft are a further connection between the record books and de l'Horizon's novel, which is interested in the figure of the witch in fairy tales and in academic discourse (for instance Federici's *Caliban and the Witch*). For more on the early-modern punishment books, see Jablonowski and Vöhringer-Rubröder.

<sup>3</sup> Sathi shows how this stems from young Kim's misunderstanding of being called "Möbu," which in Bernese German can mean "little rascal" as well as "furniture" (Sathi 5-6).

<sup>4</sup> See for example Irigaray's *The Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche* and Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa."

## WORKS CITED

- Barnes, Elizabeth. "Gender and Gender Terms." *Noûs*, vol. 54, no. 3, 2020, pp. 704–730.  
 Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.  
 Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*. Routledge, 1993.  
 Butler, Judith. *Undoing Gender*. Routledge, 2004.

- Butler, Judith. *Who's Afraid of Gender?* Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2024.
- Cixous, Hélène. "The Laugh of the Medusa." Translated by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1976, pp. 875–893.
- Colapinto, John. *As Nature Made Him: The Boy who was Raised as a Girl*. Harper Perennial, 2000.
- de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, introduction by Judith Thurman, Vintage, 2011.
- de l'Horizon, Kim. *Blutbuch*. DuMont, 2022.
- Dembroff, Robin. "Beyond Binary: Genderqueer as Critical Gender Kind." *Philosophers' Imprint*, vol. 20, no. 9, 2020, pp. 1–23.
- Dose, Ralf. *Magnus Hirschfeld: The Origins of the Gay Liberation Movement*. Monthly Review, 2014.
- Federici, Silvia. *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*. Autonomedia, 2004.
- George, B. R., and R. A. Briggs. *What Even is Gender?* Routledge, 2023.
- Germon, Jennifer. *Gender: A Genealogy of an Idea*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Grimm, Jacob, et al. "The Juniper Tree." *The Original Folk and Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm: The Complete First Edition*, vol. 1, Princeton UP, 2015, pp. 148–157.
- Haslanger, Sally. "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?" *Noûs*, vol. 34, no. 1, 2000, pp. 31–55.
- Hirschfeld, Magnus. *Geschlechtsübergänge: Mischungen männlicher und weiblicher Geschlechtscharaktere (Sexuelle Zwischenstufen)*. W. Malende, 1905.
- Irigaray, Luce. *The Marine Lover of Friedrich Nietzsche*. Translated by Gillian C. Gill, Columbia UP, 1991.
- Jablonowski, Ulla. *Das Rote oder Blutbuch der Dessauer Kanzlei (1542-1584) im Kontext der Verwaltungs- und Rechtsgeschichte Anhalts im 16. Jahrhundert*. Sax-Verlag Beucha, 2002.
- Jiang, Xiaohu. "Creating a Blutbuche and Barebacking Archive: An Analysis of Kim de l'Horizon's *Blutbuch* (2022)." *Journal of European Studies*, vol. 53, no. 3, 2023, pp. 1–13.
- Magnus, Kathy Dow. "The Unaccountable Subject: Judith Butler and the Social Conditions of Intersubjective Agency." *Hypatia*, vol. 21, no. 2, 2006, pp. 81–103.
- Money, John. *Gendermaps: Social Constructionism, Feminism and Sexosophical History*. Bloomsbury, 2016.
- Nye, Robert. "How Sex Became Gender." *Psychoanalysis and History*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2010, pp. 195–209.
- Rogers, Thomas. "Bending Gender's Rules, in Life and in German Grammar." *The New York Times*, 5 Dec. 2022, p. C6.
- Saketopoulou, Avgi, and Ann Pellegrini. *Gender Without Identity*. Unconscious in Translation, 2023.
- Sambruno Spannhoff, Theresa. "Skin Sediments: Narrating Memory in Kim de l'Horizon's *Blutbuch* (2022)." *German Quarterly*, vol. 97, no. 2, 2024, pp. 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gequ.12421>.
- Sathi, Anchit. "Writing (with) the Body: The Case of Kim de l'Horizon's *Blutbuch*." *Textual Practice*, 2023, pp. 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2023.2259349>.
- Sullivan, Nikki. "The Matter of Gender." *Fuckology: Critical Essays on John Money's Diagnostic Concepts*, edited by Lisa Downing, Iain Morland and Nikki Sullivan, U of Chicago P, 2014, pp. 19–40.
- Vöhringer-Rubröder, Gisela. "Hexenverfolgung in der Reichsstadt Esslingen." *Hexenverfolgung: Beiträge zur Forschung—unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des südwestdeutschen Raumes*, edited by Sönke Lorenz and Dieter R. Bauer, Königshausen & Neumann, 1995, pp. 141–158.
- Walkowitz, Rebecca L. *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature*. Columbia UP, 2015.

**How to cite this article:** Salvo, Sophie. "Knowing Gender in Kim de l'Horizon's *Blutbuch*." *German Quarterly*, 2024, pp. 1–16.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/gequ.12451>