Research Article

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Blood Run Beech Read: Human–Plant Grafting in Kim de l'Horizon's *Blutbuch*

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Abstract: This article discusses human–vegetal bonds in Kim de l'Horizon's award-winning novel *Blutbuch*. With its transgender perspective informing the text's botanical imaginary *Blutbuch* holds, the author maintains, an irreplaceable position in the ecological or phytographic literature. The autofictional tale develops a unique non-binary poetics by creatively working through the impact of individual, arbitrary, and, most importantly, structural violence in the blood family on the coming-of-age and growing-into-a-body of its first-person narrator. "Blood Run Beech Read" explores how de l'Horizon confronts psychic trauma and how human–vegetal bonds and attention to the material language of plants help to disengage from the transgenerational patterns of its reproduction. Suggesting that trans* realities model a different relation to the un/natural: one that dares to forge so far unseen or unintelligible connections, the analysis focuses on human–plant grafts. Specifically, it considers the symbiosis and sympoiesis of beech tree and narrator/protagonist. Through creative translations and careful close readings of the grafting scenes in the autofictional text, "Blood Run Beech Read" argues for the materiality of language as constitutive of transcorporeality.

Keywords: botanical imaginary, language of plants, materiality of language, transgender, transgenerational trauma

In 2022, the novel of a nonbinary writer – a book of autofiction with a nonbinary first-person narrator – won the German Book Prize, the top literary honor in the German-speaking world. Since then, Kim de l'Horizon's *Blutbuch* has received also the Swiss Book Prize, was translated into numerous languages (including Spanish, Catalan, French, Italian, Polish, and Swedish) and was adapted for the stage many times. An English translation is underway. Sometimes, the monster can speak and be heard.[1]

Literary scholarship has celebrated de l'Horizon's debut novel as an original contribution to the theory of gender (Salvo, 2024), the embodied narrative genre (Sathi, 2023), and cultural memory studies (Lüthi, 2023; Sambruno Spannhoff, 2024). For Salvo "*Blutbuch* offers an alternative to the rather limiting accounts of gender found in contemporary theory" (2024, p. 355). In his research on embodied narratives, Sathi considers *Blutbuch* an "expansion of the genre to new frontiers" (2023, p. 4). And Sambruno Spannhoff lauds it as "an original way of narrating memory through transformative materialities" (2024, p. 150). This article turns to de l'Horizon's *Blutbuch* for its unique insights advancing the field of Plant Humanities. Surprisingly, given the leitmotiv of the

1 I am alluding to Paul Preciado's lecture interrogating the binary gender roots of psychoanalysis, titled "Can the Monster Speak?", at the École de la Cause Freudienne's annual conference in Paris, 2019 (Preciado, 2021).

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beech tree and the importance of other plants in the narrative, this aspect is still underdeveloped in the scholarship.[2]

Through careful translations and attentive close readings of the human–vegetal relations described in this autofiction, the article that follows explores how plants can aid in the struggle for embodied self-formation. After a summary of the novel, which by force of the text's characteristics will focus on structure and style more than on plot, the article will first discuss the multitude of languages employed to highlight the problematic nexus of gender and language from a nonbinary or trans* perspective. In this context, it will also raise the promise of the material language of plants (drawing upon Michael Marder's work). The next section attends to the child's encounter with family traumata and presents several plants as interlocutors and their plant names as signifiers furnishing orientation in the child's attempts to respond to the physical and verbal intrusions of family members' secrets and stories. This leads to the core of my argument with an analysis of a particular way of "making kin as oddkin" (Haraway, 2016, p. 2): a specific form of human–vegetal bond envisioned in the text, which I will describe as grafting.[3] Grafting forges a symbiotic connection across a wound.[4] The practice – which humans may learn from plants, I suggest, leaning on Jane Bennett's most recent book *influx and efflux* – can transform the traumatic subtext of embodied self-formation without disavowing the hurt. The grafting lesson serves as an important counterweight to the idealization of fluidity, supported by de l'Horizon's program of an *écriture fluide* (De l'Horizon, 2022b) and prevalent in the existing scholarship[5], which all too easily washes over the violence that saturates self-formation. Informed by Karen Barad's agential realism and Mel Y. Chen's transdisciplinary work on animacy, the article features creative translations to highlight the effect of transitive and intransitive verb usage.[6] In dialogue with the scholar in ecology, art, and transgender studies Eva Hayward, who develops a more ecological notion of language, the final section argues that the formal experiments of the novel foreground language as both medium for and participant in the sympoiesis, to use another term proposed by Haraway (2016), of human and vegetal life forms. Starting from the assumption that queer figures and trans* aesthetics can catalyze change, this article contends that de l'Horizon's botanical imaginary, particularly the oddkin of the human–plant graft, serves as a way to confront the psychic life of violence together with its transgenerational patterns of reproduction within a heteronormative matrix and to transform transgenerational trauma.

1 *Blutbuch*

The autofiction performs the gender fluidity of its first-person narrator Kim in a language that moves fluidly between Swiss German, specifically Bernese, and Standard German, and ends with a chapter in English. To put it differently, the narrative mimics and counters the violent effects of the normative gender dichotomy on its nonbinary narrator by disrupting each idiom with several others. Style, structure, and content of the novel cut across the confines of many categories. Our focus here will be on the mutual non-exclusivity of the fluid and the broken, and the vegetal and the human.

According to the biographical information supplied by the publishing house, Kim de l'Horizon was born in 2666 on Gethen. The pen name – anagram of the birth name Dominik Holzer – has assumed a resounding reality and one can only hope that a birth on Gethen, the planet of Ursula Le Guin's science fiction novel "The

2 Jiang (2023) touches on the plant-body nexus but reduces the relation to a shared history of oppression. Sambruno Spannhoff (2024) celebrates what she, like me, names symbiosis of human and plant but ignores how violence informs this symbiosis. Thus, she misses the work's most profound contribution.

3 I build here on previous work. See Pahl (2019, 2021).

4 In its own way, *Blutbuch* contributes a narrative for the "symbiocene" (Karpouzou & Zampaki, 2023).

5 Cf. Sambruno Spannhoff (2024), pp. 158–162), Sathi (2023, pp. 9–10), Wimmer (2023, pp. 104 and 108).

6 Chen contributes to critical animal studies, new materialism, disability theory, feminist and queer theory, and critical linguistics. For a definition of linguistic animacy (Chen, 2012, p. 24): "For linguists, animacy is the quality of liveliness, sentience, or humanness of a noun phrase that has grammatical, often syntactic, consequences."

Left Hand of Darkness," in 2666 (the title of Roberto Bolaño last novel), will have had similar effects on the author's early life in Ostermundigen near Bern, Switzerland, since 1992. De l'Horizon writes poetry, prose, and plays. For the theater, they adapted Bolaño's short story "Murdering Whores" and were invited to the 2023 festival of contemporary theater in Berlin with the climate play "Hänsel & Greta & The Big Bad Witch." They contribute as a columnist to several newspapers and coedit the literary magazine *Delirium*.

Their debut novel *Blutbuch* is composed of five uneven parts plus a ten-page prologue. The first four parts present searches (for memory, for childhood, for an origin, and for the grand/m/other Rosmary), while the last part provides closure with an opening or a shift in the eternal repetition of the same: it is titled not "coming full circle" but "Coming full spiral."

Without preparation, the prologue introduces the themes of (non-)binary genders, the politics of language, family secrets, the grandmother's dementia, and the first-person narrator's desire to know more about their family and its legacy of violence. As they put it, "I want to know how this shit got into our veins"[7]. The prologue also situates the narrator/author at their writing desk in Zurich during a late winter evening at 26 years old.

The first two parts gather memories of childhood like flotsam that washes up on the shore of consciousness (*Schwemmgut*, p. 19). The first part focuses on the narrator's grandmother: her home, her things, her body, and her conduct. The narrative here is at times written in the first person, at others in the third person about the child and its grandmother, and then, again it is addressed to the grandmother. The second part, written as a stream of consciousness, presents the child's inner life in the family context. The very short, often incomplete sentences here mimic the child's speech, who, as we learn, feels spellbound to use no more than seven words at a time. The narration also includes direct speech from the mother and grandmother and introduces the child's special relation to the blood-colored beech in the ancestors' garden. The third part intertwines self-critical reflections about the writing process and the narrator's sexual life during that time with reflections about the role of the red beech tree in the family garden and research into the biological and cultural characteristics of the beech and its blood-colored mutation. The language is casual and peppered with slang, despite some very long sentences. It is vivid, highly hypotypotic, and sometimes uses the lingo of filmmaking. The next and longest part is titled "In Search for Rosemary," and treats the current life of the now demented grandmother as well as the attempts of both her grandchild (the narrator) and her daughter (the narrator's mother) to come to terms with her gradual passing and to tell her story. The last and shortest part consists of letters from a writing retreat with two friends in the Southern Swiss Alps, most of them to grandmother and one to mother, all written in English, i.e. in a language these two "don't really understand" (267). The letters contain a substantial amount of poetological reflections, as well as other reflections (about embodied life, feelings, transformation, and symbiosis), descriptions of social, intellectual, and sexual interactions during the retreat (including modern shamanism and witchery), and further memories of family relations (now interpreted with the cognizance of family trauma and patriarchal violence).

As might have already become clear, the novel presents no continuous narrative but rather a patchwork of different genres and styles: scraps of narration, reflection, intertexts, and research results. The patchwork character of the book is also rendered typographically. While the (always short) sections of the first two parts have titles, the sections of Part 4 are only numbered, and in Part 3, they are just separated by a blank line or a blank line with an asterisk in the middle; the letters of Part 5 are separated by the address ("Dear Grandma" or "Dear Mum"). The volume features different fonts and paragraph styles, including the typescript of the mother's matrilineal ancestral story, a facsimile image of a historical document, various lists, correspondence printed in italics, epigraphs in smaller font, footnotes, a Works Cited list, an outline of the book in bold smaller font, as well as the German translation of the last chapter printed upside down and in smaller font. The writing style switches between sincere self-reflection, self-reflective irony, raw descriptions of physical acts, casual language, family language, child language, pop lingo, queer cultural codes, fairy tale phrases, and academic conventions. The only stylistic constant might be its abundant engagement in word plays (often across languages).

7 "Ich möchte wissen, wie diese Scheiße in unsere Adern kommt," p. 14.

2 Trans* Plant Style

De l'Horizon forgoes the use of an article in the title of their novel. Since in the German language, articles carry information about the grammatical gender, their absence here participates in a common practice of expressing gender fluidity, namely the avoidance of personal pronouns. What is more, it allows the title word to waver between the standard and the dialect and to change its meaning in this oscillation. Depending on whether one reads the title as Swiss German (using the feminine *die* to form *Die Blutbuch*) or Standard German (choosing the neuter *das* for *Das Blutbuch*), the title will be translated as *Copper Beech* or *Blood Book*. Thus, the single title word keeps several meanings in suspension: a specific kind of tree, an object made of trees, a literary work, and the many connotations of blood (including the near-homonymy with the Swiss-German *blutt* meaning naked). Cutting across the boundaries of gender, language, class,[8] life forms (vegetal and animal), and orders of culture (material and symbolic), the title anticipates what, I contend, the entire novel performs. It creates a space for a very broad notion of trans: one that allows for a multitude of connections and transformations, especially across the human–plant boundary.

Belying the notion of gender fluidity, the form of the novel is fragmented, disjointed, and even dismembered. In a poetological passage that runs into the issue of bodily comportment, the narrator acknowledges the piecemeal flux of their self-expressions in the context of norms that are experienced as rigid and oppressive:

> In the fascistic binary of body languages, my limbs speak a gobbledygook, a chewed up Elfish, a zerbroken insistlish Ginglish, an Inbetween and Therewith that staggers back and forth in confusion.
>
> I don't know how I could articulate myself otherwise than: I know no language for my body. I can move neither in the mom tongue nor in the dad tongue. I stand in a foreign tongue. Perhaps that is one of the reasons for writing, for this dismembered, crumbling writing. … Perhaps this writing is the search for a foreign tongue in the words that one has at one's disposal.[9]

The idea of gender fluidity is exposed here as a euphemism that covers over much struggle, alienation, and existential homelessness – a pain that the final lines of the quote embrace as inseparable from a desire for the transformational potential of defamiliarization: "the search for a foreign tongue in the words that one has at one's disposal."

Such "foreign tongue" might be something even more alien than another sociolect, something unheard of yet real. Marder acknowledges the silence of plants, yet contends that "vegetal life expresses itself otherwise, without resorting to vocalization. … [P]lants … articulate themselves spatially" (2013, p. 75). He adds that "in using the word 'language' to describe vegetal self-expression in all its spatialized materiality, [he is] not opting for a metaphor" (2013, p. 75). The fragmented writing of this trans* person ("this dismembered, crumbling writing") enacts, I suggest, experiences of and desires for a rupture of bodily integrity.[10] Plants serve as privileged objects of identification in this novel, I propose, because they have the ability to turn cuts and breaks into exuberant growth, simultaneously attracting attention to and repairing them. Plants model the healing of psychic wounds without leading into the trap of disavowing those wounds.

To be sure, images and signifiers of liquidity abound in the text. To stay with the same quote, the sentence "I can move neither in the mom tongue nor in the dad tongue" bespeaks perhaps a lack of fluidity in one language but performs once more the flowing into one another of different languages. The phrases "mom tongue" and "dad tongue" only somewhat inadequately translate the original word amalgamations *Meersprache* and *Peersprache*. While *Sprache* is Standard German for language. *Meer* and *Peer* are the Bernese German words for mom and dad. In this novel, which tells the story of Kim trying to understand their maternal ancestors, the signifier *Meer* is used

8 The dialect is considered uneducated. See also the article in the news periodical *Die Zeit*, where De l'Horizon states that they have a clearer sense of their shame around class than their shame around gender (de l'Horizon, 2022c).

9 "Im Binaritäts-Faschismus der Körpersprachen, sprechen meine Glieder ein Kauderwelsch, ein zerkautes Elfisch, ein zerbroken Dringlisch, ein in Wirrnis hin und her torkelndes Dazwischen und Damit. / Ich weiss nicht, wie ich mich sonst formulieren könnte als: Ich weiss keine Sprache für meinen Körper. Ich kann mich weder in der Meersprache noch in der Peersprache bewegen. Ich stehe in einer Fremdsprache. Vielleicht ist das mit ein Grund für das Schreiben, für dieses zerstückelte, zerbrösmelnde Schreiben … Vielleicht is dieses Schreiben die Suche nach einer Fremdsprache in den Wörtern, die einem zur Verfügung stehen" (58).

10 For Marder plant language manifests as exuberant growth, but he does not get into view the vegetal self-expression around injuries (2013, pp. 36–38).

with very high frequency. Depending on what article one decides to put in front of the word – *die Meer* or *das Meer* – it can mean mom in Bernese German or sea in Standard German. The story of Kim's moms comes in waves.

And yet, there is no flow. No easy solution here. If anything, the mixing or flowing into each other of languages and styles produces a suspension. The signifiers of fluidity are apt in this context perhaps only because the sea and other bodies of water carry so much refuse and flotsam – not to say waifs and strays. Plants, specifically the title beech, come into play and figure the overlap of the solid and the liquid, the fragmented and the flowing, or the cut and the sap. The kind of foreign tongue that will be foregrounded with this article, and that runs through the book beginning with its title, inscribing itself in the body of the protagonist is the material language of plants.

3 Monstera

The novel locates monstrosity not in the gender-non-conformity of its narrator, nor in its multilinguality, non-linear narration, or mixed-genre textuality, but in the prehistory of the family: "My grandmother is called Rosemary, and she was a monster" (De l'Horizon, 2022a, p. 30). The largely untold family history is ripe with violations of individual integrity – physical, mental, and emotional – in the form of mutilation, premature death, replacement children, incestuous rape, and the expulsion of a victimized child.[11]

Rosemary stands in for her older sister of the same name who died as a child. She was born on the birthday of the first Rosemary, 16 years later. As a replacement child, her life is not her own. But then, whose life is? In many different ways the novel grapples with the implicit missions that children receive to execute what others, most often their parents, didn't manage. Grandmother Rosemary's younger sister Irma, their father's favorite, disappeared when she was fifteen – never to be talked about again, except for the fact that grandmother names her daughter, what is Kim's mother – Irma. It is suggested that the replacement child Rosemary repeats the replacement by using her daughter as a stand-in for herself, transferring her own responsibility as a silent witness of the disappearance. And indeed, the second Irma will confront her great-grandmother with questions (De l'Horizon, 2022a, p. 297). Meanwhile, Kim's father is barely in the picture, except as stuck on the story of his two childhood friends, whom he did not join one day – who knows why – on their regular climbs in the local Swiss Alps. That was the day when the boys were shredded by a stone avalanche. Family stories – the stories of Meer, Grossmeer, and Peer (mother, grandmother, and father) – are stories of violence and trauma, shaped by dissociation and repetition compulsion.[12]

The narrator seeks to write their way out of these stories not by turning away from them but by letting the stories penetrate and run through them. In this endeavor, they realize that their mission is not just to record but also to create. Not so much because they have incomplete knowledge of the facts, but because they begin to understand that these moms, their Meers, lived incomplete lives, were largely consigned to a death in life, and that there is a lot of life that can still be given to them. "I break the circle" – Kim writes in English, "of children who kill their parents in order to be free, to become themselves. I don't kill my parents. I am giving birth to my mothers." (De l'Horizon, 2022a, p. 280). The queer procreativity of such an inversion of the family line differs significantly from traditional forms of reproduction that pay forward ancestral and personally experienced violence. Kim declares, again in English, "I cannot continue the silence, because I will not have kids. There will be no one to live in my stead. My belly will not fill with life, it is only filled with blood" (De l'Horizon, 2022a, p. 290). While heteronormative reproduction here figures as the compulsion to repeat existing patterns of violence, the homonymy of Standard German for book (*Buch*) and Swiss German for belly (*Buuch*) suggests that writing autofiction serves to spiral out of the circle.[13]

The book embraces the invasion of the psyche by the ghosts of the dead, the disappeared, and the rest with their undigested stories, and celebrates the intense sexual pleasures derived from the penetrability of the

11 A replacement child is meant to fill a void, left by a dead sibling, that the parents haven't healed from.

12 Fehr (2022) traces these stories of often sexualized violence back to Ovid's Metamorphoses.

13 Note the use of the phrase "I break the circle" within the chapter titled "Coming full spiral."

body. In this context, I want to consider in more detail now the trans-species porousness or trans-kingdom porousness, to be more precise, between humans and plants.

Early in the book, the narrator addresses their grandmother explaining, "I always knew that you and mom are monsters, in search of a place where you can put your seeds, your seedlings."[14] The word choice of "seeds," and especially "seedlings," fuses the animal realm (animated movements) with the vegetal realm. The context clarifies that the child derives the certainty of identification ("My grandmother is called Rosemary, and she was a monster.") from the sound of a word, specifically the name of a plant genus, namely Monstera: "I remember that you had a huge plant in your apartment. [...] Her leaves were as big as my head, and they were hands. When I asked mom how this plant was called, she said: 'Monstera.'"[15] To the child, grandmother's plant looks like a monster with its huge fingered leaves: its many hands.[16] Grandmother's hands are also very prominent in the narrator's recollections, since they are always busy touching the child.[17] The plant name speaks to the child and supports the identification of grandmother with her house plant: "I knew that you melt into the Monstera at night."[18]

While the child turns to the image of the monster to express fear and discomfort with intrusive behavior, the fact that the monstrous emerges as so closely linked to the plant realm also allows for a sense of commonality, even sympathy with grandma: "I knew [...], that you – like me – come closer to plants than to humans."[19] In another instance, it is again a word that facilitates this human–vegetal affinity: "Your name spoke with me, Rosemary, and I hear the rosemary in our garden."[20] The child speaks with plants just like it speaks with words. Let's turn now to its main interlocutor and medium, the blood-colored beech.

4 Blood Beech

John Case, *Compendium Anatomicum* (1696)

This image from John Case's *Compendium Anatomicum* (1696) of the end of the seventeenth century is reproduced in Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch*, a title that is referenced in *Blutbuch* several times, once

14 "Ich wusste immer, dass du und Meer Monster seid, auf der Suche nach einem Ort, wo ihr eure Samen, eure Sämlinge hineinlegen könnt" (51).

15 "Ich erinnere mich, dass du eine riesige Pflanze hattest in deiner Wohnung. [...] Ihre Blätter waren gross wie mein Kopf, und es waren Hände. Als ich Meer fragte, wie diese Pflanze heisse, sagte sie: 'Monstera'" (51).

16 Indeed, the name for the plant genus *Monstera* derives from the Latin word for "monstrous" or "abnormal." It refers to its unusual leaves with natural holes (Quattrocchi, 2000, p. 1723).

17 See, for example the sections "Grandmom's hands" and "Grandmom's hands, part two" (pp. 20–21 and 34–35).

18 "Ich wusste, dass du nachts mit der Monstera verschwimmst" (51).

19 "Ich wusste ..., dass du – wie ich – näher an Pflanzen als an Menschen bist" (51).

20 "Dein Name sprach mit mir, Rosmarie, und ich hörte den Rosmarin in unserem Garten " (51).

specifically evoking this image.[21] Federici places the image in the context of her discussion of the mechanization of the human body in the service of capitalism as enabled by the mechanical philosophy of Descartes and others. Her caption reads "In contrast to the "mechanical man" is this image of the "vegetable man" in which the blood vessels are seen as twigs growing out of the human body."[22] The flow of blood is here pictured as vegetal growth in the form of leafy twigs and roots. As the final line of de l'Horizon's novel suggests, rooting and running are not opposed but overlapping physical comportments: "My mother tongue is talking. My father tongue is silence. And my own tongue are tongues, and my tongues are dripping, dropping, blurring, streaming, rooting, flowing." (298, originally in English).

If blood vessels can turn into leafy twigs, perhaps tree leaves are red because blood runs through them. Such is the logic underlying the botanical imaginary of this book (*Buch*) titled blood book (*Blutbuch*). Again, the plant–animal nexus is suggested by the linguistic material. The copper beech – title plant in the Bernese version of the title and additional protagonist of the novel[23] – is in German called *Blutbuche*, literally "blood beech." The plant name thus blends the animal with the vegetal kingdom.

Cultivated extensively in the nineteenth century for parks and gardens, the copper beech was originally a mutation of the common European beech. Seemingly against nature, the variation is produced by nature and not only once: the narrator's research identifies several original natural occurrences.[24] The leaves of the copper beech shine in flaming red or purple, as if stubbornly refusing to produce the normative color for plants. This is certainly one reason why Kim is so intensely drawn to the blood-colored beech in the family garden – "I felt a stronger bond with this red beech than with people," the narrator declares.[25] In their attempt at cross-kingdom sympoiesis, the tree meets the child halfway with its mutation to the color of blood. In further convergence with animality, its leaves form a second skin for the child – the right kind of skin.[26] They give womb-like comfort and shelter: "The child sat under its [literally her] red leaves as under a second true skin. When the sun was shining through, the leaves were like a skin from the inside."[27] De l'Horizon's analogy of leaves and skin elaborates on the fusion of animal and vegetal kingdom already provided in the German name for the red variety of beech.

In addition to the physical intimacy, the child "spoke with the blood beech," thus "affording voice to vibrant materials whose first language is not words," as Bennett has it.[28] They also conversed with the raspberries in the garden.[29] It might be the color of their fruits that turn the raspberry bushes, together with the red beech, into preferred interlocutors. The fact that, like the beech, the raspberries transport family history, provides another source for attraction.[30] Raspberries and beech assume kinship roles while at the same time providing refuge from the family. The child pleads, "Blood beech. You can simply grow. Nobody defines your form. I want to be like you."[31] The tree functions as a role model – a teacher, even: "The child asked for lessons. The blood beech knew so clearly how existing works, how to find a shape of one's own, how to inhabit a body."[32] But the tree is not eager to impart its knowledge: You need to tell your own story, it seems

21 De l'Horizon (2022a, p. 193).

22 Federici (2004, p. 147).

23 The stage version of the novel produced in Magdeburg (premiere February 2024) featured the tree as a speaking character played by an actor who also played one of the multiple Kim figures.

24 De l'Horizon (2022a, pp. 164–172).

25 "Ich fühlte mich ihr verbundener als den Menschen" (56).

26 Cf. Sambruno Spanhoff's discussion of skin sediments as bodily manifestations of a culture of secrecy and denial (2024, pp. 153–155).

27 "Es sass unter ihrem roten Laub wie unter einer zweiten richtigen Haut. Wenn die Sonne hineinschien, war das Laub eine Haut von innen" (56).

28 "Das Kind sprach mit der Blutbuche" (56). Bennett (2020, p. xxiv). Bennett's formulation invites the sense that the acquisition of the foreign tongue can be mutual: the narrator learns plant language as plants learn to speak with human words.

29 De l'Horizon (2022a, p. 102).

30 De l'Horizon (2022a, pp. 101–102).

31 "Blutbuche. Du kannst einfach wachsen. Niemand bestimmt deine Form. Ich möchte sein wie du" (76).

32 "Das Kind bat um Lektionen. Die Blutbuche wusste so deutlich, wie das Existieren geht, wie eine eigene Gestalt zu finden, ein Körper auszufüllen ist" (76).

to answer. Still, as soon as the child utters the wish to be like the red beech, something happens as they nervously chew on their fingernails:

> The child chews off a piece of fingernail. A lot of nail comes off. There is a hole in the finger. Blood drips from the finger. The child drips from the finger. It drips on the roots of the blood beech. It seeps under the roots. The blood beech drinks the child.
>
> Many thanks, little child. Do you really want to become like me?, the blood beech asks.
>
> The child nods. A root of the beech twists upward. It is a thick, bulging root. The root thrusts itself into the open finger of the child. The blood beech skeets under the skin of the child.[33]

Hovering somewhere between fairy tale, magical realism, and speculative fiction, the scene has strong undertones of a penetrative sexual act. With its exchange of bodily fluids, it might describe the childlike budding of the adult narrator's sexual practice of barebacking, which Jiang foregrounds in his discussion of *Blutbuch* (2023, pp. 305–308). It can also be read as the celebration of blood brotherhood – per se an interesting form of kinship with the potential to queer blood relations. Generally, the ceremony of the blood oath performs a symbolic graft, furnishing the idea that each person's blood flows in the veins of the other. Since there is a tree involved here, I want to go a step further and read this scene as a literal grafting rather than a symbolic gesture.[34] This act of grafting provides the first lesson in the material ways of plants. Among trees and bushes, grafts can happen spontaneously. Plants exhibit the "(vague, protean, ahuman) tendency for bodies to lean, make connections, and form attachments" that Bennett proposes "can be harnessed on behalf of a more generous, egalitarian, and ecological public culture" (2020, pp. xix–xx). The roots of different individuals grow together to communicate, share nutrients, and protect each other. Smaller plants can graft themselves onto trees and sap them. Meanwhile, it is not always easy to parse out whether the symbiotic relationship is mutually beneficial or parasitic. Spontaneous grafting is also practiced among members of different life forms, such as plants and fungi. Fungal filaments merge with the root tips of trees by the millions to exchange nourishment and information. Emulating the cross-kingdom intimacy of fungi and plants, de l'Horizon's witchery conjures up oddkin, making it possible for a plant to graft with a human animal.[35] From here on, the child feels the blood beech inside their body.

And yet, like the various languages that run through Kim and that wash up the refuse of an incomplete and unending past, the tree, with which the child is in such intimate relation, turns out not to be their own. "That is my tree,"[36] says grandma with endearment when the child tells her of their favorite tree. The garden is a family inheritance. Grandmother's father, Kim's great-grandfather built it, and it sustained the family with food while demanding a lot of care work. Additionally, the trees were meant as companion species. Rosemary's father planted the red beech when she was born. He planted one for each of his many children. One tree, a weeping one – Irma's tree – does not exist anymore; a hollow in the ground still betrays its place – which is more than can be said for Irma, who seems to have vanished without a trace. Actually, the copper beech is not grandma's tree either. It is left undetermined whether it was Kim's or grandmother Rosemary's psychic need that altered the story, but documentation is later produced that the tree was bought in 1919, the birth year of the first Rosemary.

After all, Kim's blood beech is a family tree. As such it is vulnerable to being read as symbolizing a bloodline. Violence runs in the blood of the family. The blood family demands sacrifice. In Kim's case, this

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33 Das Kind beisst sich ein Stück Fingernagel ab. Es kommt viel Nagel weg. Da ist ein Loch im Finger. Es tropft aus dem Finger. Es tropft sich aus dem Finger. Es tropft sich auf die Blutbuchenwurzeln. Es sickert unter die Wurzeln. Die Blutbuche trinkt es. Vielen Dank, kleines Kindchen. Willst du wirklich werden wie ich?, fragt die Blutbuche. Das Kind nickt. Eine Wurzel der Buche dreht sich empor. Es ist eine dicke, wulstige Wurzel. Die Wurzel stösst sich dem Kind in den offenen Finger. Die Blutbuche spritzt sich dem Kind unter die Haut" (76).

34 Despite her posthuman approach, Sambruno Spannhoff (2024) does not take the plunge into exploring the possibility of material human-plant connections, when she reads this scene as "a pact" and a "pagan sacrificial ritual" (164) arguing that "the beech tree inspires the child to develop an unaffected spirituality" (163).

35 Regarding writing as witchcraft, see De l'Horizon (2022a, p. 46) and Sambruno Spannhoff (2024, pp. 161–166).

36 "Das ist mein Baum" (57).

sacrifice seems to materialize as self-castration. – But the text also invites us to listen for a different story below the din of the same old. Let us turn to the last paragraph of the chapter titled "The Search for Childhood." The section is called "Last Story," and its last paragraph follows the child's announcement that it now wants to be (considered as) an adult. This attempt at a self-designation is answered by the mother declaring, "but you are a boy."[37] A double slap. According to mom, they are not only not an adult but also gendered male. This is the first time in the text that the child is gendered. The child enjoys the potential to be or become anything, but the (one who wants to be) adult is subjected to identification. Adulthood thus sets in with the erasure of non-gendered childhood.[38]

Only the blood beech can help in this predicament:

> "The boy goes into the garden. He feels the blood beech inside. He feels her like fingers in his feet, like delicate long claws, like spider roots. They break through the soles of the feet. The boy stands underneath the blood beech. The shoots drive and reach through the skin into the soil. They begin to grow the boy attached. It roots at him. It roots him to the ground. [Here follows much of the story of Irma, of father-daughter incest, of her pregnancy at fifteen, of her being sent to the women's prison, and her mother having the weeping tree felled the next day.] The boy drops pants and underpants. He applies the bag knife and cuts, with a jerk. He runs raspberry-red into the ground. The blood beech drinks the boy."[39]

Adulthood sets in with the recognition of gender-based violence: the one now identified as boy suddenly understands what happened to Irma. Gender and violence are inextricable. Gendering itself is an intrusion that begets violence.[40] So much can be generalized. Yet here the accounts of gender violence are entangled with stories of iterative transitioning. And this is the novel's most important and original contribution: it develops and cultivates the capacity to transform trauma – to turn generative without denying wounds.[41]

Psychically, everything happens at once in this moment. Assailed by an epiphany, the boy stops dead in his track ("he stops as if rooted to the ground," so the literal translation of the German version of this idiom (*wie angewurzelt stehen bleiben*)) and finally begins to tell the story that the blood beech had demanded earlier: their own story – but it turns out as Irma's story.[42] Self-birthing and giving birth cannot be neatly separated.[43] At some point, the child was inside the blood beech, like in a womb. Now, he feels the blood beech inside his body. The inversion undoes the usual hierarchy and sprouts a cascade of transformations. The upper body collapses into the lower body: fingers inside feet. They become animal claws, stretching out thin like spider legs – or spidery roots. Human animal, non-human animal, and plant merge inside the boy's feet. They can be neither separated nor contained and shoot through the skin of his soles. The boy's drives grow and reach into the ground, and they gain traction.[44] The boy drops his pants. Finally, he has gained a foothold and stands rooted. The original phrasing "Es wurzelt ihn an," translated above as "It roots at him. It roots him to the ground" messes with the usual order of language. *Anwurzeln* means "to take root" and, just like the English phrase, it functions as an intransitive verb. But here, in this grammatical construction, the boy is not the

37 "'Ich möchte jetzt erwachsen sein, 'sagt das Kind/, Aber du bist ein Junge, 'sagt Meer" (116).

38 Supporting this idea, the German language presents the child as grammatically neuter: *das Kind*.

39 "Der Junge geht in den Garten. Er spürt die Blutbuche in sich. Er spürt sie wie Finger in seinen Füssen, wie feine lange Klauen, wie Spinnenwurzeln. Sie durchbrechen die Fusssohlen. Der Junge steht unter der Blutbuche. Die Triebe fassen durch die Haut in den Boden. Sie beginnen, den Jungen festzuwachsen. Es wurzelt ihn an … [story of Irma] Der Junge zieht sich die Hosen runter und die Unterhosen. Er setzt das Sackmesser an und schneidet, mit einem Ruck. Er fließt himbeerrot in den Boden. Die Blutbuche trinkt den Jungen" (116).

40 See Saketopoulou and Pellegrini's account, drawing on Jean Laplanche, of gender as intrusion (Saketopoulou & Pellegrini, 2023). This account is also referenced by Salvo (2024) as part of the gender theory that is surpassed by de l'Horizon's novel. With her discussion of fear as subtext of *Blutbuch*, Wimmer (2023) also acknowledges the violence of the gender category.

41 Jiang highlights de l'Horizon's inversion of the power play in the sexual top-bottom dynamic and reads it as "satire against the patriarchal hegemony of masculinity" (2023, p. 307). In my view, such an inversion ultimately remains a mind game without material consequences. It does not transform the conditions that perpetuate sexual and gender trauma.

42 It remains undetermined whether the child knew the details of Irma's story or whether this is a retrospective implantation of the story by the adult narrator into the voice of the child.

43 For another trans account of the overlap of giving birth and self-birthing, see Stryker (1994).

44 I translated *Triebe* with shoots because of the botanical context, but it can also mean drives. I shifted this meaning to the translation of the verb *fassen* with "drive and reach." See also Marder on plant desire (2013, pp. 38–42).

originator of his foothold. He is not autonomous. He does not father his position. Rather, an impersonal agency – *es* – roots him to the ground. Hence my translation – "It roots at him" – which expresses the relational character of the rooting and its process character (the preposition "at" suggests that the movement toward him is not completed). My translation "They (the shoots, the drives) begin to grow the boy attached" replicates the same procedure, of rendering transitive an intransitive verb, in an adjacent sentence. "The alchemical magic of language … that … animates humans, animals, and things in between," which Chen recuperates, relies, among other structures, on in/transitive verbs to objectify or endow with agency respectively, both with ideological impact (2012, pp. 23 and 25). Playing with syntactical structures can inform a new mindset. Thus translation participates in the transforming of language. Trans*lation: proposing transitionings.

Then, with a jerk, he cuts off the jerk and runs to meet his companion raspberries, raspberry-red into the ground, with the blood beech drunk on the boy. Again, as in the incident with the chewed-off bit of finger, the blood beech drinks (of) the child/boy. The cut renders fluid. The rooting and running, the cutting and drinking forge the overlap of fixity and liquidity observed earlier in what I called the piecemeal flux of de l'Horizon's writing.

"He applies the bagknife and cuts." Instead of the Standard German word for pocketknife (*Taschenmesser*), de l'Horizon uses the Swiss German term *Sackmesser*, to be translated literally as bagknife. To German speakers who are not familiar with Swiss German, this word, especially in this context, evokes the ballbag or scrotum. Does that simply redouble the phallic valence of the knife? The nexus of violence and male sexuality – in the name of love and paternal protection from the ways of the world – is strongly reinforced in the story of Irma.[45] Still, I contend that the narrator begins to twist out of this logic here. "He applies the bagknife and cuts, with a jerk." The suggested self-castration is performed with another part of the organ that is cut – or, at least, with something that maintains a connection with another part of the organ that is suggested to be cut. Ballbag, bagknife, jerk, unnamed body part. A continuity enables and is maintained through the cut. No othering or instrumentalizing. Below the din of castration, a transitioning takes place. In this bending back on itself, the child and the tree can grow together as oddkin.

Beeches have a propensity for growing together. Animals, including human animals, less so. Some trees are cut so their body parts can join. Such grafting can produce extraordinary new lives (apples and oranges on one stock) or monotonous plantations. Even the spontaneous grafting of beeches requires wounds: the outer tissue of branches or roots needs to crack so that the core, or cambium, can grow together. Something needs to give so that child and tree can join in sympoiesis. The phallic logic of clean-cut distinctions needs to be given up. The phallic and colonialist logic of identification and classification can be excised. Take this as one response to Haraway's question "What must be cut and what must be tied if multispecies flourishing on earth, including human and other-than-human beings in kinship, are to have a chance?" (2016, p. 2).

For Kim, the process is not initiated by human agency. To begin with, the tree, the blood beech, assimilated via mutation to the human child or approached the child with a spontaneous body modification. Its color suggests that not chlorophyll but hemoglobin runs in its veins.[46] Vegetable man. Human plant. Trans*plant.[47]

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45 "Deshalb liebte sie der Urgrosspeer über alles, und weil er sie über alles liebte, durfte sie nicht hinaus. Weil diese Welt, die macht dich kaputt. Urgrosspeer hat Irma beschützt, und wie er sie beschützt hat. Sie ging also nicht hinaus, sie verkehrte nicht mit den Männern, aber sie wurde trotzdem schwanger" (116).

46 Compare the art project trans*plant, initiated by the lab Quimera Rosa in 2016. In public performances, they inject chlorophyll into their blood. The art collective describes this self-experimentation as a "human > plant transition process that includes an intravenous chlorophyll protocol, which, through fears, fantasies and judgments that it generates, opens the debate on the identity system" (https://quimerarosa.net/transplant/english/). They "understand sexuality as a technological and artistic creation and seek to experiment [with] hybrid, flexible and changing identities able to blur frontiers between natural/artificial, normal/abnormal, male/female, hetero/homo, human/animal, animal/plant, art/politics, art/science, reality/fiction…" (https://quimerarosa.net/about/english/). Their experiments are based on the assumption that "in order to be able to think about a non-anthropocentric ecology we need to move from identities based on essences to identities based on relationships" (https://quimerarosa.net/transplant/english/).

47 See previous footnote and Blackston, who claims to have coined the term trans*plant as an "analytic tool" (2017, p. 127). For Blackston, it has less to do with specifically vegetal characteristics than with shifts of terminology and bodies across mediums (including the line between reality and fiction) and changing investments of power (127–128).

5 Queer Plant Procreativity

Plants are named after their perceived passivity: planted and stuck, most profitably in huge plantations that colonize land with homogenized culture. And yet their vitality, as measured in their ability to grow (and to grow in multiple directions) far exceeds that of animals, human or not, in the spatial and temporal dimensions. This competence attracts the child to the tree: "Blood beech. You can simply grow. Nobody defines your form. I want to be like you." The passage incites its readers to explore whether they can break (with) the logic of classification, scaling, discipline, and norms – or even simply grow out of it. De l'Horizon's work points to that inherent potential. It shows that the traumatizing regime of language and the creative, liberating possibilities of language intra-act (in Barad's sense) with one another as well as with un/natural materiality.

Planting is a transitive verb that, according to the current rules of language, is not used intransitively. Can we sense the foreign tongue in the words at our disposal? In the spirit of "allow[ing] natural entities, forces, and processes to inhabit and deform the grammatical place of the doer," can we be creative and transform the usage of the word so that it may theorize differently (Bennett, 2020, p. xxv)? [48] For example: "the plant plants." In the matching inverse move of *Es wurzelt ihn an*, where de l'Horizon put an intransitive verb to transitive use, a transitive verb turns intransitive: the plant plants. Such phrasing expresses vegetal activity. The plant plants in the body of other plants, in the living soil, in all sorts of animals and creatures. It grafts or trans*plants.

In a brilliant analysis and moving dialogue with Antony and the Johnsons' song "Cripple and the Starfish," Hayward describes self-cutting as a way to invite growth: "To cut off the penis/finger is … to produce the conditions of physical and psychical regrowth. *The cut is possibility*. For some transsexual women, the cut is … a generative effort … to feel the growth of new margins" (2018, p. 72, emphasis in original). Plants thrive on cuts even more than starfish do. For a plant, a cut can be an impulse to grow abundantly around the cut limb. As if to mark the curtailment with flourishes. This vegetal response is more of a pro-creation than a re-generation.[49] Exuberant growth.

Like Barad, for whom "ontological indeterminacy is the undoing of a modality of expression which assumes the separability of word and world" (Barad & Gandorfer, 2021, p. 18), Hayward has a strong sense for the enmeshment of matter and language. While Barad counters the idea that language provides representations of facts with the notion of intra-action (Barad & Gandorfer, 2021, pp. 24–26), the related but slightly different target of Hayward's critique is the assumption of an arbitrary or metaphoric relation between sign and referent. She suggests thinking and living this relation as metonymical, instead. With their scarred regenerative corporeality and their deployment as signifiers, "transsexuals and starfish challenge disembodied metaphors … and propose how we are metonymically stitched to carnal substrates" (Hayward, 2008, p. 76). In that sense, "language emerges from an ontology that is ecological" (Hayward, 2008, p. 78). While "metaphor does not owe any allegiance to the literal object" – an indifference, she argues, that easily slides into objectification, domination, and exploitation –, an understanding and use of language as fundamentally metonymical connects not only words but also their users literally, physically, or in a bodily sense to the bodies signified (Hayward, 2008, p. 74). It foregrounds allegiance, participation, and belonging. Language, so conceived, cannot be transcendent or disembodied. Instead, it needs to be included in our considerations of transcorporeality. i.e. of the fact that „the outline of the human is traversed by substantial material interchanges" (Alaimo, 2018, p. 435).

De l'Horizon employs language in a thoroughly metonymical way in Hayward's sense. Already the title presents, at a minimum, the inseparability of book (a bound collection of written language) and beech tree.[50] From there we have traced, in the preceding analysis, many metonymical interchanges and have shown how

48 Barad calls attention to the fact that men don't hold the monopoly on theory but that matter itself theorizes: "The world theorizes as well as experiments with itself" (Barad, 2012, p. 207).

49 In her exploration of "prefixial flesh," Hayward (2008) focuses on trans- and re-.

50 While the long-time assumption that the word *Buch* etymologically derives from *Buche* has been contested, books are generally made of trees, i.e. the two are linked via material metonymy. For more thoughts on the connection between beech tree and knowledge transfer, refer to Hase (2018), quoted in De l'Horizon (2022a, pp. 131–132).

carnal experiences are shaped by words and *vice versa*. Such a notion of language allows Hayward to claim, "in other words, I'm not like a starfish; I am of a starfish" (Hayward, 2008, p. 76), describing such belonging as "trans-speciation." While the child of *Blutbuch* expresses the wish "to be like" the blood beech ("I want to be like you."), in the process they evidently become what they were from the beginning: of the blood beech.

Hayward still relies on commonality or shared experiences to provide the ground for the possibility of trans-speciation.[51] Such commonalities are harder to come by when it comes to animal–plant or human animal–plant transmorphing. Trans-kingdom morphing runs into even stronger walls – built in patriarchy, and colonialism – than trans-speciating. The king loves classification and hates those who mess with the categories, but he surely doesn't permit anybody to fool around with the borders of the territory. "I am of the red beech," or "I am of this tree," – while certainly intensely felt by many, including some ecosexuals and some environmental activists who fight deforestation – is thus a sentence that is harder to materially enact. We can dwell in treetops or chain our bodies to trees about to be felled. We can make love with plants (Montano et al., 2021). Or we can allow plants to plant in our flesh; we can graft with plants in transbecoming.

There is great value in moving beyond feeling to materially co-crafting an allegiance (while such material processes can be virtual, fictional, or semiotic). This is important because, in the sentimental imaginary, women or the feminine have been customarily linked to the plant kingdom. The chain has always been a defining and devaluing notion of passivity, and the logic was that of metaphor.[52] Hence, the wild idea and seemingly extreme practice of grafting strikes me as crucial. It needs a certain violence, a cut, a break with common logic, a "tear in the traditional subject/object formation" (Hayward, 2008, p. 82). We need perversity, wildness (Halberstam, 2020),[53] vulgarity, and crassness to flip the bird to the metaphor of the beautiful flower that is easily broken.

For de l'Horizon, material allegiance is facilitated by the metonymical nature of language. Because the copper beech is called blood beech in German, the tree can be there for them as the protagonist makes the cut and can absorb the bodily fluid spilling from the wound. Trans*plant intimacy nourished by semiotic materiality. De l'Horizon also shows that plant growth (flourishing around cuts and tears, and planting in bodies) can transform our habits of relating to "self," "other," and "environment." It can fundamentally reconfigure these terms by flipping the common imaginaries of individuality, wholeness, and bodily integrity. Such rearticulation resonates with trans* experiences without the resonance being unique to trans* bodies, as they proffer, according to Colebrook, only "expressions of a more profound transitivity that is the condition for what becomes known as *the* human" (2015, p. 228). Or, as Hayward puts it with sublime simplicity, "the body (trans or not) is not a pure, coherent, and positive integrity" (2008, p. 73).

Attention to grafting practices contributes to denaturalizing the supposedly natural while foregrounding naturally occurring trans* practices. We need both moves. What is nature? What are its natural tendencies? Barad doesn't grow tired of showing the perverseness, queerness, and transness of the most basic indeterminately either building blocks or disturbant waves or both of nature. If electrons touch themselves, birthing and devouring all sorts of entities, savoring and breaking all sorts of connections even with the non-contemporaneous, then perhaps a human can go back in time and rip something away so that child and *Buch* (beech, book, and belly) can join and continue to grow together.[54] Trans* is not like but already is a different relation to the un/natural in its "transmaterialities" (Barad, 2015): one that dares to forge yet unseen or unintelligible connections, for example, human–vegetal bonds. Some might offer the domesticated version of this account and claim that a child and a beech can join only in a book. If this book teaches us anything, though, it is to run as far as possible from domesticity. Or rather, to run with it and trans*form (it).

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51 Hayward speaks of a "shared phenomenological ontology" (2008, p. 82).

52 See also Chen's discussion of the hierarchy of animacy at work in the grammatical structure of languages and in stereotypes (Chen, 2012, pp. 25–27).

53 See also Haraway (2016, p. 2): "*Kin* is a wild category that all sorts of people do their best to domesticate. Making kin as oddkin rather than … godkin and genealogical and biogenetic family troubles important matters."

54 Barad (2015, pp. 394–402). For Barad, "memory is not a capacity of human subject, but rather, a re-membering, a reconfiguring/re-articulating (of) the world" (Barad & Gandorfer, 2021, p. 17). The radical openness or non-givenness of the world arises from the promiscuous activity of electrons and the profound indeterminacy revealed by quantum physics.

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