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Epistemic Disruptions Autofiction and Identity Politics in Paul B. Preciado's *Can the Monster Speak?* (2020) and Kim de l'Horizon's *Blutbuch* (2022)

SUMMARY

The paper examines contemporary autofictional texts about queer identities in the context of current debates on identity politics. Paul B. Preciado's *Can the Monster Speak?* (2020) and Kim de l'Horizon's *Blutbuch* (2022) reflect queer identities in the form of transgressive and transitory writing which blurs the boundaries between academic and fictional discourse and ultimately leads to a hybridisation of the narrative. Both texts use autofiction as a means of epistemic disruption, that is as a critical questioning of Western epistemology, especially with regard to academic discourse (Preciado) and cultural memory (de l'Horizon). The 'I' of the autofiction becomes the catalyst of an anti-hegemonic knowledge and anti-hegemonic discourse and thus performs a core concern of identity politics in a literary way, namely the claiming of a subject and speaker position in the hegemonic discourse. At the same time, the aporias of identity politics discourses also become clear when looking at both autofictions.

Keywords

autofiction, identity politics, autotheory, memory, queer studies



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1. Introduction: Identity politics and autofiction

"I am never quite sure what people mean when they talk about 'identity politics.' Usually, though, they bring it up to complain about someone else."¹ In the 21st century, identity politics has become an important, if controversial, key word in public discourse. Nevertheless, it is still unclear, as the aforementioned quote by Kwame Anthony Appiah shows, what identity politics exactly means. What is more, identity politics does not seem to be a 'cool' concept but one which is often accompanied by emotional and defensive responses. "One's own political preoccupations are just, well, politics. Identity politics is what other people do."²

In the following text, the term in question is used without any connotations, in a neutral way. Therefore, it is worth considering what identity politics is. Appiah mentions seven different ways in which one might speak of identity politics:

"(1) There are political conflicts about who's in and who's out. (2) Politicians can mobilize identities. (3) States can treat people of distinct identities differently. (4) People can pursue a politics of recognition. (5) There can be social micropolitics enforcing norms of identification. (6) There are inherently political identities like party identifications. And (7) social groups can mobilize to respond collectively to all of the above."³

In this article, identity politics shall be understood as the impetus of social movements to stand up for their rights and recognition (i.e. Appiah's seventh dimension, with special consideration of dimension four). This idea is far from new; the labour movement, the women's movement or the civil rights movement "self-consciously invoked the concept of identity in their struggles for social justice."⁴ Historically, identity politics emerged both as an activist and an academic phenomenon which is grounded in the belief "that identities are often resources of knowledge especially relevant for social change, and that [...] oppressed groups need to be at the forefront of their own liberation."⁵

Today, identity politics refers primarily to left-wing movements "beyond the white and male parameters of most earlier pressure groups"⁶ that have been formed since the end of the Second World War especially by women, queers, religious minorities and racial minorities.⁷

¹ Kwame Anthony Appiah, "The Politics of Identity," *Daedalus*, vol. 135, no. 4, (2006), 15.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴ Linda Martín Alcoff, Satya P. Mohanty, "Reconsidering Identity Politics: An Introduction," in *Identity Politics Reconsidered*, eds. Linda Martín Alcoff, Michael Hames-García, Satya P. Mohanty, and Paula M.L. Moya (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Suzanna Danuta Walters, "In Defense of Identity Politics," *Signs*, vol. 43, no. 2, (2018), <https://signsjournal.org/currents-identity-politics/walters/> (accessed 20 March 2024).

⁷ *Ibid.* A particular pioneering position is attributed to the Combahee River Collective, a group of Afro-American and lesbian women from Boston who coined the term identity politics in a 1977 statement and also provided perspectives for intersectional approaches through

Obviously, one cannot speak about identity politics without speaking about identity, a term which is not self-explanatory in itself at all. Linda Martín Alcoff and Satya P. Mohanty propose a 'realist' definition of identity which differs from essentialist definitions, on the one hand, and the anti-essentialist "postmodern view that identities are purely arbitrary,"⁸ on the other. In the 'realist theory,' identities are "not our mysterious inner essences but rather social embodied facts about ourselves in our world which makes identities "markers for history, social location, and positionality."⁹ The focus on positionality and embodiment makes it possible to consider the interactions between subjective and objective components. Identity appears not only as an attribution, but also as an active shaping: "Social identities can be mired in distorted ideologies, but they can also be the lenses through which we learn to view our world accurately. Our identities are not just imposed on us by society. Often we create positive and meaningful identities that enable us to better understand and negotiate the social world."¹⁰ This meets in some ways the definition of Stuart Hall, who emphasises the dynamics which are implied by 'identity,' arguing that "[p]erhaps instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation."¹¹

These interactions between representation and production of identity also form the poetical basics of autofictional writing. Coined in 1977 by French writer Serge Doubrovsky, the term autofiction comes into play to define a hybrid genre that turns "language about adventure into an adventure of language" and serves as a postmodern alternative to the classic autobiography, which, according to Doubrovsky, is "a privilege of the great of this world at the end of their lives."¹² Doubrovsky's concept of autofiction is to be understood both as a postmodern expansion of literary genres and as a provocation of literary studies and here, in particular, of autobiography research, which in the 1970s was prominently associated with Philipp Lejeune's concept of the 'autobiographical pact.'¹³ Especially in France and

their experiences of multiple oppressions (as women, as Afro-Americans and as lesbians): "This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity [...]." The Combahee River Collective, "The Combahee River Collective Statement", in *How We Get Free. Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective*, ed. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (Chicago-Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2017), 19

⁸ Alcoff, Mohanty, "Reconsidering Identity Politics: An Introduction," 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 222. By 'new representations', Hall understands visual representations such as the cinema.

¹² "Autobiographie? Non, c'est un privilège réservé aux importants de ce monde, au soir de leur vie, et dans un beau style. Fiction, d'événements et de faits strictement réels; si l'on veut autofiction, d'avoir confié le langage d'une aventure à l'aventure du langage, hors sagesse et hors syntaxe du roman, traditionnel ou nouveau." Serge Doubrovsky, *Fils* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1977) (flap text).

¹³ Cf. Stephanie Bremerich, *Erzähltes Elend. Autofiktionen von Armut und Abweichung* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2018), 10-55.

in francophone contexts, autofiction since then has developed its own and complex genre tradition and, along with that, a strong, comprehensive and differentiated discourse to which both critics and writers have contributed (besides Serge Doubrovsky and Philippe Lejeune, these were Vincent Colonna, Marie Darrieussecq, Chloé Delaume, Jacques Lecarme and Isabelle Grell, to name just a few).¹⁴ Soon, the term expanded to other philologies and research on English, German, Italian, Spanish, Latin American or Maghreb literature.¹⁵

As a result, very different forms of autofictional writing have developed so far. They range from Doubrovsky's consistent conception, which, as a postmodern and psychoanalytically informed genre still remains close to autobiography,¹⁶ to variations, respectively modifications (for example from female perspectives)¹⁷ in French literature to international transformations and adoptions of the genre across media.¹⁸ Consequently, the scope of autofictional writing is broad, ranging from postmodern confusion about (self-)reference and subjectivity to ironic staging of the self and reflections of the literary field to explorations of cultural memories, postcolonial and (post-)migrant identities to narratives of traumata, dissociation and social deprivation in the context of race, class, and gender. Indeed, in recent years, research on autofiction has moved away from questions of genre theory (i.e. questions in the field of the tension between autobiography and novel) and focused on the topics, narratives and poetics of autofiction.¹⁹

¹⁴ Cf. for example Serge Doubrovsky, Jacques Lecarme, Philippe Lejeune (eds.), *Autofictions et Cie* (Nanterre: Université de Paris X, 1993); Marie Darrieussecq, "L'autofiction: un genre pas sérieux," *Poétique*, no. 107, (1996), 369–380; Vincent Colonna, *Autofiction & autres mythomanies littéraires* (Paris: Tristram, 2004); Philippe Gasparini, *Autofiction. Une aventure du langage* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2008); Chloé Delaume, *La Règle du je. Autofiction: un essai* (Paris: PUF, 2010); Claude Burgelin, Isabelle Grell, Roger-Yves Roche (eds.), *Autofiction(s). Colloque de Cerisy* (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 2010); Isabell Grell, *L'autofiction* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2014); Élise Hugueny-Léger, *Projections de soi. Identités et images en mouvement dans l'autofiction* (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 2022).

¹⁵ Cf. Claudia Gronemann, "Autofiktion," in *Grundthemen der Literaturwissenschaft: Autorschaft*, ed. Michael Wetzel (Berlin–Boston: De Gruyter, 2022), 332–349; Claudia Gronemann, *Postmoderne/Postkoloniale Konzepte der Autobiographie in der französischen und maghrebinischen Literatur. Autofiction – Nouvelle Autobiographie – Double Autobiographie – Aventure du texte* (Hildesheim: Olms, 2002); Ana Casas (ed.), *La autoficción. Reflexiones teóricas* (Madrid: Arco/Libros, 2012); Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf (ed.), *Auto(r)fiktion. Literarische Verfahren der Selbstkonstruktion* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis, 2013); Hywel Roland Dix (ed.), *Autofiction in English* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018).

¹⁶ Cf. Alison James, "The Fictional in Autofiction," in *The Autofictional. Approaches, Affordances, Forms*, eds. Alexandra Effe, Hannie Lawlor (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 41–60; Stefan Iversen, "Transgressive Narration. The Case of Autofiction," in *Narrative Factuality. A Handbook*, eds. Monika Fludernik, Marie-Laure Ryan (Berlin–Boston: De Gruyter, 2020), 555–564.

¹⁷ Cf. Shirley Jordan, "État présent. Autofiction in the Feminine," *French Studies*, vol. 67, no. 1, (2013), 76–84.

¹⁸ Gronemann, "Autofiktion," 333.

¹⁹ For example, in German-language research autofictions have so far been studied in relation to the oeuvre of individual authors (for instance Herta Müller or Paul Nizon), with a focus on postmodern modes of writing and techniques of self-presentation - cf. Innokentij Kreknin, *Poetiken des Selbst. Identität, Autorschaft und Autofiktion am Beispiel von Rainald Goetz, Joachim Lottmann und Alban Nicolai Herbst* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014); Birgitta Krumrey, *Der Autor in seinem Text. Autofiktion in der deutschen Gegenwartsliteratur als (post-)postmodernes Phä-*

The internationalisation and diversification of the research discourse is accompanied by a multitude of competing terms, such as autobiographical fiction, lifewriting, postmemoir, mock-biography, whose relation to autofiction would need further clarification. Still, autofiction and 'the autofictional' have been established as fruitful and connectable umbrella concepts, perhaps not despite but due to the openness, dynamics and fluidity which they entail.²⁰ As Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf puts it: "[T]he more flexible and contested a term, the livelier and more stimulating the debate about it."²¹ It is worth taking a closer look at two concepts which recently have been trending and 'stimulating the debate.' Inspiring and productive attempts to examine new forms of autofictional writings as alternative, quasi-scientific modes of sociological self-exploration and class analysis, respectively as theoretical, philosophical and critical interventions have been made under the labels 'autosociobiography'²² and 'autotheory.'²³ Both terms imply programmatic explorations of the epistemic value of contemporary autofictional writings to be discussed in this paper. The focus is no longer on the deconstruction of referentiality and the very notion of 'reality,' nor is it on postmodern confusions about the ontological status of the 'I'. On the contrary, authors such as Didier Eribon strongly claim that the autobiographical pact is binding in their autosociobiographies, that is narratives about class relations that draw on personal experiences with social inequality and social advancement.²⁴ Autosociobiographies are transgressive in many ways: firstly, transgression concerns the very status of the text, i.e. its hybridity and oscillation between fact and fiction, autobiography and sociology. Secondly, transgression is a major aspect of the *histoire*, i.e. the

nomen (Göttingen: V & R unipress, 2015); Jörg Pottbeckers, *Der Autor als Held. Autofiktionale Inszenierungspraktiken in der deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2017), in the context of hybrid identity designs – Lydia Heiss, *Jung, weiblich, jüdisch – deutsch? Autofiktionale Identitätskonstruktionen in der zeitgenössischen deutschsprachig-jüdischen Literatur* (Göttingen: V & R unipress, 2021), and with regard to precarious, traumatic, and marginalised existences – cf. Stephanie Bremerich, *Erzähltes Elend. Autofiktionen von Armut und Abweichung* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2018); Marisa Siguan, *Lager überleben, Lager erschreiben. Autofiktionalität und literarische Tradition* (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2017).

²⁰ Cf. Alexandra Effe, Hannie Lawlor, "Introduction. From Autofiction to the Autofictional," in *The Autofictional. Approaches, Affordances, Forms*, eds. Alexandra Effe, Hannie Lawlor (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 1-18.

²¹ Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf, "Of Strange Loops and Real Effects: Five Theses on Autofiction/the Autofictional," in *The Autofictional. Approaches, Affordances, Forms*, eds. Alexandra Effe, Hannie Lawlor (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2022), 21.

²² Cf. Eva Blome, "Rückkehr zur Herkunft. Autozoziobiografien erzählen von der Klasesengesellschaft," *DVJs*, vol. 94 (2020), 541-571; Eva Blome, Philipp Lammers, Sarah Seidel (eds.), *Autozoziobiographie. Poetik und Politik* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2022). The term 'autosociobiography' goes back to French writer Annie Ernaux and has been adapted by literary studies to react to a conspicuous boom of autofictional texts in contemporary literature, which – standing in the tradition of Didier Eribon or Annie Ernaux – deal with problems of social class and social advancement.

²³ Cf. Lauren Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism* (Cambridge/Mass.: MIT Press, 2021).

²⁴ Cf. Christina Ernst, "Transclasse und transgenre. Autozoziobiographische Schreibweisen bei Paul B. Preciado und Jayrôme C. Robinet," in *Autozoziobiographie. Poetik und Politik*, eds. Eva Blome, Philipp Lammers, Sarah Seidel (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2022), 259.

contents and topics of autosociobiographies, which mostly focus on matters of class and combine stories of social advancement with the leitmotif of 'returning'.²⁵ The term 'autosociobiography' not only serves as a label for a new genre in the wide field of autobiographical writing, but also implies a shift in the notorious pledge of authenticity since autosociobiographies claim to make valid statements about one's own life as well as about social reality.²⁶ The self, along with its personal and subjective modes of experience, comes into play as an agent of credibility. Thus, autosociobiographies prove to be liminal narratives in which a variety of literary techniques and narrative strategies of fictional discourse serve sociological findings.²⁷

This claim for referentiality also holds true for the 'autotheory' genre, though from a different angle. Whereas autosociobiographies are primarily dedicated to social analysis and "assert sociological insights by narrating the self as a social fact,"²⁸ autotheory "describes a self-conscious way of engaging with theory"²⁹ by integrating autobiography with theory, literature, criticism and philosophy. Sometimes labelled as "memoir with footnotes,"³⁰ autotheory is characterised by its commitment to academic discourse conventions, including citations, which serve as "a mode of intertextual intimacy and identification,"³¹ integrate the textual self into a network of corresponding references and thus relate the 'auto' to 'theory'.³² Though foremost associated with narrative texts, such as Paul B. Preciado's *Testo Junkie* (2008) and Maggie Nelson's *The Argonauts* (2015), which are seminal works in the debate, autotheory proves to be both a trans-medial and a transdisciplinary way of "performative life-thinking."³³ In autotheory, the personal, including subjective experiences, emotions, embodiments and memories, becomes pivotal to connect theory to practice with the ultimate goal to intervene in the hegemonic discourse as well as in the social reality. In this respect, autotheory is strongly bound to queer and feminist activism and agency.³⁴

The trend of writing in the fields of autosociobiography and autotheory as well as in research into both genres appears to be revealing, not only with regard to a "reality hunger"³⁵ across media but also politicisations of the self in art, writing and activism in the 21st century. It is worth showing

²⁵ Cf. the title of Didier Eribon's seminal work *Retour à Reims* (French 2009).

²⁶ Cf. Eva Blome, Philipp Lammers, Sarah Seidel, "Zur Poetik und Politik der Autosociobiographie," in *Autosociobiographie. Poetik und Politik*, eds. Eva Blome, Philipp Lammers, Sarah Seidel (Stuttgart 2022: Metzler), 3.

²⁷ Cf. Carolin Amlinger, "Literatur als Soziologie. Autofiktion, soziale Tatsachen und soziologische Erkenntnis," in *Autosociobiographie. Poetik und Politik*, eds. Eva Blome, Philipp Lammers, Sarah Seidel (Stuttgart: Metzler, 2022), 43–65.

²⁸ "Sie [Autosociobiographien] behaupten soziologische Erkenntnisse, indem sie das Ich als sozialen Tatbestand erzählen." *Ibid.*, 44 [italics in original, English translation mine].

²⁹ Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*, 7.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, 135.

³² *Ibid.*, 133–220.

³³ *Ibid.*, 14.

³⁴ In this regard, the title of Lauren Fournier's monographic work (autotheory as feminist practice) is revealing.

³⁵ Cf. David Shields, *Reality Hunger. A Manifesto* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010).

that autofictional texts about marginalised identities can be read as a complement, perhaps even a corrective to scientific and sociopolitical discourses, and hence as alternative systems for conveying knowledge. This article puts forward a hypothesis that autofiction offers the marginalised self a particular space of representation that other discourse contexts (such as the sometimes strictly formalised and restricted-access discourse of academia, political discourse, or public media discourse) fail to offer. Linked to this is another hypothesis concerning the status of autofictional text, which is now read not 'only' as a piece of literature, but also as a form of fact-based knowledge and political commentary.

This paper focuses on examination of two texts about non-binary identities, namely *Can the Monster Speak?* by Paul B. Preciado (French 2020, English 2021) and *Blutbuch* by Kim de l'Horizon (German 2022). Although both texts are different in terms of genre, Preciado's text being an essay based on a speech, and that of de l'Horizon being a novel, they do have certain features in common. First of all, both reflect and perform queerness in forms of transgressive and transitory writings which blur the boundaries between academic and fictional writing and ultimately lead to a hybridisation of the narrative. Secondly, both texts use autofiction as a means of epistemic disruption, that is as a critical questioning of Western epistemology, especially with regard to academic discourse (Preciado) and cultural memory (de l'Horizon). In doing so, the two texts somewhat transgress the field of fiction; they have a clear referential and political concern since they aim to problematise systems and institutions of knowledge. Thus, a distinctive feature of both texts is the discursive place they claim by crossing from the literary field into the field of politics, society, and science. The identity-political relevance of these autofictions seems to lie precisely in this. As a genuine literary form of narrating the 'I', autofiction is used as a form of discourse critique and critique of hegemonic knowledge by challenging a basic means of episteme: the narrative.

In this regard, it is worth noticing how the authors themselves reflect upon questions of genre. The tensions between fictional and factual discourse as well as theory and life have been repeatedly addressed in Preciado's writing. In the introduction to *Testo Junkie* (Spanish 2008/English 2013), a book which serves as a major reference for the term 'autotheory'³⁶ and which combines critiques of biopolitics in late capitalism with protocols about self-experiments with testosterone, Preciado rejects the term *autoficción* (in English surprisingly translated as "memoir") and instead defines their³⁷ book as "una ficción autopolítica o una autoteoría" ("a somato-political fiction, a theory of the self, or self-theory").³⁸ Still, this explicit

³⁶ Cf. Fournier, *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*, 7.

³⁷ Here and in the following paragraphs, the pronoun 'they' along with its derivations and inflections (them, their, themselves) will be used as a gender-neutral third person pronoun.

³⁸ Beatriz Preciado, *Testo yonqui. Sexo, drogas y biopolítica* (Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 2008), 8; Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie. Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, trans. Bruce Benderson (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 2013), 9. The book has been first published under the maiden name Beatriz Preciado. With regard to Preciado's reflections upon genre and the problems which arise in the course of the

rejection of the term 'autofiction' needs to be seen in the context of feminist critiques of the genre, especially of Doubrovsky's definition, which fostered a shift to "a more playful, open, and politically charged mode of autofictional feminist writing."³⁹ Within this frame of gendering and politicising the genre, Preciado's counterterm 'autotheory' can be understood as "an extension, a supplement to feminist autofiction instead of a rupture with it."⁴⁰ Whereas Preciado emphasises the potential of theoretical intervention, Kim de l'Horizon points out the poetological scope of autofiction, especially with respect to queer voices and marginalised identities. In an interview about their novel, de l'Horizon claims that people who belong to a minority are particularly aware if they deal with biographical data. In this interview, de l'Horizon refers to a passage in *Blutbuch* where the main character, Kim, postulates that "autofiction is inherently queer, because we queers write in a world in which we do not actually exist yet."⁴¹ Queers, according to de l'Horizon, have often been erased "especially in language, speech and our stories. We only exist there rarely or in a coded way. That's why autofiction is so important to us: Because we write from places, where we are absent from language. Where language does not yet have an idea of itself and is silent."⁴² In this perspective, both genre and identity intertwine, and autofiction proves to be a literary means for making queer voices visible and

translations from Spanish to French and English cf. Émile Lévesque-Jalbert, "'This is not an autofiction': Autoteoría, French Feminism, and Living in Theory," *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory*, vol. 76, no. 1, (2020), 65–84.

³⁹ Lévesque-Jalbert, "'This is not an autofiction': Autoteoría, French Feminism, and Living in Theory," 72. Feminist modifications of the genre critically deal with the psychoanalytical framework of Doubrovsky's definition and its implication of a coherent (male) subjectivity, which might be an explanation for another critical side note on 'autofiction' which Preciado makes in *Can the Monster Speak?* Here, Preciado problematizes the term 'autofiction' by seeing it as part of the psychoanalytical "language of sexuality" which eventually leads to a "binary identity based on autofiction". Paul B. Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak? A Report to an Academy of Psychoanalysts*, trans. Frank Wynne (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2021), 51 (first published in French as *Je suis un monstre qui vous parle* in 2020).

⁴⁰ Lévesque-Jalbert, "'This is not an autofiction': Autoteoría, French Feminism, and Living in Theory," 79.

⁴¹ Stefan Hochgesand, "Kim de l'Horizon: 'Es darf nicht sein, dass wir uns zum Schweigen bringen,' Interview with Kim de l'Horizon," *Berliner Zeitung*, 4 November 2022, <https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/kultur-vergnuegen/literatur/kim-de-lhorizon-wir-muessen-miteinander-sprechen-li.283154> (accessed 28 June 2024) [English translation mine]. See also Kim de l'Horizon, *Blutbuch* (Cologne: Dumont, 2023), 270.

⁴² "Ich glaube schon, dass Leute, die einer Minderheit angehören, viel bewusster mit ihren biografischen Daten umgehen. Viele queere Menschen verstecken ihre Queerness ja eine Zeitlang. Dann fehlt ein Anteil in ihren Biografien. [...] Die Figur Kim schreibt an einer Stelle, dass Autofiktion inhärent queer sei, weil wir Queers in einer Welt schreiben, in der es uns eigentlich noch gar nicht gibt. Unsere Körper hat es natürlich schon immer gegeben, es gibt sehr viele Beispiele in vielen Kulturen, die mehr als zwei Geschlechter kannten. Aber trotzdem wurden wir oft ausgelöscht. Vor allem in der Sprache. Im Sprechen, in unseren Geschichten. Dort gibt es uns nur selten oder verschlüsselt. Deshalb ist Autofiktion so wichtig für viele von uns: Weil wir von Orten aus schreiben, wo wir der Sprache fehlen. Wo die Sprache noch keine Ahnung von sich selbst hat und schweigt." Stefan Hochgesand, "Kim de l'Horizon: 'Es darf nicht sein, dass wir uns zum Schweigen bringen,' Interview with Kim de l'Horizon," *Berliner Zeitung*, 4 November 2022, <https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/kultur-vergnuegen/literatur/kim-de-lhorizon-wir-muessen-miteinander-sprechen-li.283154> (accessed 28 June 2024) [English translation mine].

audible in text and language. Although from different angles – a theoretical one and a poetical one – both authors combine questions of genre and ascribe a discursive value and political significance to autofictional writings.

This points to the special place that autofiction can occupy in debates on identity politics: it is a place beyond everyday practices, actions and activist agendas, which lies at the level of knowledge production and the communication of knowledge. In this regard, autofiction comes into play as a literary agent to deal with a core issue of identity political debates, namely epistemic violence, a term which was originally proposed within the framework of the Postcolonial Theory and which points to the violating effects of hegemonial power on epistemic and discursive levels by silencing and, along with that, eliminating the knowledge of marginalised groups.⁴³ The recourse on the Postcolonial Theory is, in general, important for left-wing identity politics and sheds light on the background of some controversies about it. One reason for the heated debates about identity politics is its foundation in what the postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak called “strategic essentialism.”⁴⁴ Marginalised groups claim an identity ascribed to them from the outside and marked as derogatory and deviant, which is ultimately to be overcome. To make this possible, however, the group must first form itself as such. The adoption of external attribution is a means of agency and representation. The strategic essentialism of left-wing identity politics is therefore a sign of a transition, as identification and self-awareness are demanded in the here and now, but are ultimately to be overcome. Closely linked to strategic essentialism is the basic metonymic structure of many everyday identity-political discourses (not necessarily theoretical ones), which enables individual representatives of a marginalised group to speak as *pars pro toto* for this very group. It will be interesting to scrutinise the literary design of this aporia in autofiction, especially with regard to the significance of the narrating and narrated ‘I’ – a highly complex textual instance anyway – and to the relation of this ‘I’ to identity political debates about representation and the dialectics of the individual and the collective.

2. Claims for revolution: Paul B. Preciado’s *Can the Monster Speak?* (2020)

Paul B. Preciado’s *Can the Monster Speak? A Report to an Academy of Psychoanalysts* (2020) is based on a talk which Preciado gave on November 17, 2019 before 3,500 members of the *École de la Cause Freudienne* in France. As Preciado explains in a short foreword, the speech caused a scandal and could not be finished; instead, parts of it had been filmed and posted on the internet, and some fragments had been transcribed and translated without permission.⁴⁵ Therefore the publication of the text is, on the one hand,

⁴³ Cf. Kristie Dotson, “Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing,” *Hypatia*, vol. 26, no. 2, (2011), 236–257.

⁴⁴ Cf. Gayatri C. Spivak, “Criticism, Feminism and the Institution. Interview with Elisabeth Gross,” *Thesis*, no. 10/11, (1984/1985): 175–187; Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Studies. The Key Concepts* (London–New York: Routledge, 2013), 96–98.

⁴⁵ Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak? A Report to an Academy of Psychoanalysts*, foreword, unpaginated.

a form of subsequent completion of the original speech, and, on the other, may be regarded as an act of reclaiming authority of their own words. The text is a provocative critique of Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis in particular and of Western epistemology in general. Preciado, who was assigned female at birth and had experimented with testosterone since 2004 before they officially became a trans man in 2016,⁴⁶ positions themselves as “a trans man” in “a non-binary body”⁴⁷ in clear opposition to their audience who they accuse of pathologising, stigmatising and marginalising non-binary people and who they identify with the colonial patriarchy. In doing so, Preciado presents a form of identity politics which merges academic and literary discourse and uses the autofictional ‘I’ as a mask which itself performs a transgressional outbreak of the binaries of Western academic discourse and which eventually aims at a scientific revolution: “what is at stake is not merely the depathologization of the so-called ‘trans identity’: a whole epistemology needs to be changed.”⁴⁸

2.1. Masks, mirrors and metonymies: The I and the others

Though being a speech and in that respect conceptually monological, *Can the Monster Speak?* is a highly dialogical text in the sense of intertextuality.⁴⁹ Already the dedication of the text to Judith Butler is a strong reference to the foundations of postmodern Gender Theory and the core theses and categories associated with it: the discursive construction of gender and sex, the connection between performativity and gender and the subversive potential of parody and travesty.⁵⁰

Within the text, there are explicit references to other works which give a theoretical back-up for Preciado’s argumentation,⁵¹ including “feminist, punk, anti-racist and lesbian books,”⁵² as well as works of academics within the fields of Gender Studies such as Monique Wittig, Judith Butler, Jack Halberstam and Donna Haraway and Philosophy of Science including Thomas Kuhn and Bruno Latour. Preciado’s text has a clear identity politics agenda and aims to politicise the trans body which is described as “the triumphant irruption of another future in oneself”⁵³ and which becomes the ultimate means of a revolutionary practice:

To transition is to establish a transversal communication with the hormone which erases or, better still, eclipses what you call the female phenotype

⁴⁶ For the history of their transition cf. Paul B. Preciado, *An Apartment on Uranus. Chronicles of the Crossing*, foreword by Virginie Despentes, trans. Charlotte Mandell (South Pasadena: semiotext(e), 2020).

⁴⁷ Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak? A Report to an Academy of Psychoanalysts*, preliminary sheet.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 62–63.

⁴⁹ Cf. Julia Kristeva, “Word, Dialogue and Novel,” in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (New York: B. Blackwell, 1986), 34–61.

⁵⁰ Cf. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter. On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 24–25, 55.

⁵² Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak? A Report to an Academy of Psychoanalysts*, 22.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 38.

and allows for the awakening of another genealogy. This awakening is revolution. It is a molecular uprising. An assault on the power of the heteropatriarchal ego, of identity and of name. The process is a decolonization of the body.⁵⁴

However, the text develops its political impetus not from a primarily activist perspective, but from an epistemic one. Preciado proclaims an epistemic change, which they combine with a critique of hegemonic knowledge systems. The proclamation of a paradigm shift goes hand in hand with challenging Freudian psychoanalysis, which comes into view as an institution of the criticised Western-colonial patriarchy. According to Preciado, "Freudian psychoanalysis has placed the normalization of heterosexual femininity and masculinity at the center of the clinical narrative" and proves to be "a collection of discursive and therapeutic practices to 'normalize' the position of 'man' and 'woman' and their dominant or deviant colonial sexual identifications."⁵⁵

A sharp opposition between the speaker and the primary addressees, i.e. psychoanalysts, pervades the entire text. This boundary is already established through a preceding quotation from Victor Hugo's *The Man Who Laughs* (1869): "What am I doing here? I have come to terrorize you! I am a monster, you say? No! I am the people! I am an exception? No! I am the rule; you are the exception! You are the chimera; I am the reality."⁵⁶ Even before the actual beginning of the text, the quote reveals the identity-political impetus: the outsider position of the 'I' is characterised both as an external attribution ("I am a monster, you say?") and a metonymy ("I am the people"), so that the 'I' is identified here as a representative of a collective for which it speaks in a combative manner ("I have come to terrorize you!"). In addition, this speaking *for* and speaking *as* turns out to be a hybrid act in itself, oscillating between fiction, art and academic discourse, for Hugo's text is not quoted directly, but in a mediated way (the text names the thesis of the artist as source).⁵⁷

Besides these references the whole text itself makes up a complex intertextual dialogue on the systemic level (which concerns the type and genre of the text and its referential status) and the poetological level (which concerns its very textuality and self-reflexive implications). This leads to a hybridisation of fact and fiction, science and literature and is largely due to the reference of two pre-texts which *Can the Monster Speak?* alludes to: one from the academic field, and one from the field of literature and fiction. These pre-texts are fundamental for an overall strategy of masking and mirroring, which are examined later in the article.

The first pre-text is Gayatri C. Spivak's influential post-colonial work titled *Can the Subaltern speak?* (1988), which is alluded to in the title of the English translation.⁵⁸ The second text is Franz Kafka's "A Report for an

⁵⁴ Ibid., 35.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 53.

⁵⁶ Ibid., (unpaginated): "quoted by artist Lorenza Böttner in her thesis 'Handicapped?' (1982)".

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ The original French title "Je suis un monstre qui vous parle" does not imply this intertextual reference. It was Preciado themselves who made the decision concerning the English

Academy" (1917, "Bericht für eine Akademie"), a short parabolic story about the ape named Red Peter who assimilated in human society. This reference connects Preciado's speech about their life as a trans person with modern literature and one of its most influential representative who is notorious for his writings about alienation, crisis of the modern subject and metamorphosis. Preciado directly and explicitly draws a strong analogy between them and Kafka's short story:

To introduce myself, since you are a group of 3,500 psychoanalysts and I feel a little alone on this side of the stage, to take a running jump and hoist myself onto the shoulders of the master of metamorphosis, the greatest analyst of the excesses that hide behind the façade of scientific reason and of the madness commonly referred to as mental health: Franz Kafka.

In 1917, Franz Kafka wrote 'Ein Bericht für eine Akademie' – 'A Report to an Academy'. The narrator of the text is an ape who, having learned human language, is appearing before an academy of the greatest scientific authorities to report to them on what human evolution has meant to him. [...] But the most interesting thing in Red Peter's monologue is that Kafka does not present this process of humanization as a story of emancipation or of liberation from animality, but rather as a critique of colonial European humanism and its anthropological taxonomies. Once captured, the ape says he had no choice: if he did not wish to die locked up in a cage, he had to accept the 'cage' of human subjectivity. Just as the ape Red Peter addressed himself to scientists, so today I address myself to you, the academicians of psychoanalysis, from my 'cage' as a trans man.⁵⁹

This literary framing affects the structure of communication and intensifies the agonal relationship between the speaker and the addressee. By making analogies with Kafka's text, psychoanalysts are not addressed as academic colleagues (which would be conceivable at a symposium), but as representatives of Western-colonial hegemony (note the emphasis on the preponderance). Preciado distances their own position from this, both spatially ("alone on this side of the stage", "from my cage as a trans man") and with regard to the order of discourse (Foucault). Preciado stages themselves as the 'other' of the hegemonic Western discourse and thus invokes central theses of the Postcolonial Theory, which has clearly emphasised the significance that the processes of 'othering' in imperial discourse had for the confirmation of colonial hegemony and for the construction of an identity of the West.⁶⁰ Preciado turns this 'other' in terms of identity politics, namely as a claim to a subject position that simultaneously fulfils a mirror function.

title – precisely because of the reference to Spivak. I would like to thank Frank Wynne, who translated the text in English for this information (E-mail, March 8, 2024).

⁵⁹ Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak? A Report to an Academy of Psychoanalysts*, 17–19.

⁶⁰ Cf. Gayatri C. Spivak, "The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives." *History and Theory*, vol. 24, no. 3, (1985), 247–272; Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).

I am the monster who speaks to you. The monster you have created with your discourse and your clinical practices. I am the monster who gets up from the analyst's couch and dares to speak, not as a patient, but as a citizen, as your monstrous equal.⁶¹

The 'I' speaks here in multiple masked ways. It speaks as a monster that parallels itself with the subaltern, and it speaks as a fictional character that simultaneously takes on the parabolic mirror function of Kafka's Red Peter ("your monstrous equal"). The act of speaking and the associated claim to a subject position thus prove to be the central poetological hinge points of the text. While in Spivak's work the question of the subaltern's ability to speak is intricate and ultimately denied, Preciado answers this question performatively, namely *by* speaking as an alleged subaltern being. In doing so, the text also shapes a performative contradiction that Spivak had already recognised in her critique of (post-)colonial politics of representation and linked to the question of the responsibility of intellectuals,⁶² and which determines the aporetic structure of the entire text. According to Spivak, the subaltern cannot occupy a subject position in the Western hegemonic discourse, as they are primarily a discursive effect of this discourse.⁶³ This applies all the more to gendered subject positions, which Spivak stresses in particular.⁶⁴ The subaltern is ultimately mute, and speaking about and for the subaltern eventually affirms Western hegemony; it is a way of speaking that Spivak has always critically reflected on with regard to her own position as an academic.⁶⁵ The attempt to represent the unrepresented in the discourse and to be an advocate for the deprived is linked to an unresolvable paradox and a double bind, as advocacy moves within precisely those structures that need to be dissolved.⁶⁶

As an active academic (and moreover a white one), Preciado is ultimately themselves a representative of Western academic discourse, shaping this contradiction as an ambivalent role play that allows them both to identify with the subaltern and to assert a speaker position in the hegemonic discourse.

As a trans body, as a non-binary body, whose right to speak as an expert about my condition, or to produce a discourse or any form of knowledge about myself is not recognized by the medicinal profession, the law, psychoanalysis or psychiatry, I have done as Red Peter did, I have learned

⁶¹ Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak? A Report to an Academy of Psychoanalysts*, 19.

⁶² Cf. María do Mar Castro Varela, Nikita Dhawan, *Postkoloniale Theorie. Eine kritische Einführung* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2020), 161–228.

⁶³ Cf. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Studies. The Key concepts* (London–New York: Routledge, 2013), 246.

⁶⁴ Gayatri C. Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* [Abbreviated by the Author], in: *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, eds. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin (London–New York: Routledge, 2006), 28–37.

⁶⁵ Important buzzwords in this context include Spivak's notions of 'unlearning one's learning' and 'unlearning one's privilege,' cf. Sara Danius, Stefan Jonsson, Gayatri. C. Spivak, "Interview with Gayatri Spivak," *Boundaries*, vol. 20, no. 2, (1993), 24–50.

⁶⁶ Cf. Castro Varela, Dhawan, *Postkoloniale Theorie. Eine kritische Einführung*, 210–211.

the language of Freud and Lacan, the language of the colonial patriarchy, your language, and I am here to address you.⁶⁷

On the one hand, the Kafkaesque mask makes it possible to read Preciado's speech as an act of subversion: as an entry of the monstrous into the hegemonic discourse and a critical mirror of Western knowledge formations, which are disturbed by their own means ("your language"). On the other hand, the reference to Kafka's allegory supports the projection of the criticised hegemonic system onto individual subjects. It is not just the 'I' that stages itself as a metonymy, a *pars pro toto*, by claiming to speak for a group;⁶⁸ the auditorium is also addressed metonymically and identified with the system: "you – the normal, the hegemonic, the bourgeois white psychoanalysts, the binary, the patriarchal-colonials."⁶⁹

In this harsh opposition between 'I' and the audience and its metonymic extension to the juxtaposition of the subaltern and hegemony, the 'I', which mediates between these two worlds as the speaker takes on the function of a looking glass because "almost everything that I can say, you can observe for yourselves on one side or the other of the gender boundary."⁷⁰ It is, above all, their trans body that Preciado identifies as the pivotal point of this reflective function: as a person who was socialised as a woman but is now read as a man, Preciado has experiences on both sides of the 'gender boundary.' The trans body is thus able to reflect and literally dis-illusion central guiding concepts of Western self-image including universalism, since as "a so-called 'man' and so-called 'white', I could accede for the first time the privilege of universality. A peaceful and anonymous place where everyone leaves you the fuck alone."⁷¹

2.2. Turning the tables: Transformative narration and subversions of psychoanalytic discourse

Preciado repeatedly emphasises that living as a trans person does not result from a rejection of whatever kind of 'femininity' or an endorsement of whatever kind of 'masculinity.' Instead, it is precisely the non-binary identity that empowered them "to decolonise, disidentify, debinarify myself."⁷² In double-masking the role of the speaker – as a parabolic figure of literary fiction and as a subaltern in the hegemonic discourse – and thus in hybridising the narrative 'I', Preciado performs an alternative way of academic discourse which eventually claims to initiate a literal 'transgression' of the binary and a paradigm shift in psychoanalysis in the sense of Thomas

⁶⁷ Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak? A Report to an Academy of Psychoanalysts*, 19.

⁶⁸ "Many of my predecessors died [...] and it is with the strength that I draw from all their silenced voices, though in my own name only, that I address you today." *Ibid.*, 75; "I am speaking about all of this publicly because it is vital that the voices of sexual and gender subalterns not be appropriated by the discourse of sexual difference." *Ibid.*, 47.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 39.

S. Kuhn.⁷³ Kuhn's concept of a paradigm shift is closely linked to two other concepts that also play a role in Preciado's work: the concept of crisis and the concept of revolution. According to Kuhn, science takes place in certain paradigms, i.e. in assumptions, concepts and methods that a scientific community shares and uses to solve scientific questions. However, these paradigms are not timeless; they lose their validity when, in the course of scientific change, 'anomalies' accumulate and they can no longer be explained. This crisis leads to a paradigm shift and thus to a revolution.⁷⁴

According to Preciado, psychoanalysts have to face the fact that their discipline is precisely in this transitional phase, for "the epistemic regime of sexual difference is mutating and, within the next ten or twenty years, will probably give way to a new epistemology."⁷⁵ A good part of Preciado's text constitutes a sophisticated critical discussion on the history of Western epistemology, the pivotal role of gender and sex within it and the role that psychoanalysis has played in establishing and maintaining gender binarism and pathologising ways of living that do not fit in the binary model.⁷⁶ The asymmetrical communication relationship that the text has established in the juxtaposition of the subjugated other (the narrating 'I') and the subjugator (psychoanalysts, academics) is reversed in this long, educated and educating passages, for Preciado appears less as a subaltern monster than as an instructive teacher, sometimes even as a prophet of a new paradigm, who wants his audience to leave the lecture "enlightened."⁷⁷

Queer and anti-racist movements, according to Preciado, are the precursors of the epistemic revolution,⁷⁸ and it is precisely the zone of (epistemic) transition where the narrating 'I' as a trans person is situated, speaking "from a discursive position as unexpected as it is impossible, that of a gender-dysphoric monster, addressing the Academy of Psychoanalysts."⁷⁹ This also affects the discursive level since the discourse from this "impossible" position does not fit in the parameters of the epistemic system but still takes place within it (namely as a speech in the institution of the *École de la Cause Freudienne*). This is where autofiction comes into play because this entails a renegotiation of the way in which knowledge about trans identities is conveyed and who conveys it. The text demonstrates how a transgressive, non-binary narrative of knowledge about transgender identities can look like.

⁷³ Ibid., 55.

⁷⁴ Cf. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions. Second Edition, enlarged* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), especially 52-110.

⁷⁵ Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak? A Report to an Academy of Psychoanalysts*, 52.

⁷⁶ In these passages, which sometimes resemble a university lecture, Preciado informs, for example, about the androcentric one-sex-model which was effective at least until the Middle Ages, about the new binary epistemology which became decisive in the course of the 18th and 19th century, about the pivotal role of Freudian psychoanalysis in fixing sexual differences and about the ongoing crisis of the binary model as a result of new findings in e.g. chromosome research and endocrinology since the 1940s. Cf. *ibid.*, 56-62.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 43.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 52.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 51.

It is important to bear in mind that the masked speech in the text is closely linked to the transformation and rewriting of a pre-text (here: Kafka's "Report to an Academy"). Above all, the very formal and almost overly polite form of address borrowed from Kafka's text ("esteemed ladies and gentlemen"), that Preciado repeatedly uses, leads to ironic effects. On the one hand, the anachronistic expression supports the conservative and outmoded attitude that Preciado accuses the École of having. On the other hand, the alleged submissiveness contrasts with the self-empowerment of the speaking self, which the text successively demonstrates.

The intertextual transformation, including the basic metonymic structure of the speech described above, is part of a comprehensive strategy of 'turning the tables,' in which psychoanalysis itself is ultimately analysed in terms of its colonial-patriarchal unconscious. The psychoanalysts are sometimes even addressed to as 'patients' themselves, to whom Preciado offers "a political therapy for your institutional practices."⁸⁰

In 'turning the tables,' Preciado thus reverses the subject-object relationship of the hegemonic discourse on the one hand, and beats his opponents with their own means, on the other. This rhetorical procedure is also used to expose the unmarked norms in Western self-image. The identity-political agenda of the text is combined with the unmasking of the powerful, yet invisible and unquestioned standardisation of identity:⁸¹

Why is it, my beloved binary friends, that you are convinced that only subalterns possess an identity? [...] Do you [...] believe that you – the normal, the hegemonic, the bourgeois white psychoanalysts, the binary, the patriarchal-colonials – have no identity? There is no identity more rigid and sclerotic than your invisible identity. Than your republican universality. Your weightless, anonymous identity is the privilege of sexual, racial and gender norms. [...] To be branded with an identity means simply that one does not have the power to designate one's identity as universal.⁸²

3. Queering narratives of memory: Kim de l'Horizon's *Blutbuch* (2022)

Kim de l'Horizon's highly acclaimed autofictional novel *Blutbuch* ("blood book") was awarded the German Book Prize in 2022. At the award ceremony, it was not only the book that attracted attention, but also the author,

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Here, Preciado's argumentation coincides with central theses of anti-racism research, in particular the "shifting the gaze" (Toni Morrison) through Critical Whiteness Studies, which aims to reveal white privileges and critically reflect on unmarked, white norms and emphasis their significance for structural racism. Cf. Tammie M. Kennedy, Joyce Irene Middleton, Krista Ratcliffe, "The Matter of Whiteness: Or, Why Whiteness Studies is Important to Rhetoric and Composition," *Rhetoric Review*, vol. 24, no. 4, (2005), 359–373; Robin DiAngelo, *What Does It Mean To Be White? Developing White Racial Literacy* (New York: Peter Lang, 2016).

⁸² Preciado, *Can the Monster Speak? A Report to an Academy of Psychoanalysts*, 31–32.

who created a *geschlechtspolitische Kunstfigur*⁸³ (gender-political art figure) under the pseudonym of Kim de l'Horizon. "This prize is not just for me," de l'Horizon said at the award ceremony and then shaved off their hair live on stage in Frankfurt as a sign of solidarity with the women's protests taking place in Iran at the time. "I think the jury also chose the prize to send a signal against hatred, for love and for the struggle of all the people who are oppressed because of their bodies."⁸⁴

The symbolic act of solidarity with the oppressed is just as much a clear political statement as it is a public form of authorial staging that goes beyond the text. In this way, Kim de l'Horizon themselves invites readers to (also) situate their novel in current debates on identity politics.

3.1. Poetics of fluidity and transgression

Blutbuch is about the nexus between memory and identity and particularly reflects the role of recounting memories for individual, collective and cultural identities. The focus is on the non-binary Kim, who, after their grandmother develops dementia, decides to come to terms with their own traumas as well as the taboos and buried memories within their family history, whereby the female sides and (sights) of this family play a special role.

While dialogicity in Preciado's text is limited to systemic (genre-related) and explicit intertextual references and is thus in tension with the strictly monological-agonal structure of the lecture, dialogicity is a central organising principle in de l'Horizon's novel. In addition to the integration of numerous intertextual references (including to Preciado, who is quoted several times⁸⁵), the multi-perspective narrative situation is particularly affected by this.

The grandmother, whose own memory is increasingly fading and whose dementia is the poetological trigger for the writing process, functions as the primary addressee of the text, which borrows from the epistolary novel for large parts. In addition, numerous other forms of writing and styles are implemented, ranging from lyrical passages to conceptually oral texts, partly in Swiss German, some English passages, inserted archive documents and scientific explanations (or passages imitating the style of academic texts) including footnotes.⁸⁶ The narrator changes roles several times:

⁸³ Cf. Arno Frank, "Seht her, wir haben verstanden. Deutscher Buchpreis für Kim de l'Horizon," *Spiegel Online*, 20 October 2022, <https://www.spiegel.de/kultur/literatur/deutscher-buchpreis-fuer-kim-de-l-horizon-seht-her-wir-haben-verstanden-a-86611e26-318b-4201-955d-e94384614cab> (accessed 21 March 2024).

⁸⁴ "Dieser Preis ist nicht nur für mich. Ich denke, die Jury hat den Preis auch ausgewählt, um ein Zeichen zu setzen gegen den Hass, für die Liebe und für den Kampf aller Menschen, die wegen ihres Körpers unterdrückt werden," Cf. "Deutscher Buchpreis für Kim de l'Horizon. Anschreiben gegen den Status Quo," *Deutschlandfunk Kultur*, 17 October 2022, <https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/kim-de-l-horizon-blutbuch-deutscher-buchpreis-100.html> (accessed 10 March 2024) [English translation mine].

⁸⁵ Firstly, with a statement in which Preciado rejects identification with the male and female sex and, secondly, with a longer statement on sexuality in trans and queer culture, which according to Preciado is freed from reproductive constraints and gender domination, de l'Horizon, *Blutbuch*, 19, 265.

⁸⁶ This variety in styles and expression was one of the reasons why *Blutbuch* has been awarded the German Book Prize, cf. *Kim de l'Horizon erhält den Deutschen Buchpreis*

the narrating 'I' often appears as a very strongly marked self, sometimes acting as the monological 'I' of the epistolary novel, sometimes as a lyrical 'I' and sometimes as a poetological 'I' reflecting on its own writing. Occasionally, however, the first-person voice withdraws and turns into a heterodiegetic narrative instance, namely in passages about Kim's childhood, which is alienating to Kim for they cannot remember everything about it. These parts are narrated in the third person ('the child'), which narratively marks a dissociation between the narrating and experiencing subject. At times, the narrator even completely takes a back seat to other voices. The fourth chapter, for example, consists largely of short biographies inserted into the novel, which the main character's mother has compiled of her female ancestors and written down in a strongly dialectal style. In here, Kim shifts from the narrator and the main character to a fictitious editor. The narratological place of Kim in the novel – as the narrator, as the main character, as the fictitious editor, as a poetological ego and not least as an index of the empirical author – is thus equally hybridised and pluralised.

In contrast to Preciado's text, *Blutbuch* is not characterised by a clear appeal structure, but rather by the hybridisation and queering of narratives. Identity itself is thus presented as a fluid and transgressive category. The identity-political significance of the novel lies – here again comparable to Preciado – in the epistemic intervention, which acts out by genuinely literary means of autofiction.

The novel has five chapters, preceded by a prologue in which the first person narrator addresses the sick grandmother, reflects on the writing situation and lists "Dinge, über die wir nie sprachen"⁸⁷ ("things we never talked about"), such as Kim's non-binary identity which reveals to be only one example of queerness in the family.⁸⁸ The fluidity of gender identities is also reflected on a stylistic and lexical level. Gender-sensitive language – a controversial topic in Germany – is used consistently throughout the novel, for example *Freund:innen* instead of *Freunde*.⁸⁹ In addition to these more or less common forms of gender-sensitive language, there are completely new lexical forms that are difficult to translate into English, such as *jemensch* instead of *jemand* ('somehuman' instead of 'someone').⁹⁰ A central play on words, which also combines different national languages and literally conveys the fluidity of identity, is played out with the term 'mother'. This is replaced in

für „Blutbuch“, <https://www.deutscher-buchpreis.de/news/eintrag/kim-de-lhorizon-erhaelt-den-deutschen-buchpreis-2022-fuer-blutbuch/#:~:text=Die%20Jury-,Kim%20de%20l'Horizon%20erh%C3%A4lt,Deutschen%20Buchpreis%202022%20f%C3%BCr%20%E2%80%9E-Blutbuch%E2%80%9C&text=Kim%20de%20l'Horizon%20hat,den%20Deutschen%20Buchpreis%202022%20gewonnen> (accessed 21 March 2024).

⁸⁷ de l'Horizon, *Blutbuch*, 9.

⁸⁸ On the first two pages we learn that Kim's mother had an affair with a woman during her marriage and that their grandmother has excess testosterone ("hirsutism"), cf. *ibid.*, 9–10.

⁸⁹ The colon connects the masculine form *Freunde* (male friends) and *Freundinnen* (female friends) and at the same time indicates an intermediate space for non-binary/trans identities.

⁹⁰ This holds also true for the indefinite pronoun 'man,' which is used in German for general and impersonal statements (in English for example 'one/'you'). In *Blutbuch*, 'man' is replaced by *mensch* (human). The impersonal pronoun 'man' is neutral in terms of grammatical gender but is a homonym for German *Mann* ('man' in the sense of 'male') on the phonetic level.

the novel by *Meer*, which is the German word for 'sea' but also a homonym to the French and Swiss-German word for mother (*mère*).

In the course of the prologue, the main topic of repression and trauma is already alluded to. Repression as a basic means of hiding memories of violation is linked to the idea of inheriting and perpetuating traumas within the family. This topic is personified by the narrating 'I' which performs both as an archive and as a narrative catalyst of these hidden memories. The topic of repression is also personified by side characters like Irma, the grandmother's sister, who is a tabooed person in the collective memory of the family and whose traumatic experiences are revealed by the narrator within the course of the text.⁹¹ Along with that, other important topics are Kim's alienation from their own childhood, which they cannot remember completely, the *Blutbuche* (copper beech) in the family garden, which alludes the title (*Blutbuch*, blood book) and which functions as a poetological leitmotif for the search for one's own roots and one's own language, and the ambivalent meaning that anonymous and insensitive sex (which is sometimes described very explicitly) has for Kim: on the one hand, as an escapist means and regulator for their imbalanced emotions and, on the other, as a metaphor for the almost physical borderline experience that the incorporation of other feelings and stories means for the narrator, who feels like an archive of other people's burden.⁹²

The prologue is followed by the first chapter, which contains miniatures about the grandmother in enumerative form (her body, her places, her idiosyncrasies), thus performing a tentative, fragmented narrative approach to the addressee. The second chapter contains remarks on the child's ambivalent relationship with mother and grandmother, characterized by fear and coldness as well as closeness. Chapter three makes references to botanical history to develop a leitmotif of the novel, the copper beech, in greater depth. Chapter four uses a female family tree created by Kim's mother to unfold the story of female ancestors. Finally, the fifth chapter contains letters to the grandmother written in English which is followed by a German version that is laid out 'upside down,' so that readers literally have to turn the novel if they want to read it. The switch to English has both an alienating effect, while at the same time being identified as a means of verbal individuation and liberation from memorial pre-texts:

I am always scared. I am still scared of you, Grandma, scared of what you will do when you read all of this. Which is why I am writing these letters in English, the language I taught myself by reading *Harry Potter* and watching *Lord of the Rings* as a teenager, the language of my sex-dates, the language that has other eyes than my mother tongue, the language in

⁹¹ In the course of the novel, it is revealed that Irma had been sexually abused by her own father and, after becoming pregnant, had been sent to a women's prison by her family, cf. de l'Horizon, *Blutbuch*, 116, 288–289.

⁹² The metaphor of the body as an archive of other people's feelings and stories is explicitly mentioned several times in the novel and correlated with anal sex (*ibid.*, 50–51) and the incorporation of shame ("a body of shame, a whole archive of it," *ibid.*, 269, original in English).

which I did not inherit your eyes and your mothers' and your mother's mother's eyes, the language in which I don't feel watched, the language that feels like a space of my own, no matter how incorrect, the language that you don't really understand.⁹³

Precisely this search for a language of one's own and its ambivalent, both violating and empowering relation to archives of identity and narratives of memory is closely linked to the key motif of the novel, namely the copper beech.

3.2. Back to the roots: Critical accounts on identity and ideology

The copper beech tree in the family garden serves as a poetological metaphor and is strongly connected with the narration of memory. The copper beech was planted by the narrator's great-grandfather for his daughter, i.e. Kim's grandmother, and functions as a symbolic place of memory where national-cultural memory, collective family memory and personal-individual memory come together.

It initially stands for difficult access to one's own self, one's own past and one's own voice. The tree is closely linked to the childhood of the narrating 'I', to which it has no direct narrative access, clearly recognisable in the distanced narrative mediation in the first part of the book, in which the mode shifts from autodiegetic to heterodiegetic narration and the narrator only speaks of 'the child' in the third person. The large tree in the family's garden is a place of refuge for 'the child.' As told in a fairytale-like allegorical passage at the beginning of the book, the child buries its voice in the roots: "When I grow up, the child thinks. I will come back. And the voice will tell me everything."⁹⁴

Poetologically, the novel shapes precisely this search for one's own voice, which goes back to the roots. It does so by pluralising both memory and voice, and combining them with different forms of writing. Memory, identity and narrative are presented in their interdependence in a literary way, which is not unusual for autofictional and autobiographical texts, and reflected in the dynamics of narration. What is special about de l'Horzon's text is that it combines this poetological reflection with the queering of memory narratives. This seems to be precisely where the identity-political relevance of the text lies. Comparable to Preciado, it aims to revise epistemic orders (in *Blutbuch* it is the knowledge of history, whereas in *Can the Monster Speak?* the knowledge of body and psyche). But in contrast to Preciado it does not convey this revision as a metonymic confrontation of 'I vs. you, but as a polyphonic-hybrid discourse.

In this regard, the copper beech also serves as a symbolic means to criticise nationalist identity politics. It demonstrates in a nutshell the significance of narratives for the foundation of national identities, an aspect that Stuart Hall had already emphasised in 1992. In his essay titled "The

⁹³ Ibid., 267 (original in English).

⁹⁴ "Wenn ich gross bin, denkt das Kind. Werde ich zurückkommen. Und die Stimme wird mir alles sagen." Ibid., 94 [English translation mine].

Question of Cultural Identity," Hall points out the ideological implications of "narrating the nation," which often goes hand in hand with an "invention of tradition" and ultimately creates "national cultures as imagined communities."⁹⁵ In *Blutbuch* these narrative formations of national identity and cultural memory are revealed by spoofing academic writing and, at the same time, offering insights in historical narratives of genealogy. The first-person narrator traces the story of the tree, which almost symbolically invokes the ideological connection between blood and soil, in extended passages, working through the German-language botanical discourse of the late 19th and 20th centuries. These passages are designed as a form of parody of academic discourse (for example, quotations from botanical works are referenced in the footnotes, but are also ironically commented on within these footnotes). They critically demonstrate the ideologisation of identity narratives. For example, various experts (*Blutbuchologen*⁹⁶) are quoted and they claim the origin of the copper beech for their region (South Tyrol, Thuringia). In the course of this ironic revision, puns play an important role which directly refer to the title *Blutbuch* and its implication of both *Buch* (book) and *Buche* (beech). The neologism *Blutbuchologen* is difficult to translate for it implies both an ironic professionalisation of botanical experts dealing with the particular tree ("copper beechalists") and an ironic allusion of the nationalist ideology of 'blood and soil' carried on in 'books', i.e. narration ("blood bookolists"). The *Blutslogik*⁹⁷ ("blood logic") of 'pure' cultivations is taken *ad absurdum* in a very sarcastic way because, as the narrator emphasises, it was not the *blutdirekten Sprösslinge*⁹⁸ ("blood-direct offspring") of the ancestral beech that were responsible for the typical red colour which is decisive for the tree species. Rather, this colour was the result of 'asexual' propagation, namely by grafting.⁹⁹ The parodistic deconstruction of the ideological charge of identity, which can easily be transferred to nationalist narratives and eugenic fantasies of purity, is thus accompanied by a queering of these narratives of the tree.

3.3. Flip sides of epistemic violence: The hidden history of mothers

Another form of queering memory narratives can be found in the fourth part of the novel ("The Search for Rosmarie"), which is dedicated to the narrator's female family history. When the grandmother's health deteriorates, their mother asks Kim to compile a family tree for the grandmother. While searching for materials for this family tree, Kim finds a collection of notes written by their mother. She has traced the history of the female family members, which goes back to the Middle Ages. The narrator now takes on the role of an editor and, to a certain extent, lets their mother, whose miniature biographies are reproduced verbatim, take the floor. These notes are

⁹⁵ Stuart Hall, "The Question of Cultural Identity," in *Modernity and its Futures*, eds. Stuart Hall, David Held, Anthony G. McGrew (Cambridge: Polity Press 1992), 291-298.

⁹⁶ de l'Horizon, *Blutbuch*, 165.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

a queering of memory narratives in a multiple way. First of all, they open up a narrative space for a special distorting and female voice, that of Kim's mother, who is not familiar with any – be it academic or fictional – ways of narrating. Accordingly, these passages, which, appear to be the most inventive parts of the novel, crisscross any narrative conventions the readers are used to. Formally aligned as short biographical notes, these passages are not descriptive at all but imply various techniques of fictionalisation, such as internal focalisation, and, at the same time, are filtered through the very dialectal and colloquial style and impetus of Kim's mother, who is omnipresent as a narrating voice.

The short biographies form the hidden history of the mothers in Kim's family. They are stories about strong women and they have an empowering effect. At the same time, they are stories of gender-based violence, witch-hunts, the internment of women, the persecution of lesbian love and prostitution and the patriarchal exercise of aggression against queerness, which is a cross-cutting topic in the family history. With regard to the significance of cultural memory, they illuminate a blank space in hegemonic-patriarchal identity narratives, namely the female sides and sights.

In this chapter, the hybrid character of the autofiction, i.e. its oscillation between fact and fiction, as well as its potential to disrupt hegemonic memory narratives, comes fully to the fore for the blank space of the hidden history of mothers, which the text fills here in literary terms, proves to be a hybrid narrative itself. In retrospect, Kim reveals that they invented the chapter.¹⁰⁰ The female narrative voice of the mother thus proves to be fictionalised for the reader and filtered through the queer narrative voice. The critical potential of autofiction and its identity-political significance become particularly clear with regard to the interaction between official memory discourse and repressed memories. Autofiction offers literary space for the flip side of epistemic violence by revealing the repressed aspects of hegemonic-patriarchal narratives. It gives female sides and sights on gender-related violence a literary space. At the same time, the autofictional text stages the recursive structure of trauma through the pluralisation of voices (the forgotten women speak through the mother's voice, the mother's voice in turn proves to be shaped by the narrating 'I' of Kim). The essence of trauma lies precisely in the fact that they have to be relived again and again. What is epistemically repressed, it could be pointed out, is not automatically completely forgotten, but lurks beneath the official discourse. It is the 'I' from the margins that becomes the narrative catalyst of repressed knowledge, making it literarily available within the framework of autofiction.

4. Conclusion

The discursive place and epistemic significance of autofictional texts in contemporary literature can be examined in more detail by means of an identity-political perspective. The texts on queer identities under scrutiny make a clear

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 270.

claim to referentiality, socio-political significance and epistemic intervention. This is interesting both with regard to current trends in autofictional writing, such as autosociobiography and autotheory, and with regard to the underlying concept of literature since a tendency towards the re-factualisation and re-politicisation of literature seems to be emerging here.

Although both texts are characterised by varied narrative strategies and styles and although they also play with the narrative place of the narrating 'I' (whether by speaking masked, as in *Preciado*, or by orchestrating a polyphonic, multi-perspective ensemble of voices, as in *de l'Horizon*), the autobiographical pact is not unsettled. This is also due to the fact that both texts are largely self-explaining and reveal their procedures in an explicit manner. The multitude of advanced narrative procedures and literary techniques used in *Preciado* and *de l'Horizon* are thus in a peculiar tension with the intentionalism that pervades both texts and is evident in the explicit clarification of statements. To put it more simply, the reader basically has little to do because the texts reveal their interpretation. The focus is shifted from the creation of ambivalences on a hermeneutic level to the narrative proceeding of ambivalences through literary means of autofiction.

Both *Preciado* and *de l'Horizon* use literature as a means of transgressive writing and aim at the epistemic level. Hence, they transgress the field of literature and conjunct science and fiction. In doing so, they disrupt hegemonic knowledge discourses (in *Preciado's* case that of psychoanalytical science, in *de l'Horizon's* that of cultural memory) and expose narratives and the hegemonic creation of identity, which they juxtapose with alternative forms of storytelling and the communication of knowledge about queer identities. The self of the autofiction becomes the catalyst of anti-hegemonic knowledge and anti-hegemonic discourse. The autofictions of *Preciado* and *de l'Horizon* are therefore able to implement a core concern of identity politics in a literary way, namely claiming of a subject and speaker position in the hegemonic discourse.

At the same time, the aporias of identity politics discourses also become clear when looking at both examples. On the one hand, the metonymic structure of *Preciado's* text goes hand in hand with a literary staging of agency and empowerment of the self, but on the other hand, the agonal opposition of the speaker and the audience encourages a hardening and essentialisation of the discourse positions, by equating 'the others' with the hegemonic system and identifying the 'I' with the subaltern, an identification that can ultimately only be made plausible by the literary masquerade, but which obscures the privileged place that *Preciado* occupies as an author and academic within the hegemonic system. Conversely, in *de l'Horizon's* novel, the representation of queer memory narratives ultimately remains tied to the imaginary, which is an aspect that the novel itself makes clear through explicit indicators of fiction. These need not be points of criticism, but they seem to open up connections for a queer poetics of autofiction, which (here again comparable to the core concern of left-wing identity politics) has its special transitory potential, namely in the active shaping of a social transition to the recognition and subjectivation of marginalised identities:

Maybe this is, what is inherently queer about autofiction: to start writing from a reality that repeats the fiction that we don't exist. To start writing from a reality that isn't real to us, that puts us in the realm of fiction. To produce ourselves through writing, to invent literary spaces that are other, hyperreal, utterly needed realities. Maybe this is, why so many of us write 'autofiction': because we are still stories, because we aren't real bodies yet.¹⁰¹

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¹⁰¹ Ibid., 270.

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