

Motherhood for All—Women, Men, Trans*, Inter*, Nonbinary and Agender-Persons—Examined Using the Figure of the Continuum*

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This article is about the question of what the term “motherhood” signifies, and how the figure of the Continuum helps recognize and explain pluralities of motherhood *beyond* the gender binary of “female-male”. After an initial explanation of the concept of gender as a Continuum, the figure of the Continuum will be applied to forms of motherhood and will discuss them in light of the four dimensions of the Continuum—physicality, feeling, sociality, and desire. The tensions between physical and social motherhood will be traced in an examination of Bertold Brecht’s “The Caucasian Chalk Circle” (1948) and its references to biblical, Chinese and German-language texts. Based on the diverse forms of motherhood discussed in the article, concerning trans* men among others, the necessity of a reformulation of the understanding of motherhood as a new parenthood will be outlined, which overturns the limiting connection between motherhood and heteronormatively defined femininity.

Keywords: Motherhood, Parenthood, Gender, Gender plurality, Continuum

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What Is/Was Considered Normal?

The Western European and Anglo-Saxon sphere was ruled until about 1968 by a supposedly clear, stereotypical gender order which differentiated between “female” and “male”, defined the biological “sex” as inherent and unambiguous,¹ combined with a “typically female” and “typically male” canon of feelings and behaviors and a heterosexual structure of desire between man and woman. So-called women without ovaries or so-called men without testes, for example, as well as homoerotic desire and the connected social ways of life, trans* and inter* genders, nonbinary genders and a lack of gender, and so-called women and so-called men displaying actions and feelings outside of established gender stereotypes would be regarded as deviations and disorders, and would often be declared sick, deviant or wrong (Baltes-Löhr, 2018a). At birth, babies are assigned a female or male gender based on biomorphological traits, such as a vagina or a penis. Traits that are deemed ambiguous, such as a penis that is judged as being too small or a clitoris that is judged as being too big, are used as a reason to perform so-called gender-corrective surgeries on healthy newborns. Based on the medically constructed, binary and gendered traits, certain stereotypically female or stereotypically male feelings and behaviors, as well as a heterosexual orientation of sexual desire, are then expected from the so-called girls and so-called boys. Gender binarity and heteronormativity was seen as the norm.

Dissolving Norms Since 1968

With life practices of so-called women, lesbians and gay men becoming less secret since the second half of the 20th century, binary notions of gender have increasingly been called into question. Women’s movements and gay and lesbian movements have discussed the oppressive effects of a heteronormative order (Maihofer, 1995, Becker-Schmidt, 1993). Nonetheless, gender has for a long time been considered *the* structural category of human forms of life. Only the introduction of ideas of intersectionality,² which emphasized belonging to an ethnic group and a social class as an axis of difference alongside gender, saw gender discussed in more complex contexts. Especially Judith Butler’s (1991; 1993; 1995) insights into the constructedness of gender through performative processes, repetitions and subversions of the so-called biological “sex” and the so-called social “gender” and the connected gender relations opened new perspectives, and enabled gender to detach from a heteronormative corset. This theoretical framework allows the concept of gender as a Continuum to re-analyze actually existing pluralities, variations and diversities, differences and similarities of gender, and thus to re-examine all facets of gender.

The Figure of the Continuum Exemplified Using Gender

This thought figure was conceived in 2014 (Baltes-Löhr, 2018a; 2016; 2021) with the examination of how trans* and inter* genders can be considered *without* becoming a “third”, “fourth”, “different” or “hybrid” gender, and thus *without* themselves becoming a new binary—considering how trans* genders are still associated with not feeling comfortable in one’s own body (Allex, 2014), and inter* genders (Allex, 2014) with physical traits, such as the size of the penis and the clitoris, the structure of the vagina, the position of the testes, the presence of ovaries and a uterus, chromosomes, and the levels of the hormones testosterone and estrogen.

¹ Over the course of the Enlightenment period in the late 18th century, the idea of a natural, bipolar gender order of man and woman replaced the notion that had been predominant until then that gender was god-given, see Schade, Wagner, and Weigel (1994, pp. 1-7).

² Gudrun-Axeli Knapp referencing Kimberlé Crenshaw, who, based on analyses of legal proceedings, pointed out the importance of race and class alongside the category of gender, see Crenshaw (1991, pp. 1241-1299); Knapp (2005, pp. 68-81).

Such bipolar opposites, however situated, can be overcome using the figure of the Continuum, which allows differences *and* similarities between trans* and inter* persons as well as between so-called women and so-called men to be considered. Based on this figure, all possible extant or still unknown genders, for example, nonbinary and agender identities can be situated in an equal relation to one another. Thus, depending on the historical situation, cultural context, and individual configuration, any gender can be viewed, both individually and collectively, as 1st gender, as one's own gender. Trans* and inter* genders would *no longer* be viewed as *between* the two "starring roles" of "femininity" and "masculinity", would *not* be another pair of opposites within an extended, but still bipolar gender order, but would be considered as their own positions on a Continuum. These positions can change over the course of an individual life without these changes, these re-positionings being considered out of the norm, sick, deviant, or as an expression of playful arbitrariness. Similarly, "femininity" and "masculinity" can be viewed in their actual diversity regarding the physical and psychological dimensions, social behavior, and sexual desire. Not all so-called women feel homogeneously "female" and do not all behave according to the stereotypes still in place; the same can be said for so-called men, as well as, it is important to emphasize, for all other known or unknown gender configurations. This concept of gender(s), which transcends established and new bipolarities, is described with the term "polypolarity" in the context of the Continuum.

If the figure of the Continuum releases gender from a binary localization, then the figure of the Continuum can be said, in a more general sense, to replace the figure of the In-Between, the Third Space, which can then also be transferred to the concepts of migration, culture, space, time, borders, work, family, health, and age (Baltes-Löhr, 2018b). Gender as a Continuum comprises a thought model that is able to portray all differences and all similarities (both to be viewed as fluid concepts) between the different genders and gender groups in such a way that actually existing forms of life in, all their diversity, no longer have to become victims of restricting categorical orders and the often connected hierarchies of 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, etc. genders. The individually self-ascribed gender is considered one's own gender, and not "another" or "third" or "fourth" gender. To speak of "other", 1st, 2nd, 3rd, or 4th genders is itself an expression of the power of binary gender orders, an expression of a violence of definition, which presumes to dictate to which gender a person belongs or should belong. The thought figure of gender as a Continuum not only affords a new conceptual space for diverse and equal forms of gender, but also for changes in one's individual biography concerning one's ascription to a certain gender, as well as for different and mutable, individual or collective positions along the Continuum depending on situations, cultural contexts, and biographical phases. Furthermore, the figure of the Continuum allows the depiction and analysis of historical changes concerning ideas of gender and gender orders in all their variability, differences and similarities.

The Four Dimensions of Gender as a Continuum—Goodbye to Heteronormativity: The Physical Dimension of Gender as a Continuum

The following order was considered "natural" until the 1980s. The so-called biological gender, often referred to as "sex", was seen as inherent, unambiguous, and immutable.

However, since the 1980s insights from biological research have made it clear that the so-called biological gender cannot be determined unambiguously, as had been assumed (Henke & Rothe, 1998). Streckeisen (1991) proposed the following features of gender: chromosomes, gonads, morphology, and hormones. If biological sex were unambiguous, then every person with a vagina would have developed breasts, ovaries, a comparable

concentration of estrogen, and the same XX chromosomes as an adult. Similarly, XY chromosomes would always presume a penis, testes, and a corresponding level of testosterone. All so-called women would have to have a vagina, ovaries, a uterus, developed breasts, narrow shoulders, a wide pelvis, and no facial hair save for eyelashes and eyebrows. Following this presumed lack of ambiguity, all so-called men's morphology would include a penis, external testes, a flat chest, broad shoulders, a narrow pelvis, and facial hair in addition to eyelashes and eyebrows. However, *this is not so*. There is variability and diversity in the combination of different components that prohibits the concept of a biologically unambiguous gender (Henke & Rothe, 1998). In reality, not all women with a vagina have a broad pelvis or ovaries. Similarly, men with a penis can have ovaries and/or more or less developed breasts. Testosterone and estrogen levels might vary significantly in persons who might otherwise conform to female or male traits. Facial hair in women is an exhaustive topic that fills magazines and beauty salons, as well as the lack of facial hair in men—not to speak of pubic hair.

This allows the *first conclusion* that biological “sex” *cannot be defined as unambiguous*.

Table 1

So-Called Biological Genders, “Female”- “Male”: Presumed Unambiguous, Opposite and Clearly Differentiated

	Female	Male
Morphological	Vagina Developed breasts Narrow shoulders Wide pelvis	Penis Flat chest Broad shoulders Narrow pelvis
Chromosomal	XX	XY
Gonadal	Ovaries	Testes
Hormonal	Estrogen	Testosterone

The Psychological Dimension of Gender as a Continuum

The unambiguousness of the binary order “female-male” has also come into question on the level of feeling, the psychological dimension of gender as a Continuum, often referred to as gender identity. The psychological dimension of gender describes one's feelings about and self-awareness of gender, and thus oscillates between ascription and adoption of gender identities, and results in names or labels that might or might not entirely or partially correspond with those given by others. For example, so-called women might not feel “female” in any given situation, and so-called “men” might not feel “male” in any given situation. Additionally further ascriptions and experiences other than “female” and “male” are extant, for example, the experiences and ascriptions of inter* and trans* persons. People might associate with one gender, with no gender, might associate with the gender assigned to them at birth or not associate with that gender, might associate with several genders at the same time or depending on the situation, might be consistent with the ascriptions of feelings and experiences to a certain gender—or not, might associate with a certain gender but not the connected stereotypes.

This leads to the *second conclusion* that, regarding the psychological dimension of gender as a Continuum, an unambiguous definition along the lines of “female” and “male” *is no longer possible* either.

The Social Dimension of Gender as a Continuum

This dimension will be examined more in-depth since the question of what constitutes “female” and “male”, based on so-called physical traits at birth, is primarily connected to the social behavior and the

traits presumed to be the cause of it. Stereotypical ascriptions of behavior to so-called women and so-called men based on a presumed binarity of gender informed stereotypes were assumed to be true until the late 1980s, and are still barely questioned today. Girls/women should be emotional, passive, empathetic, gentle, natural, focused on the body, and dependent, while boys/men should be dominated by rationality, activity, toughness, strength, culture, mind, and autonomy. Other genders are, even after the revolutionary mood of the Women's Movement in the 1960s, scarcely mentioned until the 1990s. These binary ascriptions of stereotypical behaviors are situated antagonistically, in opposition to one another, and are seen as immutable. The attributes ascribed to boys/men, such as rational, active, strong, tough, focused on culture, highly developed intellectual competencies and a desire for autonomy are regarded as superior to those ascribed to women. The Women's Movement of the 1960s led to two important normative shifts in the Western European and Anglo-Saxon sphere. The normative coin is flipped; femininity and the connected stereotypes come to the forefront and increase in normative value, but still remain in a binary setting. Insights into existing differences *between* women and *between* men give space for the idea that there is no such thing as an inherent female or male character. Social behavior connected to gender is seen as the result of social processes of construction. The normative coin is flipped again. Plurality comes to the forefront. It becomes clear that people belonging to any gender group might be or become emotional, rational, passive, active, empathetic, tough, gentle, strong, connected to nature and culture, physical, intellectual, dependent, autonomous, able or unable to forge connections etc., if they are—and this is crucial—afforded space and opportunity over the course of their life to develop their skills—including those transcending established binary gender orders.

This allows the *third conclusion* that behavior and character traits connected to gender are to be viewed as *plural and diverse*.

The Sexual Dimension of Gender as a Continuum

The sexual dimension of gender as a Continuum encompasses sexuality, sexual desire, and sexual orientation. The established matrix of binary heterosexuality, which comprises solely the sexual desire between men and women, has been superseded by actually lived pluralities. Apart from heterosexual orientations and structures of desire, monosexual, asexual, bisexual, homosexual, pansexual desires become manifest. Social institutions, such as marriage and family are no longer solely based on heteronormative ideas of a lifelong, monogamous marriage between a woman and a man. Homosocial forms of life, which are based on structures of desire between those belonging to the same gender group, are increasingly accepted in society and are afforded legal equality with heteronormative marriages between women and men.³ Additionally, it *cannot* be assumed that trans*, inter*, and nonbinary persons can be ascribed to *one* specific form of sexual desire.

This leads to the *fourth conclusion* that sexual desire and sexual orientations *can no longer be described by a binary heterosexual matrix*.

³ Since October 1st 2017 the right to marriage applies to same-sex couples in Germany as well, see Mangold (2018); Kitliński & Leszkowicz (2013, pp. 195-239); <http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/frankreich-randale-nach-grossdemo-gegen-homo-ehe-a-902001.html>; and Fassin (2018, pp. 87-104).

First Summary

Table 2

Summary of “Gender as a Continuum”

Figure of the Continuum					
Gender					
Currently known and named forms and categories of gender					
Trans*	Inter*	Male	Female	Nonbinary	Agender
Dimensions					
Physical/body/material		Currently still popular terms: biological gender; sex Insights: Physical traits <i>do not</i> point towards a certain gender			
Psychological/feeling		Currently still popular term: gender identity Insights: The experienced gender moves between self-ascription and ascription by others, which might or might not correspond ; the assignment of a gender at birth might or might not corresponds with one’s individual ascription			
Social/behavior		Currently still popular terms: social gender; gender; gender-conforming behavior Insights: Girls/women and boys/men do not behave according to the stereotypes assigned to these two genders; trans*, inter*, nonbinary, and agender persons similarly do not behave according to binary stereotypes			
Sexual/desire		Currently still popular terms: sexuality; sexual desire; sexual orientation Insights: Sexual orientations and sexual practices, as well as the social connections based on them, <i>cannot</i> be described using the blueprint of a heteronormative structure of desire			
Borders and unambiguities may shift within a certain dimension(<i>horizontal, intradimensional variability</i>) between the different dimensions(<i>vertical, interdimensional variability</i>)					
Polypolarities Positions of gender might be localized <i>outside</i> of the poles of “female” and “male” Within a certain gender category one or several dimensions might be more or less relevant depending on the time, situation and/or cultural context					
Diachronical, biographical and cultural variabilities and polypolarities The complexity of gender as a Continuum might vary depending on age, historical era and cultural settings					
Gender as a Continuum is always embedded in an <i>intersectional perspective</i> . Axes of meaning include age, cultural/ethical roots, socio-economic status, socio-spatial environment, religious and political beliefs					
Gender as a Continuum serves to depict and analyze lived pluralities of gender					

Every category of gender (“female”, “male”, “trans*”, “inter*”, “nonbinary”, “agender”, as well as presently unknown and unnamed genders) are comprised of the four dimensions—physical/material, psychological/feeling, social/behavior, and sexual/desire. The borders within each of the four dimensions are fluid, which can be called the horizontal expression of the Continuum, or intradimensional variability. The relation of the four dimensions of gender to one another is also not clearly definable, which constitutes the vertical expression of the Continuum, or interdimensional variability. Depending on the situational context, a certain dimension of gender might become more or less dominant, or more or less important for a female, male, inter*, trans*, nonbinary, or agender person. An individual person might view their self-ascribed position on the gender Continuum as absolute, which does not preclude possible changes over the course of their life. Positions on the Continuum that have been assigned to a person by others but do not correspond to their self-ascription might be understood as a more or less violent attempt to define their gender unambiguously as a position on the Continuum which does not fit that individual person. Such attempts at less ambiguous, ill-fitting ascriptions result in tension for the individual who does not have any space for their self-ascription. Self-ascriptions of gender positions on the Continuum may change over the course of one’s life and be more or less ambiguous. A fluid position can also function as one’s own, unambiguous gender, and should not be

devalued as playful arbitrariness. The fluid and shifting is to be recognized as unambiguously one's own. However, changes and shifts within and between the different dimensions of the Continuum might occur depending on historical era, geographical space, cultural contexts, and biographical phases. The dimensions are *not causally related*; one's morphology, for example, *does not* determine one's sexual desire, an experienced gender identity *does not* result in certain behaviors, and sexual desire *does not* point to a certain gender identity. This is true for all known and named as well as all so-far unknown and unnamed genders.

It is important to mention once again: *the* agender person, *the* woman, *the* nonbinary person, *the* male person, *the* trans* person, and *the* inter* person does not exist. New stereotypes are to be avoided. Every person should have the right to self-determination regarding their gender, or lack thereof. In accordance with the values of intersectionality, a person is more than just their gender.

Motherhood as a Continuum

If motherhood is viewed through the lens of the Continuum, it results in the following attributions to the four dimensions: (a) physical, body, material, (b) psychological, feeling, (c) social, behavior, and (d) sexual, desire.

Table 3

Motherhood as a Continuum—The Four Dimensions

Figure of the Continuum	
Dimensions	Related to motherhood
Physical/body/material	Bodily/physical connotations
Psychological/feeling	Felt/experienced motherhoods
Social/behavior	Motherly behavior, social motherhoods
Sexual/desire	Desired, wanted, hoped-for motherhoods

The Physical Dimension of Motherhood

In general, the following motherhoods can be differentiated: So-called cis women,⁴ who become mothers after becoming pregnant and birthing a child. Insemination might take place as part of sexual intercourse, through artificial insemination, by introducing sperm to the egg cell in utero or through in-vitro fertilization, meaning the introduction of a fertilized egg cell to the uterus. The person providing the sperm might be known or unknown in any of these situations. For a long time, motherhood was seen as the pinnacle of womanhood; so-called women who do not bear children are often seen as “incomplete women”. Even though more and more women consciously decide against becoming a parent (Bundesministerium für Familie, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend [Federal Ministry for Family, Seniors, Women and Youth], 2014), this is still seen as a deviation from the assumed feminine normalcy (Trotjer, 2017). If heterosexual couples are unable to conceive a child despite wishing to do so, they will often consider a surrogate mother, as will homosexual male couples. With a so-called surrogate motherhood, the connotations between the physical, the psychological, the social and the wanted, desired dimensions of motherhood shift. Heterosexual couples use surrogate mothers to fulfil a desire for children; this procedure is legal in some states of the US, in Canada, Belgium, the UK, and Greece (Co-Eltern.de [co-parents.de], n.d.). There are two different forms of surrogate motherhood: Either the sperm of

⁴ On the term “cis woman”: a term for those who identify with the female gender assigned to them at birth; the term “cis man” is the corresponding term for those identifying as male, see Kühne (2016).

the potential father is used to fertilize the surrogate mother's own egg cells, or in-vitro fertilization is utilized to fertilize the egg cells of another female-connoted person with the sperm of the potential father and then insert the fertilized egg cells into the uterus of the surrogate mother (Trolice, Salgado, & Packan, 2020). In the latter case, there is not genetic connection and thus no biologically founded relation between the surrogate mother and the child she will bear. Surrogate mothers might be considered cis women who birthed a child, but who do not conform to the social dimension of motherhood.

However, so-called cis women who have had a child may also experience ambivalences between biological, psychological, social, and desired motherhoods. A few examples could be a feeling of rejection towards a desired and wished-for baby extending past a postpartum depression; a perceived failure to fulfil the often perfectionist aspirations of mothers, fathers, and relatives on the social dimension of motherhood; children who are rejected by their biological mother on an emotional level because they are the result of a rape and an abortion was not an option for a variety of reasons; newborn babies who are left in baby hatches or baby boxes by their biological mother, father or both parents. Baby hatches are meant to afford mothers and/or fathers the opportunity to leave their newborn child in a safe environment rather than abandon it and endanger its life if their situation is desperate (ntv-Panorama, 2019). In June 2019, Germany affords nearly 90 of these institutions. When a baby is given up for adoption, it is also possible for persons other than those who provided the sperm and egg cells to become social, psychological mothers/fathers.

Trans men with a uterus also belong to the dimension of physically connoted motherhoods. Thomas Trace Beatie, born in Honolulu, Hawai'i in 1974, identifies as a trans man. Thomas Trace Beatie has been taking hormone replacements since 1995, had top surgery to remove his breasts in 2002, and has carried three children to term in June 2008, September 2009, and July 2010, respectively (Reichel, n.d.). Trans man Trystan Reese had his first boy in July 2017 in the US (El Desconcierto, 2017). Stephan Gaeth and Wyley Simpson are parents to a child born in February 2019. Stephan Gaeth identifies as a cis man and Wyley Simpson identifies as a trans man (Newsbeezer, 2019).

Pregnancies involving an implanted uterus are also relevant in regards to physically connoted pregnancies. US-American Kayla Edwards was born without a uterus, and a pregnancy seemed impossible for her. In 2017, doctors of the University of Baylor in Dallas, Texas, successfully performed a uterus transplant on her. In October 2019, Kayla Edwards had her first child (Ducharme, 2019). In Sweden, the first child resulting from a uterus transplant was born in 2014. Until 2019, about 40 uterus transplants were performed in Sweden, the US, and Germany. In March and May of 2019, the first two babies resulting from a uterus transplant were born in Germany. In 2018, the first baby whose mother had received a uterus transplant from a deceased donor was born, which led to a debate about the ethical implications of these organ donations.

Psychological Dimension of Motherhood

The feelings one experiences around becoming and being a mother can also be very variable. For one, feelings might change over the course of the pregnancy, birth, and life as a mother. Additionally, the cultural contexts, political systems, societal values, and religious beliefs that surround the person considered a mother may influence her expression of her felt motherhood. The idea that one will "automatically" experience the "joys of motherhood" upon birth does also not accurately describe actually lived reality in all its diversity. This also applies to mothers who have looked forward to having a child and who consciously decided to pursue and engage in pregnancy and motherhood. The idea of an automatic feeling of happiness for mothers, the often

romanticized “joys of motherhood” has been described in all its ambivalences, fluctuations and also its possible absence in Libby Purves’ book *How Not To Be A Perfect Mother* (1987)—however, Purves exclusively refers to “conventional” mothers, who have had a biological child with whom they live.

As demonstrated by Thomas Trace Beatie, Trystan Reese, and Wyley Simpson, motherhood is also the purview of trans men as well as gay men who have adopted a child, or of surrogate mothers who have carried and birthed a child using the semen of one of the partners or of an anonymous donor. We also have to ask the question how trans men and women who have become mothers or fathers during the biologically female or male phase of their life now engage with, experience and feel about and continue their parenthood in their new, self-determined gender. Does a father who transitions towards a female identity stay a father, or does she become a mother to her child or children? Does a trans woman herself still feel like a father, or like a mother? How about a mother who transitions towards a male identity? How does motherhood feel for a trans man? Do these constitute new, scarcely known or named forms and expression of motherhood, fatherhood, parenthood, which might expand the Continuum of the psychological dimension of motherhood, similar to lived forms of co-parenting? Jochen (33), Marie (27), and Cora (26) are the parents of eight-month-old Lynn. Marie and Jochen are what we would traditionally understand as “biological parents”. Cora and Marie live together as a lesbian couple. Jochen, who was already the father of a six-year-old daughter, wanted more children but did not want to realize this desire within the confines of a partnership after his failed relationship with his daughter’s mother. Marie confirms she had a strong desire to have a child, but said:

“A child conceived with a sperm donor was out of the question for me”. Her child should know her father, she said. Cora sees herself as a parent as well: “At the moment I’m diaper mom and Marie is feeding mom” (Steinbach, 2015).

Social, Behavioral Dimension of Motherhood

Just as the physical, material, biological and the psychological, felt, experienced dimensions of motherhood can be varied, the social, behavioral dimension of motherhood also exhibits a broad spectrum of variance and is, as Isabella Heidinger (2008) clearly expressed, “not tied to gender” (p. 285). Heidinger (2008) considered a person a mother who “is able and willing to reliably accompany a child in the sense of motherly qualities, and who assumes this responsibility”, but only “of their own free will” (p. 285). However, one might wonder if this so-called “motherly quality” might not be called, perhaps more accurately, a parental quality. All in all we can say that social, behavioral motherhood is not tied to one gender, just as it is not tied to whether or not a person has physically birthed a child.

Excursion: The Caucasian Chalk Circle, Bertold Brecht 1944/1945

Literary engagement with the social dimension of motherhood and the possibilities of comparing and contrasting this engagement can be exemplified using Brecht’s 1944/1945 play “The Caucasian Chalk Circle” (Lektürehilfe.de [readinghelp.de], n.d.). This excursion will focus on the changing constellations and concepts of motherhood, from the 14th century medieval fairy tale play by Chinese playwright Li-Hsing-tao (Lektürehilfe.de [readinghelp.de], n.d.), Klabund’s version from 1925, Brecht’s fragments of the “Chalk Circle of Odensee” (1938/1939) and the novella “The Chalk Circle of Augsburg” (1940), to Brecht’s version conceived in exile in Santa Monica over the years of 1944/1945 and first performed in 1948 in Minnesota. A revised version of “The Caucasian Chalk Circle” was first performed on October 7th 1954, the fifth anniversary

of the foundation of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), at the Berlin Ensemble in East Berlin, and on April 28th 1955 in Frankfurt/Main in the Federal Republic of Germany.

From Chalk Line to Chalk Circle

In the 14th century, Chinese playwright Li-Hsing-tao (1259-1338) writes a play with the original title “Hoei-lan-ki”, which can be translated as “The Chalk Barrier” or “The Chalk Line”. The play is about Hai-tang, a former prostitute and a very poor, but exceedingly good person, who bears a son as the concubine of the affluent royal advisor Ma. To secure her husband’s inheritance, the jealous wife kills her husband, claims Hai-tang’s son as her child, and accuses Hai-tang, the child’s biological mother, of her husband’s murder. A judge, in a trial with bribed witnesses, declares the wife the biological mother of Hai-tang’s son and thus the recipient of the dead man’s inheritance. In revisionary proceedings in front of Peking’s High Court, a second judge orders a “test” to determine the real mother. Both women try to pull the child to their side over a line drawn in chalk, and the one who succeeds is to be the “real” mother. Hai-tang lets go of her son twice, since she cannot and will not cause him any pain. The judge summarily recognizes her as the biological mother and awards her both the child and the inheritance connected to him (Lektürehilfe.de [readinghelp.de], n.d.). The advisor’s wife is punished for her deceit. Li-Hsing-tao focuses mainly on a critique of the Chinese legal system in his text, which nonetheless in the end helps the biological mother to retain her rights to her child.

Alfred Henschke, known as Klabund (1890-1928), develops the Chinese text he knew from translations (Julien, 1832) into a stage play in five acts titled “The Chalk Circle”. Its first performance at the city theater in Meissen, Germany, on January 2nd 1925 was so successful that around 40 other theaters made their interest in the play known. At its core, Klabund’s play reiterates the message of the Chinese original, but adds a love story between the biological mother Hai-tang, also a former prostitute in this version, and the Chinese emperor Pao, who had fallen in love with Hai-tang as a prince. In Klabund’s version, Hai-tang is found guilty of her husband’s murder and the wife receives both the child and the inheritance, until Pao, in his role as emperor, orders all legal proceedings to be revised, including Hai-tang’s case. The chalk line becomes a chalk circle in Klabund’s version, while the results and the final judgement remain the same. In this version, however, it turns out that Emperor Pao is the biological father of the child. He confesses “that he visited her [Hai-tang] at night in the brothel and made love to her. Hai-tang had always believed that night had only been a dream”.⁵ What in 2020 sounds like rape and the possible drugging of a partner to keep them insensate resolves in a fairy-tale fashion in Klabund’s play: the biological father, the biological mother and their son end up living happily together as the emperor’s family, in prosperity and peace. One almost wants to say: and they lived happily ever after. One thing to note here is that the biological mother does not know who her son’s biological father is.

When examining the question of the social dimension of motherhood as a Continuum, it is important to note that both texts, the medieval version by Chinese author Li-Hsing-tao, and the early 20th century German version by Klabund, are very similar to Solomon’s judgement in the Bible, where honesty and justice are measured in whether or not a biological mother can cause her child pain. The King James translation of the Biblical text from the first Book of Kings in the *Old Testament* (1 Kings 3, 16-28) (*King James Bible*, n.d.) goes thusly:

Then came there two women, that were harlots, unto the king, and stood before him. And the one woman said, O my lord, I and this woman dwell in one house; and I was delivered of a child with her in the house. And it came to pass the

⁵ See [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Der_Kreidekreis_\(Klabund\)](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Der_Kreidekreis_(Klabund)), last accessed on March 15th 2021.

third day after that I was delivered, that this woman was delivered also: and we were together; there was no stranger with us in the house, save we two in the house. And this woman's child died in the night; because she overlaid it. And she arose at midnight, and took my son from beside me, while thine handmaid slept, and laid it in her bosom, and laid her dead child in my bosom. And when I rose in the morning to give my child suck, behold, it was dead: but when I had considered it in the morning, behold, it was not my son, which I did bear. And the other woman said, Nay; but the living is my son, and the dead is thy son. And this said, No; but the dead is thy son, and the living is my son. Thus they spake before the king. Then said the king, The one saith, This is my son that liveth, and thy son is the dead: and the other saith, Nay; but thy son is the dead, and my son is the living. And the king said, Bring me a sword. And they brought a sword before the king. And the king said, Divide the living child in two, and give half to the one, and half to the other. Then spake the woman whose the living child was unto the king, for her bowels yearned upon her son, and she said, O my lord, give her the living child, and in no wise slay it. But the other said, Let it be neither mine nor thine, but divide it. Then the king answered and said, Give her the living child, and in no wise slay it: she is the mother thereof. And all Israel heard of the judgment which the king had judged; and they feared the king: for they saw that the wisdom of God was in him, to do judgment.

This text once again shows how the biological and social dimensions of motherhood intermingle. However, it is important to note that in the case of the Judgement of Solomon one mother, accidentally or not, kills her child and attempts to swap it for another woman's biological child, who asks the king to resolve the deceit. Just as in the previous texts, the biological mother in the *Old Testament* does not want to cause her child harm and would rather leave it to the deceitful woman. This course of events is prevented by the king's judgement, interpreted in the text as wise and clever.

In his 1944/1945 text "The Caucasian Chalk Circle", Bertold Brecht references the Chinese original as well as Klabund's version from 1925 and the biblical Judgement of Solomon. Brecht first engaged with the topic of Klabund's chalk circle test in an interlude written for his 1927 play "Man Equals Man" titled "The Elephant Calf". Fragments about "The Chalk Circle of Odensee" followed in his exile in Denmark in 1938/1939, in which the central role is played by a maid who cares for a child who is not her own. During his exile in Sweden, Brecht rewrites the text in 1940 and localizes it in his home city of Augsburg during the Thirty-Year-War, which also serves as a setting for the 1939 play "Mother Courage and Her Children". The character conceptions and plot in "The Chalk Circle of Augsburg" already tend towards those of "The Caucasian Chalk Circle". In "The Chalk Circle of Augsburg", a widowed mother rejects her biological child; because of its Protestant father, she sees it as a potential danger to herself in the increasingly Catholic Augsburg. Maid Anna takes the child in and builds a legal framework for the child's education and her social motherhood in the form of a fictitious marriage. After the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, and thus the end of the religious war between Catholics and Protestants, the biological mother demands her son be returned to her. Maid Anna takes the matter to court, where the judge Dollinger orders a chalk circle test. Anna cannot harm her son, in contrast to the biological mother, who pulls at the child until it is on her side of the circle. In his judgement, Dollinger—contrary to the earlier texts—awards the child to Anna, the social mother. Here, Brecht clearly breaks the connection between biological and social motherhood. It is the social dimension of motherhood that determines the actions of the non-biological mother to not harm her child. The behavior of the social mother, the maid Anna, and the biological mother in the conflict around proving "real" motherhood shows that the biological dimension of motherhood as a Continuum does not equal the social dimension of motherhood as a Continuum. Presumed causal connections between biological, physical motherhood and social motherhood diverge.

In earlier texts, the biological mothers were unable to cause their children pain and were thus recognized as the "real mothers". Brecht's text negates the physicality, the biological dimension of motherhood, as the basis of a mother who cares for the happiness and safety of her child.

The same can be said for the play “The Caucasian Chalk Circle”. The main plot takes place in Georgia. Weber places the temporal frame at the end of the 18th/beginning of the 19th century (Weber, 1978). Brecht has worked many references to his own prior works, the Chinese text by Li-Hsing-tao, Klabund’s work with the text and the passage from the *Old Testament* into his Caucasian Chalk Circle, but his message in regards to the connotation between biological and social motherhood, which is of principal interest here, stays the same as in “The Chalk Circle of Augsburg”. The maid Grusche rescues a widowed governor’s wife’s son, abandoned by his mother as a result of emotionless calculations, and later demanded back as a result of those same calculations. Grusche raises the boy and agrees to a marriage hoping that her husband will die soon. However, he surprisingly recovers and Grusche becomes trapped in an unwanted marriage that makes her look unfaithful to her original fiancé, the soldier Simon, who she believed was dead. Nonetheless Simon pretends to be the biological father of Grusche’s son Michel and the story has a happy end, as the judge who is to decide on the biological mother’s claims to the child lets justice rule (Inhaltsangabe.de [summary.de], n.d.). As in “The Chalk Circle of Augsburg”, the biological mother successfully pulls the child across the line of the chalk circle twice, and twice the maid Grusche lets her son go, and is recognized as the “true” mother precisely because of those actions. Brecht thus makes clear that “true”, “actual” motherhood does not necessitate a biological relation, meaning it does not equal the biological, physical dimension of motherhood.

He breaks with this presumed connection by only allowing social criteria to define motherhood: a woman who puts her child’s wellbeing over her own interests, who takes care of the child over a long period of time and who plays a principal role in its education can be called a mother. (Inhaltsangabe.de [summary.de], n.d.)

Brecht’s Judge Azdak is “a figure who dismisses the established laws that protect family and blood. Thus, the author questions established laws and develops his own definition of right” (Inhaltsangabe.de [summary.de], n.d.). In this sense, Brecht harkens back to a central element of the 14th century Chinese text, which, as mentioned earlier, examines the question of justice in the Chinese judicial system: in contrast to Brecht’s text, the question of motherhood is resolved in the sense that the biological mother is seen as the “good”, the “real”, and the “true” mother. Brecht places the social dimension of motherhood before the biological and thus, among others, reverses the perspective on the rights to the child: “The mothers do not have rights to their children, but the children have the right to the best possible mother”, which, as Brecht shows, is not always the biological mother. Brecht illustrates that biological mothers do not inherently care or think about what is best for the child. Their behavior towards and love for the child counts for more than the biological relation, and those qualities might be embodied better by the social mother. In this sense, Brecht also questions mothers’ claims to *their* children. Here we can glimpse a hint of the question why motherhoods might be wanted, wished-for and pursued.

This excursion has made clear, that biology and relation is no guarantee for a positive social motherhood ensuring the wellbeing of the child. In this sense, the social reality that in the 21st century, a lesbian, non-biological mother, even if she is married to the biological mother, still has to adopt her own child to legally be considered their mother. The equalizing right to be considered the parent of one’s own child has been demanded by gay and lesbian organizations as a milestone on the path to realizing parenthood for everyone (Klein, 2020).⁶

⁶ In early July 2020, a bill assessed to be homophobic by gay and lesbian organizations was vetoed in the German Federal Council.

Dimension of Desired, Wanted and Pursued Motherhood

For this dimension as well, many and varied reasons can be imagined as to why a person, be they female, male, trans*, inter*, nonbinary or agender, would want to be a mother. Philippa Schindler analyzed the image of mothers on the internet in 2018: “Motherhood on the Web. A critical discourse analysis of the image of the mother on mommy blogs” (Schindler, 2018). Her analysis has made clear that

a fundamental rethinking of motherhood is in order. We have to examine the variety of experiences and practices concerning motherhood, which result from different resources and categories of differences such as age, social environment, sexuality and race. It would be desirable to focus more on scientific examination of motherhood, especially considering the area of conflict in which mothers are often located. The goal must be to realize motherhood pluralistically and, when it comes to parenthood, as an act of equal participation in the family sphere. (Schindler, 2018, p. 39)

Here motherhood, or rather parenthood as a Continuum can contribute to the discussion.

The dimension of desire is often connected to sexual orientation; at this point, it is important to note that motherhood has not causal relation to one’s sexual orientation. Phrased differently: the desire to become a mother is, thanks to medical and technological progress, no longer tied to the prerequisite of a (cis) woman participating in heterosexual intercourse to conceive and bear a child, is no longer tied to the psychological gender “female”, and no longer tied to stereotypically female, biomorphological traits. The pursuit, the desire for motherhood can be expanded to the pursuit for parenthood, which must be open to all persons regardless of the physical, psychological, and social dimension of gender, in order to ensure the wellbeing of the children entrusted to them. An example for this is Melanie and Vanessa Roy. They live together as a lesbian couple and have two children: Jax, born to Vanessa in January 2014, and Ero, born to Melanie in January 2015. Both women say that becoming a mother has nothing to do with one’s sexual orientation (Rtl.de, 2015).

Conclusion: Motherhood for All as a New Parenthood?

Considering the diversity of lived experiences, the need for a new definition of “motherhood” has become apparent. The same can be said for the different practices, feelings, desires around the topic of “motherhood”, as well as for the resources afforded to persons who are mothers. What can they access, what do they want and have to access? What societal measures are necessary to meet these diverse requirements, not lastly to afford everyone the possibility of becoming and being a mother, without the discrimination still endured by same-sex parents, but also by trans men and women? What influence do age, cultural environment and ethnic heritage have on the motherhood of persons who want to become mothers—or already are? What is needed are systematic scientific analyses on images of motherhood and the connected diverse lived realities in order to allow a new and productive theoretical and societal idea of motherhood that goes beyond the still prevalent traditions surrounding it. In this vein, the mothers who experience motherhood without living as biologically connoted women should be recognized, as well as trans men who have birthed children and thus give motherhood a new facet, trans women who became fathers and create a new “parenthood” after their transition, and same-sex parents and LGBT+ families, regardless of what concrete social form of life they might lead.

A connection between the figure of “gender as a Continuum” and the figure of “motherhood as a Continuum” might be a chance to further develop parenthood as a replacement of binary ideas of motherhood. A new parenthood could be powerful enough to dismantle still prevalent binarities not only concerning gender but also concerning motherhood, and to thus create room for diversity. Diverse and new social realities of life,

together with new conceptions of parenthood, could contribute not only to the wellbeing of children, who will not be pushed into stiff and ritualized bottlenecks, but also to the wellbeing of all adults who want to responsibly guide children on their way into and through life in the sense of a new parenthood.

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