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Gender-queer Identity and Resistance to Gender Binary in Andrea Gibson's Poetry

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Abstract

The question of gender, specifically gender identity, is prominent in today's society. It is highly debated and through the development of queer theory it is gaining more academic recognition. However, there is a gap regarding representation of the gender-queer identity of one contemporary poet, Andrea Gibson. Gibson provides a much needed perspective and voice in society and scholarly debates. This is why this essay uses queer theory along with Kate Bornstein and Judith Butler to examine three poems by Gibson, "Swing-Set," "The Jewelry Store" and "A Genderful Pep-Talk for my Younger Self". The essay analyses the ways Gibson, through poetry, formulates a gender-queer identity and thus questions the generic gender binary system.

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1. Introduction

This essay will highlight and explore the ways in which the contemporary poet Andrea Gibson uses their¹ poetry in order to question the socially determined and normative expectations of the binary genders, male and female. By investigating Gibson's poetic treatment of gender identity, the essay will show how Gibson challenges the social expectations of gender, and manages to use performativity² in order to formulate a gender-queer³ identity outside the binary understandings of gender. Gibson plays a unique and revolutionary role in the poetry world, providing a voice for the people that do not conform to heteronormative models of gender identity. Gibson also provides a much-needed voice in the academic world for the discussion of gender-queer realities. There is an urgency to expand the canon of western literature, and to include more diverse voices, such as Gibson's, which provide a more fair and truthful representation of how our world is. This is why Gibson is an important voice to be heard and elevated in debates about gender and poetry, which is one of the aims of this essay.

Andrea Gibson, an American, gender-queer poet under the activist banner, constantly makes visible and disputes the normative aspects of gender identity in the specific socio-cultural context in which they are writing (*Pansy* 119). Gibson started their carrier in poetry by joining the self-proclaimed, radical and political performance art group Vox Feminista (*Pole Dancing* 99). In an interview in *Interview Magazine* by comedian Tig Notaro, Gibson says that even though the group is inactive today, they still live by their motto: "comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable" ("The Pioneering Poet"). When considered in relation to the subject of gender identity and Gibson's poetry the motto indicates that Gibson uses their poetry to comfort those who do not conform to established notions of gender that are perceived as innate or natural in society. Furthermore, Gibson also seeks to make the people, who do not question the seemingly innate notions of gender, start questioning them, in order to "disturb the comfortable" ("The Pioneering Poet"). Thus, in Gibson's case, their poetry functions both as educational, and as a sanctuary for the people

¹ The singular they/their is a commonly used gender-neutral pronoun, which Gibson also uses. Throughout the essay, I will use this gender-neutral pronoun while referring to Gibson.

² Performativity as I use it here refers to Judith Butler's theory that gender is a performance rather than an essence. The meaning of the concept will be explained in more detail further in the essay.

³ A person seeing themselves as being outside the gender binary.

with non-heteronormative gender who experience similar realities to Gibson's.

In order to illuminate the main interpretive points of this essay, it is important to clarify, briefly, the terms, gender identity, normative gender identity, and performativity in relation to Gibson's poetry. Gender identity is an individual understanding of what gender one identifies with (Bornstein 24). In other words, gender identity is determined by what one feels one's gender is, despite what one has been assigned at birth (24). The normative understanding of gender identity in society, however, is reached by telling people that their genitals are the only factor that determines their gender. This understanding is also called "gender assignment," which is first done by doctors when one is born (22).

Gibson's poetry frequently opposes both the process of "gender assignment" and the social expectations regarding gender by complicating the binary categorizations such as male/female, boy/girl/, and man/woman. Gibson's poem "Swing-Set" presents a strong case to illustrate this point, which will be developed further in this essay. In "Swing-Set," the normative expectations of gender are challenged by letting the children in the poem theorize the subject of how one determines one's gender. In the poem, one child says: "even though you've got / hairs that grow from your legs / and the hairs on your head grow short and pokey / and you smell really bad like my dad / that you're a girl" (Gibson, "Swing-Set" 19-23). This quote demonstrates normative male attributes like hairy legs, short haircuts and perhaps even not smelling good. However, the poem uses these gendered attributes to illustrate how one can challenge them by showing that these attributes do not necessarily belong to a person who has been assigned male at birth, but can be adopted by anyone. In doing so, the poem not only complicates the categorizations of man and woman, but also shows that gender is more a personal performance of attributes rather than something fixed and innate to everyone.

This particular idea of personal performance is crucial for understanding how Gibson explores gender identity. As Judith Butler explains, the idea of performativity, in the context of gender means that gender is something that we perform through different gendered attributes, rather than something we have (xv). What Gibson does in their poetry is that they take this idea of performativity of gender and use it to formulate their own gender-queer identity. Gibson also uses performativity on the level of poetic language, making specific formal choices such as the use of consonance, enjambments, and poetic pun, in a way that enhances the theme of gender identity that is central to their poetry.

As we shall see, the poetic mechanisms and strategies Gibson uses in "Swing-Set" in order to challenge gender norms, are frequent throughout their work. By challenging the normative understandings of gender, Gibson formulates a gender-queer identity that is

positioned in a critical relation to a normative power structure, that is, the binary gender system. When something is considered a norm, the people who conform to it gain more power than the people who do not. The power structure places the categories of man and woman as the only options when it comes to gender identity, which is a culturally and socially created understanding of gender—one that is formulated solely through biological requirements (Wiseman and Davidson 529).

Gibson's poetry shows that there are different ways of expressing gender. By challenging the normative expectations our culture places on men and women, Gibson's poetry illuminates the fact that gender identity is not static but can be changed. As a result, the generic understanding of gender is challenged and a new form of identity emerges.

The way Gibson questions gender is aligned with the way queer theory questions it. In queer theory as in Gibson's poetry gender is seen as something beyond biology. This is why, in this essay, queer theory, and more specifically, the theories of Kate Bornstein and Judith Butler, will be used when analyzing Gibson's poetry. The poems analyzed in this essay are selected from Gibson's three poetry collections *Pole Dancing to Gospel Hymns* (2008), *The Madness Vase* (2011) and *Pansy* (2015). Furthermore, the specific poems that will be analyzed are the ones where the subject of gender identity is treated explicitly, they are: "Swing-Set" from *Pole Dancing to Gospel Hymns* (2008), "The Jewelry Store," from *The Madness Vase* (2011), and "A Genderful Pep-Talk for my Younger Self," from *Pansy* (2015).

It is important to point out that this essay acknowledges the limitations of academia due it being a patriarchal institution in its exploration of Gibson's perspective on gender and identity. Therefore while writing this essay there is an understanding regarding the gender-queer struggle being a continuous struggle within the walls of the university. By introducing Gibson in academic and critical debates, one can take a further step in questioning the academic patriarchal institutions and therefore create debates not only within society as a whole, but also at university more specifically.

2. Literature Review

This section provides an understanding of how Andrea Gibson's poetry has been received and interpreted. However, it will become clear that Gibson has received close to no academic recognition in scholarly discussions. There are no extensive analyses in academic texts where Gibson's poetry is discussed in detail. Of all the texts that can be accessed through various

scholarly databases, only one deals with Gibson's work to a significant extent. In his essay, "Good morning, Colossus," Matthew A. Zellmer analyses Gibson's poem "Tadpole," and stresses the way in which Gibson empowers the reader and creates a sense of solidarity with their audience (8).⁴ Zellmer argues that in doing so Gibson aims to achieve "a democratic ideal" through their poems (8). Additionally, he focuses on the imagery of God and religion in that specific poem. Zellmer interprets the imagery of God in the poem as a form of provocation, claiming that Gibson tries to engage the reader by including important but controversial topics (8). Yet, Zellmer never mentions or discusses gender identity in connection to Gibson despite the centrality of this issue to the poet's work.

Amanda Kempfues briefly mentions Gibson's poem "Andrew" in her undergraduate honors thesis "Word Warriors: Investigating the Poetic Form Through a Case Study of Feminist Spoken Word Poetry" and discusses Gibson's poetic construction of self (45-46). Like Zellmer, Kempfues fails to address the question of gender in relation to Gibson's poetry. Similarly, Rachel Beth Rozman quotes Gibson in her essay "The evolved radical feminism of spoken word: Alix Olson, CC Carter, and Suheir Hammad" (20). Still, the quote is not from any of Gibson's poems but from a chapter Gibson wrote in a book entitled *Word Warriors: 35 Women Leaders in the Spoken Word Revolution* (20). Rozman uses the quote to emphasize the fact that the poetry slam world is male dominated, and criticizes this by arguing that women should take up more space in that world (20). However, Rozman only focuses on what Gibson says about the role of women, ignoring the fact that Gibson's text develops into a reflection on their gender-queer identity.

It is striking that even though Gibson has been invited to perform at various universities both in America and Europe, very little has been written on their poetry. The lack of critical attention to Gibson's poetry indicates that there is an academic gap that has to be filled. However, during a questions and answers-session with their fans on the web forum reddit under the title "I am Andrea Gibson, a queer touring poet with extreme stage fright. AMA!", a few people wrote that they actually did study Gibson's poetry during several gender and literature classes at their universities. This information shows that there is an increased interest in Gibson's poetry within academic spheres, since the academic circles not only invite Gibson to perform but also create opportunities for students to study the poems.

Even though Gibson's poetry has not been extensively represented in academia, there is a great quantity of independent reviews and interviews on different Internet based

⁴ The essay is part of Zellmer's Master's thesis.

blogs, forums, newspapers and magazines.⁵ These are highly relevant and important sources to use, in order to trace the reception of Gibson's poetry. Among these circles, the reception of Gibson's poetry has mainly been positive, often illuminating the activist traits and messages in the poet's work. The student-run university newspaper at Lawrence University, *The Lawrentian*, for example, reviews Gibson's performance at the university and underlines the positive reaction of the audience to Gibson's exploration of important issues such as bullying, sexuality and gender.

The website *Autostraddle* in an interview titled "Poet and activist, Andrea Gibson: The Autostraddle interview." on the other hand, introduces Gibson by stressing the significance of the poet not only for the queer community, but also for people outside it. The introduction also emphasizes Gibson's role in the queer community by drawing attention to how the poet voices issues such as gender and sexuality that are important to that particular community. Similarly, in a review of *The Madness Vase* published on the website *Insatiable Booksluts*, the author, Kelsey, argues that the book generates a feeling of being "buffered, supported, comforted," claiming that Gibson's poetry functions as a voice for the people they are writing about, for instance, the LGBTQ⁶ community. The review points out that Gibson's way of writing poetry is straightforward and with a distinct purpose. The review includes a discussion of the poems "The Jewelry Store" and "Andrew," in order to provide support for the argument that LGBTQ issues are prominent in Gibson's poetry.

Anthony Moll's review of *Pansy*, on the web publication *Gay Life*, begins by claiming that slam poetry, a form of poetry that Gibson uses, holds a lower status compared to other forms of poetry when it comes to prestige and recognition among academic spheres. Moll continues his discussion regarding the status of slam poetry and claims that Gibson has taken the role of the slam poet, changing it from someone that only performs at cafés into a "near-celebrity" especially on the Internet. According to Moll, it is on the Internet that Gibson's poetry spreads, and continues to reach people in different places both physically and psychologically. Furthermore, while commenting on *Pansy* in particular, Moll writes that the poems present "post-Butlerian notions of gender," even though he does not provide a sufficient explanation for this argument. Still, this is an interesting observation that is relevant

⁵ The writers of the reviews and interviews constantly use the wrong pronoun (she/her) when referring to Gibson, which can be either due to the fact that most of the reviews were written before Gibson stated that they chose to use the pronoun they/them

⁶ LGBTQ (abbreviation): Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (RFSL Glossary)

for my claims since Moll's comment shows that the question of gender is something that people are picking up on, and find important to Gibson's poetry.

Many of the reviews seem to agree upon, and acknowledge, the activism and the desire for social justice that are visible in Gibson's poetry. Another aspect the reviews have in common is that they recognize the great influence that Gibson has on the queer community, and the fact that they play an important role by voicing subjects that are important to the queer community, such as gender identity. These reviews are crucial in the sense that they demonstrate the audience reception and impact of Gibson's poetry among different circles of readership. Furthermore, as I have mentioned earlier, there is a lack of scholarly attention to Gibson's work, which points to a gap in literary discussions of contemporary poetry, gender, and identity. Thus, one of the purposes of this essay is to start addressing and filling this gap by exploring Gibson's work and the question of gender, which is one of the most pronounced topics in their poetry.

3. Theoretical Framework – Queer Theory, Bornstein and Butler

There are many texts theorizing gender, however, the texts this essay will benefit from are those that theorize gender identity specifically, and those written from the perspective of queer theory. The very basis of this theory is found in its resistance preconceived to definitions of all kinds that relate to gender. Queer theory claims that providing strict definitions would risk normalizing the notion of "queer" and thereby contradict its original purpose, which is to destroy what mainstream society finds to be normal (Jagose 1). This mentality of resistance can be found in the majority of Gibson's poetry dealing with gender identity. There is a steady resistance towards definitions deriving from the generic gender binary system, and a refusal to see gender as something that can be defined by a fixed and normative power structure. Rather, in both Gibson's poetry and queer theory, gender is presented as something individual and changeable, just like everything else that society has created.

Queer theory shares with gay and lesbian theory an interest in questioning the normative and fixed definitions of identity. What differentiates queer theory from lesbian and gay theory is the fact that in queer theory, the critical focus is not only on definitions of sexuality and sexual difference that derive from the norm, but also on gender and the norms concerning gender (Jagose 3). Like queer theory, Gibson's poetry both deals with sexuality and also illustrates the complexities and problems that occur when sexuality and gender

identity both function according to the norm. As Jagose argues, queer theory claims that there is no steady relationship between the physical aspects of gender, such as chromosomes and/or body, gender identity, and sexual desire (3). Instead, queer theory argues that there are numerous ways of gender identification, outside what is considered generic by the normative society (3), by which I mean the cis-gendered⁷, heterosexual social order. The perspective of queer theory seeks to liberate people from the limiting and binary systems of exclusively “homo/hetero and feminine/masculine” identities (59). Gender identity is something far more complex than being placed into such binaries, and Gibson acknowledges this very complexity in their poetry. Gibson’s poetry often places the reader into situations where a gender-queer individual is faced with the outside world trying to enforce the idea of gender identity that is based on a choice between two alternatives: woman/man, girl/boy, etc. Both queer theory and Gibson’s poetry resist static definitions that force individuals to be one of the two genders that are set as innate by culture.

One of the fundamental texts that theorizes the notion of gender identity from the perspective of queer theory is Kate Bornstein’s book *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women and the Rest of Us*. Bornstein discusses, from a critical perspective, classifications of gender that are prescribed or assigned in our society, which will be highly useful when analyzing Gibson’s poetry. This is due to the fact that Gibson’s poetry deals with such prescribed categories of gender from a perspective similar to Bornstein’s, in order to express a gender-queer identity that is outside of the generic binary gender system. Moreover, the relevance of Bornstein’s theory lies in its distinct ways of clarifying how gender functions within our society, a clarification that can be found in Gibson’s poetry as well. Bornstein writes: “*Gender means class. By calling gender a system of classification, we can dismantle the system and examine its components*” (22). By this quote she exposes the existence of multiple layers of gender and the importance of displaying those layers.

Bornstein mentions several classifications of gender, one of which is “gender assignment” that is determined by doctors and is based on biological features—either one has a penis, and therefore is a boy, or one does not have a penis, and therefore is a girl (22). Another type of classification Bornstein describes is “gender identity” which is determined by what gender one feels one identifies with (24). Bornstein argues that gender identity expresses a sense of belonging: either you feel like you belong to females, males or both/neither (24). “Gender roles” is another way of classifying gender, which is driven by the question of

⁷ When a person’s gender identity corresponds to their assigned gender. (RFSL Glossary)

“How do I need to function so that society perceives me as belonging or not belonging to a specific gender?” (26). This means that there are specific ways of classifying gender that are assigned by society, and they are often based on a binary system that sees individuals as belonging to either one gender or the other. These socially assigned ways of classifying gender might depend on almost anything, and Bornstein defines these as “positions and actions specific to a given gender as defined by a culture.” (26)

Furthermore, Bornstein discusses the notion of “gender attribution,” which is done unconsciously, and is based on several aspects that guide us to determine what gender a person has (26). She argues that “gender attribution,” just like “gender assignment,” is not only phallogentric,⁸ but also an extremely binary way of viewing gender because it only provides two possible alternatives of being: woman or man (26). All these aspects of gender and classification that Bornstein discusses are important and extremely relevant for an analysis of Gibson’s poetry and gender. The poetry of Gibson resists social classifications of gender by displaying how “gender identity” not always corresponds with the binary system of “gender assignment.” It also shows how the social assignment of gender is used as a basis for “gender attribution” when people try to determine other people’s gender.

There are different “cues” that assist us when trying to determine another person’s gender. What is important to note here is that these cues are set by culture and can therefore be changed by the very same culture. The cues which are relevant when analyzing Gibson’s poetry are “physical cues”—meaning that there are bodily features that are stereotypically connected to a certain gender, which Gibson’s poetry explores and resists (Bornstein 26). To exemplify, a beard is associated more with being a male than being a female, and therefore one is more likely to perceive a person with a beard as a male rather than a female. The people that the gender-queer individuals encounter in Gibson’s poems use “gender assignment,” “gender attribution,” and “physical cues” in order to police the gender-queer individual into being either a woman or a man. These cues are also used to contrast the two genders, woman and man, and to show that it is possible to be in between or beyond these two genders. In other words, Gibson formulates their identity in relation and resistance to the binary genders that are endorsed by society.

Bornstein recognizes that gender is made up of a set of rules that enforce the gender binary and the belief that biology is the only thing that determines one’s gender. However, Bornstein also acknowledges that knowing these rules makes it easier to break

⁸ Refers to the assumption that a person is male until the contrary is proven.

them. In her book, she explains how the illusion of gender as something static and essential can be bent. She discusses the notion of gender ambiguity or fluidity as methods of breaking the normative idea of gender (Bornstein 51-52). Ambiguity is described as a form of refusal to follow the norms; fluidity on the other hand is described as a “refusal to remain one gender or another” (52). Bornstein explains: “Gender fluidity is the ability to freely and knowingly become one or many of a limitless number of genders, for any length of time, at any rate of change. Gender fluidity recognizes no borders or rules of gender” (52). This quote illustrates how gender is neither static nor innate; it is instead something that holds a certain kind of “fluidity”. The notion of being without “borders or rules” (52) is the essence of gender-queerness and, it is, as we shall see, also the essence of Gibson’s poetry dealing with gender identity.

Furthermore, Bornstein also illustrates how difficult it can be for people that are not cis-gendered to experience situations where the choices regarding gender are limited to the binary identities of woman and man (84), a difficulty that is also expressed in Gibson’s poetry. Bornstein argues: “The choice between two of something is not a choice at all, but rather the opportunity to subscribe to the value system which holds the two presented choices as mutually exclusive alternatives. Once we choose one or the other, we’ve brought into the system that perpetuates the binary.” (101) This quote illustrates the limitations involved in not being allowed to make choices that are outside the gender binary, which Gibson also describes in their poetry. Bornstein also mentions how one is allowed to identify with a gender only when one has “a pure identity” that excludes ambiguities (105), and how being ambiguous regarding gender can result in being assaulted (104).

However, as Bornstein further claims, “There are probably as many types of gender (gender systems) as could be imagined” that do not fit into the categories of woman and man (30). This means that even though cues and classifications exist, there can be as many different gender identities as there are people in the world. By refusing the idea that gender is defined through “physical cues” or biological features,⁹ Gibson’s poetry demonstrates how gender identity is in fact something separate that is not dependent on established ways of classifying and identifying gender. Their poetry suggests that every individual understanding of one’s identity is highly valid. As in Bornstein’s theory, in Gibson’s poetry, gender identity is not bound to or limited by the binary categories of gender: woman/man. Instead, questioning these binary categories themselves helps constituting

⁹ Genitals.

alternative forms of gender identity. Like Bornstein, Gibson points to alternative forms of gender identity that are characterized by ambiguity and fluidity, which they use as a strategy for challenging the normative and binary classifications of gender. Thus, Bornstein's theories surrounding the issue of gender provide a useful framework for approaching Gibson's poetry.

There are many instances where Gibson's poetry illustrates how gender functions in society. In order to widen our understanding of these instances in the poems, the present essay also makes use of Judith Butler's theories of gender and performativity for analyzing Gibson's poetry. Butler's theories acknowledge that gender in society is often "taken for granted [and] at the same time that it [is] violently policed" (xx). With this in mind Butler understands that there is a certain discourse that governs what gender is and how it should be (10). Consequently, she questions the normative understandings of the binary genders and seeks to reformulate a perspective that challenges society's view on gender.

Furthermore, Butler questions the binary structure of gender by arguing that gender is not necessarily determined by sex. She writes: "even if the sexes appear to be unproblematically binary ... there is no reason to assume that genders ought also to remain as two" (Butler 9). It is when one dares to separate the two—gender and sex—that one finds gender to be something less constrained and regulated by biology (9). In fact, Butler explains that the body is only a canvas onto which "cultural meaning" gets projected (12). Butler claims that when sex and gender are considered separately, one can easily define a person with a penis or a masculine person as a woman and vice versa (9), or one can see gender as something that lies between or beyond binary categories. This questioning of the binary categories of gender is a prominent feature of Gibson's poetry. Gibson separates sex from gender identity and can therefore present an understanding of gender that is not defined by sex. When it comes to Gibson and the gender-queer identity, Butler's theory becomes crucial when explaining how the gender-queer individual resists these gender binaries to create a new or alternative form of identity.

Furthermore, Butler writes about the denaturalization of gender as a necessary step not only to resist gender binaries but also to affirm alternative forms of gender identity:

Only from a self-consciously denaturalization position can we see how the appearance of naturalness is itself constituted. The presuppositions that we make about sexed bodies, about them being one or the other, about the meanings that are said to inhere in them or to follow from being sexed in such a way are suddenly and significantly upset by those examples that fail to

comply with the categories that naturalize and stabilize that field of bodies for us within the terms of cultural conventions. Hence, the strange, the incoherent, that which falls ‘outside’, gives us a way of understanding the taken-for-granted world of sexual categorization as a constructed one, indeed, as one that might well be constructed differently. (149)

The idea of questioning gender naturalization as something “constituted,” which Butler discusses here, is a process that Gibson’s poetry uses in order to formulate a gender-queer identity. By using Butler’s theory of denaturalization, one can see how Gibson aims to denaturalize the binary genders in order to illuminate the limitations that they hold and the other possible gender identities that exist.

Consequently, Butler argues that the acts we perform in order to communicate our gender in social situations are constructed and repeated acts that are learned by seeing how other people before and with us communicate their own gender (185, 188). It is further claimed in Butler’s text that while people seem to believe that they are performing an “original” form of a gender (188), what they perform “is an imitation without an origin” (188), meaning that there is no real essence that can be imitated. Instead, the acts we perform in order to communicate our gender are constructed by society in order to maintain the gender binary system (191). However, performativity as defined by Butler, does not always reproduce the binary system of gender. Individuals can also use performativity to express different forms of gender identity that unsettle the established binary systems (Kaplan 158), which the analysis of “The Jewelry Store” will show. By using Butler’s idea of performativity it is possible to highlight the ways in which Gibson deals with this very same subject in order to make visible and distance themselves from the maintenance of the gender binary system.

Thus, both Butler’s and Bornstein’s theories present a fruitful perspective for analyzing Gibson’s work. Bornstein’s perspective on “gender attribution” and trans experiences in society helps illuminating how Gibson depicts reality of gender-queer individuals in a normative society and Butler’s theories of performativity presents a framework for how Gibson uses “gender attribution” in order to both display and dismantle the binary gender system that are set in our culture.

4. Analysis

4.1 “Swing-Set”, Pole Dancing to Gospel Hymns

The poem “Swing-Set,” from Gibson’s 2006 collection, *Pole Dancing to Gospel Hymns*, raises questions regarding gender identity that can be examined through Bornstein’s concept of “gender attribution”. The scene is initially set in a kindergarten where the speaker, who is a child, introduces the poem with a simple question: ““Are you a boy or a girl?”” (Gibson, “Swing-Set” 1). The question is directed to an adult working at the kindergarten who, as it becomes clear throughout the poem, represents a gender-queer person. The question that the child poses indicates a process of “gender attribution” since it seeks to determine the addressee’s gender by assigning the binary options of being “a girl or a boy” (1). The opening scene of the poem also presents a reflection on how the binary system of gender is something that is taught and reproduced by parents, and passed onto their children as if it were something innate or natural. Despite what one might feel like, it is obvious that society and its culture have constructed an idea of what a person of a specific gender should look like (Butler 10-11). As Butler claims, when it comes to gender “coherence is desired” (185). Therefore, when someone does not conform to the forms of gender identity that are enforced by the binary, and seemingly “natural” gender system, a sense of confusion develops, especially when people around them try to figure out what gender they are/have. In the poem, it is precisely this confusion that results in the child’s question “Are you a boy or a girl?” (Gibson, “Swing-Set” 1). The voice in these lines indicates that that there are only two alternatives of gender that one can identify with.

The adult addressed with the question states that they have known each other “for three years” and questions the importance of knowing their gender (Gibson, “Swing-Set” 4-5). The child agrees that if it did not matter before, it does not matter now, and changes the subject (8). The act of letting go so quickly shows that the child figure in the poem has not been fully indoctrinated by the idea that determining someone’s gender is fundamental. In the eighth stanza the adult is yet again faced with a child reflecting their parents’ understanding of gender:

‘Uh...my mom says that even though you got
hairs that grow from your legs
and the hairs on your head grow short and poky
and that you smell really bad like my dad

that you're a girl.' (19-23)

This stanza demonstrates how “gender attribution” functions. Gibson uses formal devices in order to put emphasis on the physical characteristics that are used to define gender. In particular, the use of enjambment in this stanza mediates to the reader the systematic categorization of physical attributes. Gibson’s poetic technique makes every line list a different physical trait associated with being a male, and thereby underlines the significance of these traits for determining one’s gender. Furthermore, the poem suggests that it is the parents that teach their children how to determine people’s gender through “physical cues” or attributes (Bornstein 26-27). By having the child refer to their mother—“my mom says” (Gibson, “Swing-Set” 19)—the poem shows that the child’s own sense of gender has not yet been fully established. However, by bringing up the subject of gender, the poem indicates that the child is in the process of learning how gender functions in society. Again, in this case, it is clear that the “gender attribution” consists of and is limited to the binary genders of female and male (Bornstein 26). The words and lines that are used to demonstrate the binaries in this stanza are: “mom” (Gibson, “Swing-Set” 19), “dad” (22) and “girl” (23), indicating that these are the only alternatives one can be in the mind of the child. The mother figure seems to have taught her child what attributes constitute a man (hairy legs, short hair and smelling bad) and what constitutes a woman (shaved legs, long hair and smelling good). It is by teaching the child the socially established meanings of these attributes that the binary system of gender identity is reproduced, and the normative understandings of gender are set in culture (Butler 189-191).

The cues concerning “gender attribution” provided by the child speaker in this stanza are solely “physical cues” (hairy legs, short hair and smelling bad), which indicates that the mother figure, whom the child speaker is referring to, has analyzed the addressed person’s gender only through the bodily and physical features (Bornstein 26). The physical attributes listed in the poem are all normative masculine features that are not typically associated with femininity. While the parent might have done something good by teaching their child that typical masculine attributes do not always mean that the person is male, the parent reinforces the binary idea of gender by insisting that the addressee is “a girl” (Gibson, “Swing-Set” 23). Even though the person does not look like a girl or a woman, they still are, because they were not assigned male at birth: “you are a girl” (23). This type of gender classification that is explored in the poem is deeply rooted in the “gender assignment” process. When someone is born, the doctors have only one way of determining what gender

the child has, and that is by their biology, or genitals, more specifically (22).

Gibson continuously returns to the idea that children are not as indoctrinated by the gender binary system as the adults, which is most probably the reason why in this poem the child figures are introduced in dialogue. Whenever the gender-queer adult figure is confronted with a question, there is no argument or a violent conflict between the child and the gender-queer adult working at the kindergarten. Instead the real conflict begins when more adults are introduced in “Swing-Set”. In the fifteenth stanza, for example, the gender-queer person in the poem introduces a scene where their father comments on their appearance during a Christmas dinner by saying that “his appetite [was] raped away / by the intrusion of my haircut, / ‘What were you thinking? You used to be such a pretty girl!’” (Gibson, “Swing-Set” 41-43) Through the figure of the father, the poem shows the ways in which gender is controlled and “violently policed” (Butler xx) according to an ideal of what gender is and how it should be performed. At the same time, these lines show that the father feels he is violated due to the fact that their child has, by their haircut, disrupted the gender norms that are established in society.

The word choice “raped” conveys how strong the father’s reaction to the violation of the gender norms is. What the father fails to understand is that his understanding of gender is socially constructed and continuously maintained through reproduction (Butler 23). When a person deviates from the normative expectations of gender, other people see them as failures (23). This is precisely what the father figure implies when he asks: “What were you thinking?” and then adds: “You used to be such a pretty girl!” (Gibson, “Swing-Set” 43) The father’s speech indicates that the addressee used to conform to how a person that had been assigned female at birth should look like. The father can be seen as exemplifying a form of “gender attribution” by assigning and trying to discipline the gender of his child according to the socially accepted idea of being a “girl” (Bornstein 26). The scene with the father, thus, communicates Gibson’s aim to explain the way in which “gender attribution” functions in society, and the significance it holds.

The next act of “gender attribution” is introduced in a dialogue between the gender-queer figure and a woman at a public restroom, where the woman says: “‘Sir! Sir, do you realize this is the ladies’ room?!’” (Gibson, “Swing-Set”51). As Bornstein explains, in a society that only offers two options when it comes to gender, those who do not fit into any of the options are nevertheless constantly forced to choose, and being forced to choose which of the gendered bathrooms one should use can be one of these situations (84). In the poem, the woman looks at the person coming into the bathroom, and uses different cues of “gender

attribution” to determine whether that person belongs there or not. Upon finding that the person entering does not conform to how a woman should look and act, the figure of the woman speaks up to mark that the person has violated an understanding of who is welcome there and who is not. This act also tells the addressee that they are not accepted in the category of “woman.” However, this is not to say that the person would be accepted in the men’s bathroom instead; the gender-queer persona in the poem is placed in a limbo, with no place to go, due to society’s limited, binary choices (Bornstein 102).

The addressee replies by saying, ““Yes, ma’am, I do. / It’s just I didn’t feel comfortable / sticking this tampon up my penis / in the men’s room”” (Gibson, “Swing-Set” 52-55). The lines indicate that the woman-speaker’s “gender attribution” had failed since the cues that were supposed to assist in determining the person’s gender were not at all helpful. The poem therefore shows that the body does not always fulfill its assigned function to reproduce the gender norms. The person’s ironic reply to the woman, which introduces both the “tampon” (54), associated with the female body, and the “penis,” that is normatively associated with the male body, conveys the failure of “gender attribution”. By showing how “gender attribution” can fail, Gibson thus shows how faulty the classification process of gender is.

Another aspect of the poem that can be construed through these lines is the power of performativity. By using Butler’s theory of performativity, one can see that the mainstream viewpoint that is represented by the woman figure perceives the addressee as performing the male gender. It is possible to argue that the addressee in the poem has adopted traditional masculine traits, performed and repeated them, to break free from the gender they have been assigned at birth. However, as Butler explains, “gendered bodies are so many ‘styles of the flesh’. These styles all never fully “self-styled”, for styles have a history, and those histories condition and limit the possibilities” (Butler 190). This quote explains that history can make it difficult to perform a gender-queer identity due to the fact that history indicates that people have a reference for how things should be. The scene where the woman at the bathroom calls the person entering “sir” (Gibson, “Swing-Set” 51) shows that “gender attribution” only allows two genders; the person does not seem to be a woman, and therefore they must be a man (Bornstein 26).

Towards the end of the poem, Gibson introduces another scene where a mother and her child encounter a gender-queer person at a store. The mother asks her child not to stare at the gender-queer person, to which that person reacts strongly, claiming that the mother is the one doing wrong and not the child. By asking the child not to look, she is

“pushing aside the best education on *self* / that little girl’s ever gonna get” (Gibson, “Swing-Set” 63-64). These lines show that children ought to have many frames of reference in relation to how gender can be preformed and expressed. Consequently, in the twentieth stanza the gender-queer person explains how the mother’s way of living limits the worldview of her child. The addressee lists normative feminine objects and phenomena: “Maybelline lips, Stair Master hips / synthetic, kiwi, vanilla ‘spilling beauty” (65-66), and urges the mother to “take [her] pinks and blues, / [her] boy-girl rules / and shove ‘em in that cart / with [her] fucking issue of Cosmo” (67-70). The use of consonance, in these lines, specifically the repetition of the “s” sound, not only slows the line but also puts a specific accent on feminine objects and phenomena such as “Maybelline lips,” “Stair Master hips,” “spilling beauty,” etc. Thus, Gibson marks the performance of gender, showing how these supposedly feminine objects are used to construct and reproduce gender identity that is associated with the female body. Furthermore, the words “shove” (69) and “fucking,” (70) indicate the harsh tone, showing that the gender-queer person is tired of the limited ways in which gender is socially constituted and assigned. Bornstein writes that gender ambiguity serves a purpose, for it breaks the normative ideas of gender (51-52), it is therefore crucial for children to live in a world where gender ambiguity or fluidity is visible and not something that one has to look away from.

Correspondingly, the poem ends on a hopeful note, with the gender-queer person explaining that they will return to work at the kindergarten, and that the children will not care if they are in a dress or in a different type of clothing (Gibson, “Swing-Set” 72-75). The gender-queer person hopes that these children will form the future and not reproduce the social reality that their parents try to present them with (78-80).

4.2 “*The Jewelry Store*”, *The Madness Vase*

The poem “The Jewelry Store”, from *The Madness Vase*, places the reader in an observing position. The reader is taken on a journey through several occasions where the speaker has found the surrounding society’s perspective on gender to be harmful. The poem begins with the speaker, a child with an undefined gender identity, at a jewelry store with their mother. The person working behind the counter is described as having “burlap skin” (Gibson, “The Jewelry Store” 7) and “windproof hair” (8), in other words, almost being styled to the point of excessiveness due to her overly tanned skin and hair that is unable to move due to the large amount of hairspray used when styling it. The description of the highly styled, feminine woman indicates that Gibson is using this figure in order to represent the normative ideal of how women should look like. According to Butler, by defining and representing the opposite

of a man, the feminine woman is at the same time defining what a man is (61). This is why the woman's comment in the poem, to the mom that the child is "one 'adorable little boy'" (Gibson, "The Jewelry Store" 11) is so substantial. By seeing the child and concluding that the child does not look like a girl, and therefore must be a boy, the woman functions as both judge and jury of the normative society. The scene tells the reader that the child does not conform to the normative ideas of how gender should be performed. However, it also tells the reader that the woman tries to either eliminate or conceal the ambiguity of the child's gender. By uttering the words "'adorable little boy'" (11), the woman is attempting to stabilize the gender of the child-speaker.

The introductory stanzas in the poem imply that the speaker of the poem is that of a child figure with an ambiguous gender. According to the woman in the store, the child-speaker is a boy, however, according to the mother, the speaker is a girl. The speaker does not give a sense of being one or the other, and this ambiguity is viewed as a failure by the mother, since the child-speaker does not conform to established gender norms. There are consequences to not conforming to gender, which the speaker is fully aware of, despite being a child. In the third stanza the speaker expresses a sense of fear when they are in the car, on their way home (Gibson, "The Jewelry Store" 13-16). It is not only what the mother might say in the car that scares the speaker, it is also "the litany of things we will do / to fix me." (15-16). The speaker is aware that people, including the mother, will see their failure as something that needs to be fixed, and the process of fixing produces a sense of fear. The woman in the store and the mother provide only two choices of gender, a boy or a girl. As Bornstein writes, "The choice between two of something is not a choice at all, but rather the opportunity to subscribe to the value system which holds the two presented choices as mutually exclusive alternatives. Once we choose one or the other, we've brought into the system that perpetuates the binary" (101). The limitation of the gender binary is precisely what the poem points to. The speaker does not belong to any of the normative gender identities, but society only offers two alternatives, leaving them trapped in a world that does not see nor accepts them.

The fourth stanza illustrates what happens when a child finds out that their choice of gender identity is limited to two: "I dig to the bottom of my fire-red toy box / 'til I find the doll with the golden hair. / I cradle her in my arms / and I wait for my mother to see me." (Gibson, "The Jewelry Store" 18-21) The act of digging shows that "the doll" is something that has been buried deep, and therefore, not used a lot, if at all. The doll exists, but is hardly ever used, and the very act of both burying and digging for the doll can be interpreted as a metaphor for the speaker's gender-queer identity. The speaker knows what

power the doll holds; it signifies the very essence of being a girl. By playing with a doll and in addition to that by “cradl[ing]” it—a nurturing act, much like a mother—the child seems to perform a type of femininity that conforms to culture’s female gender roles. However, the final line of the fourth stanza makes it clear that the digging for, and cradling of, the doll is not for the speaker but for the mother: “I cradle her in my arms / and I wait for my mother to see me” (20-21). The speaker does not want the mother to be disappointed, and does not want her to see them as a failure.

The result of this act of self-preservation is presented in the fifth stanza where the mother smiles, which indicates that the act of cradling the doll was a success. However, the speaker notes that “love / is a silent auction / and I am worth more sold” (Gibson, “The Jewelry Store” 24-26), implying that in order to be accepted and loved, they have to give up, or sell, themselves for the sake of other’s comfort. One is accepted only when one proves that one’s identity is “pure,” by conforming to the normative understandings and classifications of gender (Bornstein 105).

The speaker then shifts focus from the mother to society as a whole by arguing, “They wanna make us something. / They wanna toothpick our bones / and keep us between their teeth.” (Gibson, “The Jewelry Store” 27-29) Firstly, the collective “they” could refer to society as a whole, or more specifically, to the cis-gendered people who do not acknowledge the existence of genders other than the generic binaries of woman and man. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler claims that the normative society demands a clear and comprehensible sense of gender (185), meaning that gender ambiguity is the opposite of what society wants. Secondly, gender-queer people are not only dismissed by society but they are also harmed and controlled, which is conveyed through metaphors and figurative language that Gibson uses in lines: “They wanna toothpick our bones / and keep us between their teeth.” (Gibson, “The Jewelry Store” 28-29) These metaphors indicate violence and control. The speaker also realizes that other people, “they,” perceive the people with a non-binary gender identity as “something,” rather than as “someone” (27). The key word here is “something”, which illustrates Butler’s claim, “The mark of gender appears to ‘qualify’ bodies as human bodies” (151). Which indicates that when defining an individual as “something” one is showing that one do not “‘qualify’ bodies as human bodies” (151). Gibson illustrates that “they” view gender-queer people as objects; trying to turn them into “something” that they can comprehend.

Furthermore, the image of, and the association with, “teeth” returns later in the poem where words like “teeth” (Gibson, “The Jewelry Store” 30), “crooked” (30) and

“braces” (34) occur. The speaker continues to show how they did not follow the gender norms when growing up by claiming that they “dressed, walked, talked” in a “crooked way” (32). They also state: “I am tired of wearing braces” (34), indicating, metaphorically, that they have been forced into a strong mold that forces the misplaced or “crooked” things into place. What “crooked” refers to in this poem is the gender-queer identity, and how the speaker’s “gender role” is viewed in the eyes of the normative society. The metaphor of the “braces” resonates with Butler’s argument that people are regulated and molded into a cultural ideal that is limited to a binary understanding of gender (99-101).

In the twelfth stanza, Gibson returns to a similar bathroom scene as the one in “Swing-Set” which I have discussed in the previous section of this essay. However, while “Swing-Set” allows the speaker to answer to the person that identifies them as a man, the speaker in this poem does not. Instead the speaker says: “a woman grabs me by the neck of my coat / and drags me from the ladies’ room / like dog on a chain” (Gibson, “The Jewelry Store” 53-55). These lines demonstrate how a figure that belongs to one of the binary categories, a woman, is treating a gender-queer person as less than human. The scene can be interpreted through Butler’s claim about the social act of reprimanding those who fail to perform the binary genders that are assigned to them at birth (190). Bornstein also brings up the reprimands, or violence that is directed at people who do not conform to the binary gender attributes and roles (104). She claims that it is not the sexual orientation of an individual but the act of breaking the binary gender norms that leads to being assaulted (104).

By placing the woman and the speaker in the same gendered room (the ladies’ room) the speaker forces the reader to question the seemingly natural idea of the binary genders as something absolute (Butler 149). In our culture, people have distinct ideas of how different genders should, and should not be and, when faced with individuals that do not adapt to these ideas, people are forced to question the social categorization of the binary genders (149). To further explain these lines, one can suggest that by questioning the seemingly natural system of binary genders, Gibson seeks to break the normative understandings of gender, and formulates a gender-queer identity that is outside the gender binary. The breaking of the norms also indicates an alternative form of gender identity that is formulated in contrast to the generic ideas of gender (149).

Moreover, the following stanza shows the reaction of the speaker after being policed by the woman who finds out that they did not belong to the “ladies’ room” (Gibson, “The Jewelry Store” 54). The speaker says that they experience “confused gratitude / and the urge to bark [their] pretty name” (57-58). The “gratitude” is due to the recognition that they,

in fact, are not a woman. However, they are not a man either, and the “confusion” lies in not knowing where they belong. This echoes both the words of Bornstein and what has been claimed earlier in the poem: if only two alternatives are provided, the alternatives provide not a choice, but a limitation (Bornstein 101).

The tone of the poem then changes from resignation to hopefulness, when the speaker wishes that the people would see the multitudes that their identity consists of, instead of reduced them to only one aspect of their identity that is determined by “gender attribution”. Gibson expresses this idea through a metaphorical connection to nature. The speaker “[hopes] someone will see the rainforest growing” (Gibson, “The Jewelry Store” 71) and later, they urge the people to “see how many ecosystems / can exist in one redwood tree” (73-74). The lines imply that nothing is singular; instead everything, including the identity of the speaker, is complex, holding many layers and aspects.

In the nineteenth stanza the speaker further comments on gender identity by arguing: “I can guarantee a haircut / will never tell you anything about someone’s gender” (Gibson, “The Jewelry Store” 80-81). By making this claim, Gibson seems to resist the idea that performing certain bodily features or attributes provides an accurate way of identifying one’s gender (Butler 190), such as the “haircut” that is mentioned in these lines. In other words, the lines imply that the performance of physical features in fact do not say “anything about someone’s gender” (81). Furthermore, by these lines Gibson also seems to claim that “gender attribution,” which is often based on the physical appearance or presentation, does not necessarily suggest anything about a person’s gender identity. However, the lines express, in a way, the essence of queer theory, which indicates that there are no strict definitions; it is, in fact, impossible to define a gender by simply referring to the physical attributes (Jagose 1). Both Butler’s and Bornstein’s theories agree with Gibson’s perspective since rather than defining gender identity as a category that is solely based on physical attributes, they also point to the ways in which people express and “play with gender” (Bornstein 139).

The concluding stanzas of the poem illustrate the complexity of gender-queer identity within a culture that continuously reinforces the gender binaries. The speaker says that they wear “a pink barrette in [their] pocket / in case [they] had to split-second decide / if WOMAN would be a safer armor than THIS” (Gibson, “The Jewelry Store” 100-102). The speaker recognizes the oppression and violence that they might experience in a biological female body, but their gender-queer gender identity also might expose them to oppression and violence. Therefore they have to decide which aspect of their gender would be safer to present. As Bornstein explains: “It’s not only people who intentionally transgress gender who

get into trouble. Eventually the gender system lets everyone down. ... Sometimes, even with all the time and effort we put into obeying the rules, we get hurt” (80). Here, Bornstein’s words indicate that the binary gender system is a structure that hurts even the people within it. In fact, as Butler explains, the hierarchy of the binary gender structure tries to establish that women are nothing without men that give them meaning (50). This hurtful gender structure is precisely why the speaker has trouble deciding whether acting like a “woman” (Gibson, “The Jewelry Store” 102) or “THIS” (102) is more beneficial.

In the twenty-fifth stanza, a societal agent, the police, is introduced. The police symbolize the law, which the members of the society have to obey. Butler explains the role of the law in relation to gender by writing that the binary between genders or the “division is always the *effect* of the law, and not a preexisting condition on which the law acts” (74). This quote shows that the law under which we obey is also created in order to maintain the idea of the binary genders. Similarly, in Gibson’s poem, it is when faced with the police that the speaker has to choose which identity would be least hurtful: “his flashing blue lights / gave me ten seconds to pick / what target he’d be most likely to miss” (Gibson, “The Jewelry Store” 103-105). The police officer, which also obeys the system of gender binaries, identifies the gender of the speaker as a woman. The speaker says “the way you spit the word *ma’am* down my throat / like I might swallow it in the same gulp as my pride / when you decide who I am” (110-112). The lines demonstrate how the law takes liberties to define, in this case, by using the gendered address, “*ma’am*” (110).

Furthermore, the speaker provides, in the twenty-eighth stanza, an imagery of a bloodhound, saying that it “gnawed on her pronoun / like her self-given name / was not a stained glass cathedral” (Gibson, “The Jewelry Store” 121-123). The “pronoun” represents the trans identity of the “gender-bent...trans-kid” that is mentioned earlier in the stanza (119), and the lines provide a sense of the person’s “pronoun” or trans identity being hunted down by the bloodhound, possibly a figure that stands for an authority in society. The lines “like her self-given name / was not a stained-glass cathedral” (122-123) indicate that the “self-given name,” which refers back to the “pronoun,” is being treated as if it “was not a stained-glass cathedral,” (123) that is, something holy. Again, the poem shows how the law and authoritative figures do not respect the self-defined identity of the people that do not follow the generic binaries of gender.

Finally, the speaker says: “Now ask me what I am. / I’ll tell you all of the above / and none of what they’ve ever listed” (Gibson, “The Jewelry Store” 125-127). The role of the speaker explicitly shifts from being the defined to the definer. The speaker places the reader

and the addressee in the poem in a position where they are forced to listen to the speaker's own definition, where they explain that their gender cannot be reduced to an "either/or" (Bornstein 102) As queer theory explains, establishing a fixed gender identity is not the aim; rather the aim is to prove that there are no fixed identities (Jagose 68). The speaker further explains: "I will say I have never cared to Be / nearly as much as I care to *Become*" (Gibson, "The Jewelry Store" 128-129). These lines can be understood through Butler's words that "one is not born with" a gender; rather, "gender is always acquired" (151). Therefore, despite what genitalia one might have been born with, one can become whatever gender one wants, that is due to the understanding that gender is created by our society, and it is not something that is innate (Butler 152).

This poem therefore illustrates many aspects of gender and gender identity. It formulates a gender-queer subjectivity that breaks with and stands in contrast to socially established gender norms, when for example; a gender-queer person enters the "ladies' room" and meets a cis-gendered woman. Moreover, the poem also illuminates how the cultural law harms not only people not only people who are outside the gender binary but also those who exist within it.

4.3 "A Genderful Pep-Talk for My Younger Self", Pansy

In their most recent collection of poems, *Pansy*, Gibson continues to address gender-queer topics. However, instead of telling the reader of the hardships that result from not conforming to the gender binary, the poems take on a more empowering tone.

In "A Genderful Pep-Talk for My Younger Self," Gibson uses the second person pronoun "you," which addresses both the reader and, as the title suggests, a younger version of the speaker. Another pronoun used in this poem is "they," which most probably represents the normative society that enforces the gender binary system. By using the pronoun "you," Gibson creates a sense of alignment between the speaker and the reader: "They want you thinking you're bad at being a girl / instead of thinking / you're good at being yourself." (Gibson, "A Genderful Pep-Talk for My Younger Self" 1-3) If normative gender performativity is "a repetition and a ritual" (Butler xv), these lines designate that breaking them is considered a failure according to the normative society ("they"): breaking with the expected gender roles that are associated with being "a girl," makes one "bad at being a girl" (Gibson, "A Genderful Pep-Talk for My Younger Self" 1). The lines suggest the idea of refusing the notion of being bad at something, in this case performing your assigned gender, and instead, endorse the idea of celebrating yourself. Additionally, by stating, "you're good at

being yourself” (3), the speaker challenges the idea that reaching a “coherent” gender identity (“being a girl”) is something that is fundamental or necessary (Butler 185).

The second and third stanzas also speak of a “they” (Gibson, “A Genderful Pep-Talk for My Younger Self” 4, 7). Again, “they” want something from the addressee (“you”), which the speaker opposes. In the third stanza: “They want you to buy your blush from a store” (4). The poem indicates that “they” feel like something is missing from the “you,” who is expected to look like “a girl,” in this case, the blush. One can assume that the blush represents femininity, just like “the doll” in the poem, “The Jewelry Store”. If this is the case, then, this line corresponds to Butler’s idea that people have set ideas of how to do gender (19). Butler further explains that people try to impose their ideas on everyone, thinking that they are universal, when in fact the idea of universality limits gender into being one way and not the other (19); blush or no blush. By showing how “they” urge the “you” in the poem to “buy your blush from a store” (Gibson, “A Genderful Pep-Talk for My Younger Self” 4), the poem indicates that normative “gender attributes” are artificially constructed, and are not produced naturally. To further explain, Butler writes that “gendered bodies are ... ‘styles of the flesh’” (190), and continues by arguing that this stylization of the body is constructed through history, and through what history has told us about how certain genders should look like (190). Gender is repeated and reproduced “within its binary frame” when people continually reproduce the gendered acts and attributes that they have seen others perform (191).

In response to “buy[ing] your blush from a store” (Gibson, “A Genderful Pep-Talk for My Younger Self” 4), the speaker introduces an alternative imagery: “They want you to buy your blush from a store / instead of letting it bloom / from your butterflies.” (5-6) The final lines point to how “blush” can be created in ways that are not artificial. The butterflies probably refer to the sensation of tingle in the gut that people can experience from pleasant feelings such as love and excitement. These feelings are much more pleasing and create blush in a more pleasant way than going to a store, and buying something that is artificially made, such as makeup. By juxtaposing the “store” with the artificial “blush,” and later, the “bloom” with the natural “blush” (5), this stanza thus indicates a resistance to artificiality and a celebration of letting the body be as it is.

The third stanza however, breaks this empowering tone, and moves onto describe the suffering that gender-queer people experience in a culture that only recognizes woman and man as the possible genders: “They’re telling you to blend in, / like you’ve never seen how a blender works, / like they think you’ve never seen the mess from the blade.”

(Gibson, "A Genderful Pep-Talk for My Younger Self" 7-9) The lines show that what seems to be a simple act ("blending in"), in fact, harms the people that carry it out. The word "blend" is used and reused in different forms in these lines, creating a poetic pun, ("blend in" and "blender" and then "blade") to demonstrate the harmful cause and effect of the initial act of "blending" in, and participating in the normative and binary system of gender. What Gibson's poetic use of pun reveals is the painful effect of "blending in," which can be connected to Bornstein's claim that "This culture attacks people on the basis of being or not being correctly gendered (having a politically correct body)" (79). The act of violence that is depicted in Gibson's lines occurs when "they" are actively "telling" the addressee to do things, rather than simply wanting or asking them.

Even though society wants the addressee of the poem to know that the addressee has failed to perform their "assigned gender," the speaker lets them know that they will, in the future, wear "bow tie and suspenders" (Gibson, "A Genderful Pep-Talk for My Younger Self" 20). If the speaker is a gender-queer person, one can assume that these items of clothing indicate a distancing from the generic ideas of what women are supposed to wear in order to perform their gender. Instead the speaker imagines adopting the performance of a man, and therefore places their gender identity beyond their assigned gender. As Butler explains, there is no "original" gender, and the ideas we have of gender are created by the culture we live in (188). Butler further explains "originality" as a way of constructing "the illusion of a primary and interior gendered self" (188). This quote suggests that our culture created the sense of gender we have, and removed the fluidity and ambiguity from the idea of gender identity. Gibson's poetry embraces the ambiguity and fluidity of gender that society conceals or eliminates by imposing a binary system. Wearing the "bow tie and suspenders" (Gibson, "A Genderful Pep-Talk for My Younger Self" 20) also shows that the body is what we choose to alter when we want to communicate something about ourselves. Butler explains "the body as the medium which must be destroyed and transfigured in order for 'culture' to emerge" (177). This indicates that in order to break free from the binaries one must "destroy" the ideas we have about the gendered body.

Gender is not simple, it is complex and, above all it can be experimented with, just like any other aspect of a person's identity (Bornstein 139). In the tenth stanza this understanding becomes more evident, when the speaker mentions "the law, you will break over and over / to let the light in." (Gibson, "A Genderful Pep-Talk for My Younger Self" 29-30) The lines can be read in relation to Butler's theory that it is difficult to escape the law, because it is created within the very language that we use and understand the world (100).

However, the law also refers to different aspects of gender that people have to follow in order to conform to the standards of “pure” gender (woman or man) in society (Bornstein 105). As the poem suggests, it is by constantly breaking “the law” that one can “let the light in,” which can be interpreted as the hope for moving beyond the normative understandings of gender. Butler writes: “gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all” (190). In Gibson’s poem, the possibility that there can be a world without gender, or rather a world with more genders than two, brings hope to the speaker, and perhaps even to the addressee.

To conclude, the speaker notes that it is “Your body, not theirs. / Your spirit, not theirs. / Yours” (Gibson, “A Genderful Pep-Talk for My Younger Self” 31-33), emphasizing that there is a division between what other people want and think and, what the speaker and the addressee have to do in order to be true to themselves. The message that one has to find one’s own truth and reality within a limiting culture is an important reminder, not only to the addressee in the poem, but also to everyone.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this essay was to show how Andrea Gibson uses their poetry to question the normative and binary system of gender in order to formulate a gender-queer subjectivity. As this essay has shown, Gibson’s poetry reveals how gender functions in society by exploring and questioning the culturally assigned and binary categories of man/woman, girl/boy, male/female etc., The poetry of Gibson challenges the social expectations of gender by introducing social situations where gender-queer individuals in the poems break with, and resist the existing gender norms and ideals.

In the poem “Swing-Set,” Gibson deals with the notion of “gender attribution,” revealing that there are normative expectations of gender, such as hairy legs and short hair that are typically associated with being a man. However, by contradicting this belief, and by projecting these physical attributes on a body that is not assigned male at birth, Gibson also shows how gender can indeed be indefinable, ambiguous and indeed queer. Violence and performativity are subjects found in the poem “The Jewelry Store”. The performance of the gender binary is contrasted with the performance of gender-queerness, in order to demonstrate how a gender-queer identity can emerge from resistance to the binary system of gender. The poem depicts the violence directed towards the gender-queer individual by society, which seeks to police gender identity into being coherent and within the gender binary. Lastly, in the

poem “A Genderful Pep-Talk for My Younger Self” Gibson voices the importance of expressing a gender-queer subjectivity. The poem urges the reader to follow their own heart and truth rather than following the hurtful and artificial binary of culture. Throughout the poem, Gibson questions the normative notions of gender and acknowledges that in order to break free from the binaries, one must “destroy” the established ideas we have about the gendered body.

By using both Bornstein and Butler it has become evident that the strategies Gibson uses in their poetry are partly to comment on the complexity and violence that the generic binary gender system reinforces through its powerful position within society. Nevertheless, if a woman defines what a man is by being a woman (Butler 61) and therefore repeatedly reproduces how the binary genders ought to function (190-191), Gibson shows that by not following these repetitions, something else that is outside the binary is created. Both Butler and Bornstein agree with Gibson that gender can, and perhaps even ought to be played with, in order to break the binaries. Gibson is a missing voice in the academic world. Three poems were chosen in this essay, but there are many more that are waiting to take their rightful place in academia, and in critical discussions of poetry and gender, more specifically. There is a great quantity of material to analyze, not only about gender identity, but also about sexuality, mental health and perhaps even love.

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