



## Talking to, Talking Back: Sex/Gender as a Dialogic Process

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### Abstract

*Debates have grown regarding the meaning and usage of the terms ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ in the UK. There is an influential ‘gender-critical’ movement that views sex as immutable biological reality, and advocates for this understanding to guide policymaking and politics. In contrast, this article argues that theories of sex and gender should account for both biological and sociocultural aspects, as well as interactions between the subject and the social world. To highlight interactions between biology, society and culture, this article takes sex/gender as one concept. It outlines how sex/gender can be viewed as a dialogic process of constant engagement with, and response to, the other. It centres Bakhtin’s concept of the ‘dialogic’, which denotes the continuous unfinished dialogue with others that moulds all language and cognition. The article first explores how some feminist theorists have addressed these questions. It builds especially on Butler, Moi and Young’s works, particularly the notion that gender can be viewed not as a set of shared features but a personal experiential response. Likewise, this article argues that subjects are born into prevailing sex/gender structures, shaped by societal norms and expectations, and can only respond to these. However, each response also generates the potential for change. In illustrating these points, the article explores one type of response, ‘embodied texts’, which construct narratives from lived experience. Focusing on trans writing, these texts can create space for trans writers to resist erasure and challenge mainstream discourses. As an effective example of such resistance, the article analyses Harry Josephine Giles’s transfeminist zine, *Wages for Transition* (2019).*

**Keywords:** sex/gender, subjectivity, dialogic, transfeminism, embodied texts

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### Introduction<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, controversy has grown around the meaning and usage of the terms ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ in the UK. This is partially in response to advances in trans rights. For example, the Scottish Government’s attempt

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the editors for all their help and support during this process. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their insightful comments and suggestions, which have helped me refine my thinking and enriched this piece.

to include trans women in their definition of ‘woman’ within the Gender Representation on Public Boards (Scotland) Act (2018) caused legal challenges and culminated in the UK Supreme Court’s ruling that the terms ‘man’, ‘woman’ and ‘sex’ refer to biological sex in the Equality Act (2010) (*For Women Scotland Ltd v The Scottish Ministers*, 2025). Conflicts were also inflamed by failed attempts to simplify the current system of legal sex/gender<sup>2</sup> change by replacing medical diagnoses with self-declaration of identity (Hines, 2020, p. 700; Pearce, Erikainen and Vincent, 2020, p. 678). Various women’s rights groups have formed who oppose such movements to widen understandings of sex, such as *For Women Scotland* and *Woman’s Place UK*. These groups, often called ‘gender-critical’, mobilise around the concept of women’s sex-based rights and distinguish ‘sex’ as immutable biological reality from ‘gender’ as a changeable social category (Pearce, Erikainen, and Vincent, 2020, pp. 679–680). This approach assumes a sex-gender dichotomy separating biological and sociocultural factors. The gender-critical movement—advocating for the essential nature of ‘sex’ and its use in policymaking and politics—has gained momentum (for example, Davy, 2021, pp. 20–23; Shaw, 2022; Hines, 2020). A Council of Europe report (2021, p. 14) criticised such simplistic and dichotomous views of sex and gender, which have created a hostile environment for trans people.

Gender-critical thought reflects ideological issues within feminism,<sup>3</sup> including disputes around belonging, language and biology (Pearce, Erikainen and Vincent, 2020, p. 678). For example, the separation of ‘sex’ as biology and ‘gender’ as social role was a hallmark of second-wave feminist thinking but was later challenged and deconstructed by various feminist theorists (Hines, 2020, pp. 703–704). The concept of ‘woman’ as the central subject of feminism has also been problematic. Debates around what constitutes a woman, who can identify as a feminist, and who belongs in women’s spaces have permeated feminist theories for at least five decades (Hines, 2019, pp. 148–149). Trans-exclusionary feminism has always been challenged within the wider movement, but has never gone

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<sup>2</sup> The Gender Recognition Act (2004: s9) uses ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ interchangeably.

<sup>3</sup> Some affiliations can be found between gender-critical and right-wing organisations who share ‘anti-gender’ stances (Hines, 2025, p. 708). Whilst these debates are also fuelled by conservative forces, it is important to acknowledge that there are many forms of feminism, including conservative strains, and that gender-critical feminists campaign against trans-inclusion in the name of women’s rights.

away (Hines, 2019, p. 149). These debates also speak to theoretical tensions between social constructivism (or constructionism) and essentialism.<sup>4</sup> Constructivism views reality as mediated, or even produced by, sociocultural construction (Sverker, 2020, pp. 22–24). Essentialism argues something has inherent properties and immutable essence, which manifests for feminists in the belief that all women share some attributes or experiences, such as biological characteristics or gendered oppression (Fuss, 1989, p. 2). Gender-critical feminists generally adopt an essentialist view and have expressed worries around blurring the boundaries of womanhood. For example, *For Women Scotland* (2022a; 2022b) have stressed the need to recognise women as a “sex-class” with distinct needs in law.

This article responds to this current moment in the UK, as gender-critical feminists campaign to distinguish ‘sex as biological’ from ‘gender as social’—and to define women by the former—along with a worrying trend of trans-exclusion. Other theorists have already countered the gender-critical position from various perspectives, including legal, biological, political and sociological (see, for example, Zanghellini, 2020; Sharpe, 2020; Pearce, Erikainen, and Vincent, 2020; Hines, 2020; Thurlow, 2024; Walters, 2024; Amery, 2025). This article argues that gender-critical ideologies are harmful and offer a reductive approach to sex and gender. It aims to explore alternative conceptions that can account for a range of factors—including biological and sociocultural—and widen, rather than narrow, understandings of these concepts. It explores how gendered subjectivity can be viewed as in-process not static, and specifically as a ‘dialogic process’ and a ‘response’. The article begins with a theoretical discussion outlining this approach. It then demonstrates this by focusing on one type of response, exploring how trans people writing about their embodiment can create spaces in which to talk back to, and transform hegemonic norms. An example of such a text will be discussed: Harry Josephine Giles’s transfeminist zine, *Wages for Transition* (2019).

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<sup>4</sup> Although these are not necessarily opposing theories, for example, a social constructivist can hold essentialist views, and vice versa (Fuss, 1989, p. 4).

## **Sex/Gender as a Dialogic Process**

This section outlines the key theorists who have influenced the article's theoretical approach. It begins with Judith Butler's theory of performativity, viewing gender and subjectivity as unstable and in-process. From here, it explores the body as a crucial but unsettled factor in lived experience, using Toril Moi and Iris Marion Young's notion of 'lived body'. This section finishes with Mikhail Bakhtin's 'dialogic', and its application to sex/gender as a response.

### ***Butler: Acts Constituting Gender***

Butler approaches subjectivity as continually in-process. Reading Beauvoir's famous phrase, "one is not born, but, rather, *becomes* a woman", (cited in Butler 1988, p. 519), Butler situates this in the phenomenological tradition of "constituting acts". According to this view, gender is unstable and established through "a stylized repetition of acts" and "stylization of the body" (Butler, 1988, p. 519). Butler's reading of Beauvoir posits that 'female' as biological fact is meaningless, while 'woman' is a process of becoming where the body repeatedly embodies historical possibilities, becoming a "cultural sign" (Butler, 1988, p. 522). Butler (1988) proposes a performative theory of gender, not as a role the subject adopts but a series of acts constituting the subject's identity, and the illusion of a stable identity. Importantly, both the subject and their acts are produced through social and historical processes, with no conscious doer behind this. Likewise, there is no natural sex or inherent gender, only processes of historical production which construct such ideals (for example, see Butler, 1988, p. 528; 1999, p. viii). Thus, Butler's theoretical focus is on *construction*, not the construct, of gender (Gleeson, 2017). Butler's theories have been highly influential in thinking about both sex and gender as produced through historical pressures. There is no identifiable beginning or end point of this process. For example, the body is both material and "materializing of possibilities" (Butler, 1988, p. 521), whilst bodies are not pre-gender but develop through the process of gendering (Butler, 1999, p. 13). Further, sex itself is not a straightforward attribute but a "regulatory practice that produces the bodies it governs" (Butler, 1993, p. 1). In this way, even those things taken as natural or pre-cultural givens—like 'sex',

‘body’, and ‘matter’—are historical processes which produce the appearance of boundedness and fixity (Butler, 1993, pp. 9–10).

This article takes two foundational ideas from Butler. Firstly, there is no subjectivity before society and culture. People are born into and develop within the bounds of power and regulatory norms, which they can expand or alter but never exceed (Butler, 1999, pp. 40–42). Likewise, they are constantly shaped by gender and do not exist before “gendering”, developing constantly within the “matrix of gender relations” (Butler, 1993, p. 7). Nevertheless, this article argues that people retain their own worldviews, desires and agency within these structures. They are both subjects and subjected to the world around them.<sup>5</sup> Secondly, if gender is constantly repeated and (re)made, it could be made differently. Butler has a strong ethos of change:

If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity, then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relations between such acts, in the possibility for a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style. (Butler, 1988, p. 520)

Following Butler, this article argues that an approach to sex/gender should centre process and construction, not stasis. This is especially important to feminism as a project for social change. However, Butler has also been critiqued for understating reality and lacking a normative basis for politics. Nussbaum (1999, pp. 37–38)<sup>6</sup> famously attacks Butler’s anti-normativity and preference for subversion in place of change for ‘real women’, ‘real bodies’ and ‘real struggles’. Likewise, Butler has been criticised for not placing sufficient focus on the specific social structures and inequalities affecting people’s lives (Jackson, 2001).<sup>7</sup> It should be

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<sup>5</sup> Following Foucault, Butler (1993, p. 15) calls this ‘subjectivation’, but considers it a paradox as someone who would oppose norms is also constituted by those norms. This article argues that people have internal drives and agency but agrees that this is always in interaction with norms and power structures.

<sup>6</sup> Nussbaum (1999) also critiques Butler on other grounds, including obscurity, not defining or explaining key concepts, and citing contradicting scholars without resolving their differences.

<sup>7</sup> Jackson (2001, pp. 289–290) states that works like Butler’s should be called “cultural constructionist” not “social constructionist” because they neglect social structures or specific social contexts/practices/hierarchies.

noted that their recent work focuses more on ‘practical’ issues (for example, Butler, 2015; 2022). Stone (2005) also argues that Butler’s denial of objective bodily forces undermines the normative basis of their theory, including how subversion is possible or why it is desirable. This article follows Butler’s focus on *process* but argues that the acts constituting gender should be situated within specific social structures and conditions, with greater emphasis on the interactions between the subject and external world, to elucidate agency and change.

### ***The ‘Lived Body’***

The body is key to lived experience, being the site of sensory experiences through which people interact with the world. Focus on corporeality also benefits feminism, as bodies exist at the intersection of private and public, being both personal experience and cultural mirror (Grosz, 1987, p. 9). However, centring the body does not have to lead feminism towards biological essentialism, or trans-exclusionary politics. This article argues that the body fluctuates in meaning and significance within specific cultures and social situations. Emma Heaney (2021) thoughtfully demonstrates this in an essay outlining her gynaecological experiences. Writing around topics like fertility and reproduction generally associated with femaleness, Heaney narrates moments of affinity in shared experiences with friends of various genders:

Some of these friends are women, some are not women. Some have the same organs and structures that I have, others do not. Some are modifying their bodies with the same substances with which I am modifying my body. We’re there together, listening to one another; my body’s experience has been involved in being able to hear about theirs. My love for these people creates a bond that affects how I feel about my body and makes me want to protect theirs. History has created these bonds between and among our bodies and these affinities, for me, are the substance of my sense of sex identity, of what embodiment itself means. (Heaney, 2021)

Bodies are inevitably caught up in social dynamics, as biological and sociocultural factors are in constant encounter. Indeed, all individuals manipulate their bodies, often based on normative standards and feelings of authenticity (Koyama, 2001; Spade, 2006, pp. 318–319). No easy

recourse can be found in appealing to the reality of biological sex. Even in discussing biological facts, “[...] there is nothing in the body that can be said to be permanent and unchanging” (Fausto-Stirling, 2017, p. 63). The somatic—including sex characteristics—is in constant process, affected by changes to internal physiology, as well as environmental factors, whilst none of these are strictly binary or straightforward as divergences exist at each stage of development (for example, Fausto-Stirling, 2005; 2017; 2018). Fausto-Stirling also (2005, pp. 1516–1517; 2017, p. 64) argues that a theoretical approach to sex or gender should be based on process not stasis and account for both biological and cultural influences.

One such feminist approach comes from the works of Moi and Young. Moi (1999, p. 73–74) argues that Butler mis-reads Beauvoir in viewing sex as meaningless without culture and signification. The issue with Butler, alongside other post-structural feminists, is their commitment to the binary of ‘sex as nature’ vs. ‘gender as social role’ and attempt to overcome biological determinism by denying the importance of the body, thus losing touch with lived experience (Moi, 1999). Moi follows Beauvoir’s view of the ‘body as situation’, placing importance on both the type of body someone has, and that body’s significance for the conditions or situation in which they find themselves (Moi, 1999, pp. 80–84). Moi (1999, p. 114) finds it theoretically beneficial to focus on bodies and subjectivity rather than sex or gender. Thus, Moi (1999) proposes using the ‘body as situation’ to account for subjectivity without resorting to essentialism of culture or biology. This approach highlights the importance of people’s bodies for experiencing the world. The body is also the vessel that senses, acts and responds to its social and cultural surroundings. Young (2002, p. 417) takes up the notion of a ‘lived body’, arguing that this improves on gender by encompassing both biological and cultural factors, and the multitude of elements impacting lived experience, for example, race, gender, sexuality, which position people in specific ways and constrain their choices. However, Young highlights that the goals of feminist and queer theory go beyond “theorizing subjectivity”. Young argues that different concepts are needed to describe subjectivity/experience versus social structures, although acknowledges interactions (2002, p. 411). Young partially adopts the ‘lived body’ for subjectivity (2002, p. 415) and retains ‘gender’ for social structures and wider power relations (2002, p. 426). For Young

(2002, p. 426), gender is experienced through bodies not as a set of features shared by individuals, but a “personal experiential response”.

This article was especially inspired by Young’s notion that gendered experience manifests as a ‘response’. It also broadly follows Moi and Young in stressing the interplay between corporeality and sociocultural influences. Nonetheless, the ‘lived body’ is not used as a central theoretical concept here. While the body is the site of sensory and perceptual experiences, it also matters how experiences are interpreted and integrated into higher-level concepts of self and identity. When this article uses terms like ‘cisgender’ or ‘transgender’, what it finds important is how individuals understand their own physiology, and their place in society. Indeed, people do not share bodies or sensory experiences but still feel affinity and belonging to communities, such as womanhood. The ‘lived body’ accounts for this because it does not assume mind-body dualism. However, terms like sex and gender carry deep social significance here, and Young’s attempt to retain gender reinforces this. This author disagrees with Young that separate concepts are needed for subjectivity and social structures. Subjectivity develops within social structures. Instead, this article follows other theorists in using sex/gender as one concept to emphasise that bodies are constantly influenced by factors like culture, habits and meaning (Lancaster *et al.*, 2023, p. 2). Additionally, in the vein of Moi and Young, this article views sex/gender as produced in interaction between lived experience and social structures, and which manifests as a *response* to conditions like biology, culture, power and oppression.

### ***Bakhtin’s Dialogic***

To develop the theme of *response*, this article turns to Bakhtin. Bakhtin viewed the self as specular and held that all language and thought are shaped by constant and unfinished interactions with others, what he called the ‘dialogic’ (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 92). Bakhtin focused on the role of language and literature in society, although his ideas can be extended beyond this, as this article hopes to do.<sup>8</sup> A key tenet of Bakhtin’s is that a

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<sup>8</sup> Bakhtin’s works are many and diverse and have been applied to various fields and political persuasions (Dentith, 1995, pp. x–xi). Additionally, Bakhtin is an expansive and sprawling writer who develops lengthy arguments accumulatively (Dentith, 1995, pp. xi–xii). For the sake of space and clarity, this article discusses one essay, *The Problem of Speech Genres* (1986), which provides an account of how people adopt and use language

communicative act is meaningful only within concrete contexts (Dentith, 1995, p. 3). In appropriating Bakhtin, a ‘feminist dialogic’ approaches identity as contingent and relational, not essential (Bauer and McKinstry, 1991, pp. 2–3). Below, key ideas from Bakhtin’s essay on speech genres are summarised, then related to sex/gender.

Bakhtin emphasises that language is acquired through social interactions. By hearing the words of others, people recognise what is expected and appropriate in various contexts (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 60). The consistent types of utterances used in a certain situation form ‘speech genres’, albeit with considerable diversity (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 60). Therefore, language becomes inseparable from its social functions, coming to life in concrete utterances (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 63). When people speak, they call upon their available speech genres, which they deem appropriate to the situation. Speech genres effectively demonstrate ‘freedom within limits’, as people may learn more styles and play with genres to a certain extent, but always remain somewhat generic (Holquist, 1986, p. xix). Norms and expectations pre-exist the subject and mould the identities they can acquire. Importantly, Bakhtin views speakers as *respondents*, highlighting that no-one is first to speak, so each utterance becomes a response, to the linguistic system and its rules and norms, and to the utterances of previous speakers. Each utterance forms a link in a chain (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 69).

A strength of Bakhtin’s thought is that it accounts for both the individual and the social. Whilst speakers exist in the chain of communication, boundaries remain between them, and each contains individuality in their style (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 76). Furthermore, the word lives in three arenas for each speaker: a ‘neutral’ space belonging to no-one, such as the dictionary word; as used by other people and echoing their styles and intentions; as the speaker’s word used in a particular situation and carrying the speaker’s intentions and expression (1986, p. 88). Whilst there are both generic forms and words carrying the styles of others, people take these for their own purposes to “assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate” them (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 89). Here, Bakhtin centres individuality, agency and transformation

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in interaction, and is therefore a useful text for thinking through sex/gender as a response. However, there are other Bakhtinian concepts not mentioned here which have been extended to feminism (for example, see Bauer and McKinstry, 1991).

alongside social influences. His theory has a strong normative basis and ethical imperative, whereby all individuals are seen as unique and irreducible, causing constant fluctuation within the language system.

Appropriating Bakhtin's linguistic theory to sex/gender consolidates the insights from previous sections. Sex/gender is constantly in-process, without beginning or end. The social norms and history of acts far predate any subject. Born into this and in interaction with others, a person learns to act appropriately, becoming gendered. There are constant social and cultural constraints, as different situational contexts will require different forms of behaviour. Additionally, people are socialised within different spaces and will have more or less freedom to move through the world, using the resources they have available. To be understood and accepted, one must be generic. However, people also take the resources and 're-work' them, causing constant fluctuation as norms shift. Bakhtin posits that language comes to life in concrete utterances as a response to the linguistic system and other speakers. Likewise, this article argues that sex/gender comes to life in concrete acts—for example, dress, behaviour, speech—and these acts are a response to social norms and structures, as well as to other individuals. Thus, *response* acknowledges that sex/gender is always directed *to* a specific structure or situation. This is theoretically useful in situating both the subject and their acts within social hierarchies and power relations. This can also align with feminist calls for intersectional analyses, which recognise that individuals experience varying levels of oppression and freedom based on their distinctive situatedness within overlapping systems of power (for example, Crenshaw, 1989; Bilge, 2013). For a response, both the specific situational, and wider structural constraints must be considered. Viewing sex/gender as a *dialogic process* and *response* emphasises that the meaning and significance of sex/gender changes by context, that there are always different constraints present for different people, but also agency as they can choose how to respond within these limits. This approach crucially accounts for the relationship between the agency of the subject and constraints of social structures. Without theorising this relationship, there can be no strategy for social change (Scott and Jackson, 1996, p. 6). This provides a general approach to sex/gender. However, people respond to sex/gender structures in many ways. Different social situations call for different responses, whilst various conditions (for

example, biology, culture, power) fluctuate in importance. To further illustrate this, the rest of this article centres one type of response: narratives about the lived experience of sex/gender, specifically in a written medium and produced by trans people.

## Embodied texts

Addressing the importance of trans writing, Jacques recounts:

[...] I discovered a wave of 1990s trans theorists, mostly North American, who encouraged trans people to write openly about their experiences, to counter negative portrayals in mass media and their political repercussions. Sandy Stone told trans people to think of themselves as '*a set of embodied texts whose potential for productive disruption ... has yet to be explored*'; Kate Bornstein asked if the creation of a 'transgendered writing style' could produce an 'identification with a transgendered experience', putting a trans spin on Hélène Cixous' influential 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1975), which implored women to write about their embodiment. (Jacques, 2021) [my italics]

Writing about trans experience is one response to a culture that would erase or stigmatise trans communities. Narratives can allow marginalised individuals to claim a voice in the public sphere and share their experiences widely. This article adopts 'embodied texts' to denote writing where an author represents their lived experience. This can include fiction or non-fiction, and this article will explore the example of a political manifesto. Importantly, writing is an act of *construction*, which only presents a version of reality. The messiness of experience is organised into a coherent structure using the language system available. Thus, as a system of signification, language mediates people's understandings of the world and how they conceptualise reality (Spender, 1980, pp. 2–3). Discourse both refers to and construes reality in a complex interactive relationship. While not arguing against the existence of an objective reality, this article contends that through discourse, people reproduce versions of reality. Likewise, Wittig (1993, p. 108) identifies two social realities of oppression: one material and one conceptual, with language as the tool to move between them. Importantly, linguistic articulation necessarily loses something in the process. It cannot express the whole and becomes an abstraction. Certain

aspects are retained, emphasised, or hidden when telling a story of oppression.

A dissonance is sometimes highlighted between the reality of trans lives and the discourses surrounding these. Shon Faye (2021) remarks that British media and academic institutions reduce the political struggles of trans people to a ‘toxic debate’ or ‘culture war’, to distract from “the material ways we are oppressed”. A recent report into Scottish trans and non-binary experiences highlights precarity around accessing public spaces, housing and employment (Scottish Trans, 2024). However, discourse not only distorts reality but acts upon it too. For example, trans-exclusionary arguments around toilet access put trans and gender nonconforming people at risk of violence and harassment (Jones and Slater, 2020). The ‘real’ and ‘discursive’ cannot be neatly separated. Material trans issues (for example, access to legal documents or single-sex spaces) also become implicated in larger ideological discussions around belonging and legitimacy. As language organises and communicates experience, it can become a tool for social change, impacting how people understand and engage with their social environment.

The study of embodied texts consolidates many insights about sex/gender as a ‘dialogic process’ and response, creating spaces where lived experience, society and culture meet. The writer as subject possesses agency in telling a version of events, utilising shared narratives and lived experiences in either established or novel ways. Simultaneously, they are constrained by genre conventions, expectations, their available resources and skills to deploy them. Their audience, whether real or imagined, creates an additional issue of legitimation. At every stage between the writer’s production and the reader’s interpretation, the real and constructed blur. Just as individuals are constituted through social interaction and discursive practices, stories constitute identities and so, “poststructuralism shades into narratology” (Davies and Harré, 1990, p. 46). Importantly, there are power relations involved, so people have varying levels of prestige and authority to make themselves understood. In criticising the “cultural turn” in feminism during the 1990s, from an analysis of ‘things’ to ‘words’, Jackson (2001, pp. 283–284) highlights that linguistic issues must be situated in an analysis of sociohistorical conditions. To adequately understand the impact

of discourse and narratives, theorists must consider its social context, especially the pressures under which it is produced.

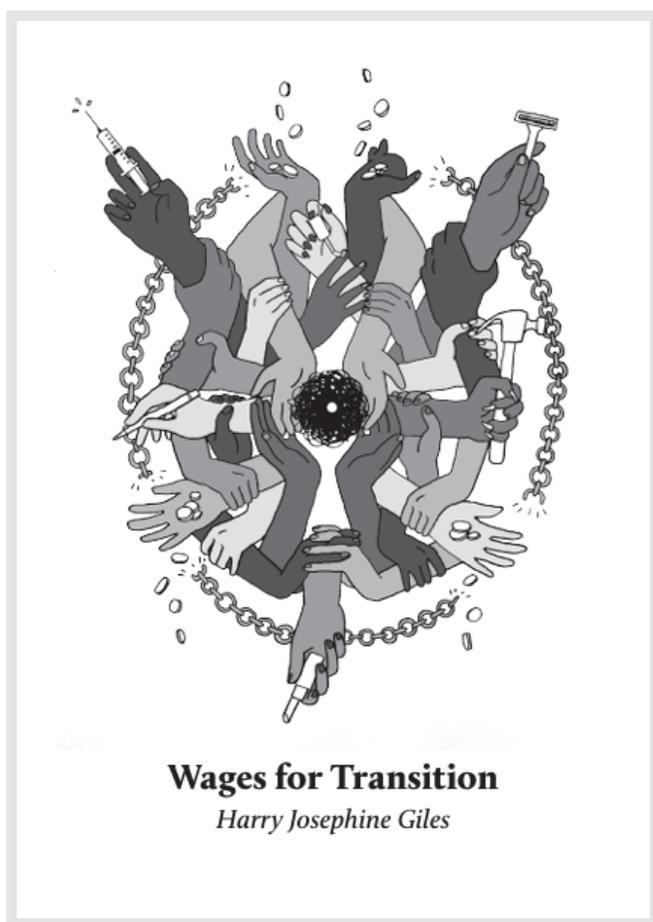
Between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, texts inscribing the trans experience were primarily written by medical professionals who pathologised gender nonconformity (Beemyn, 2013, p. 114). Christine Jorgensen's autobiography was ground-breaking and invited a wave of similar memoirs by trans women in the 1970s/80s (Beemyn, 2013, p. 115). Autobiographical writing can be empowering. The mere existence of narratives by trans people resists their erasure from public consciousness (Sherif, 2020, p. 312). The issue, however, is not merely representation but deference to people's understanding of their own experiences, allowing authentic expressions without conformity to others' discourses. Some academics tend to distinguish the medical discourses about trans experience from 'genuine' trans narratives (for example, see Heaney 2017). This distinction is used because of real subjugation and gatekeeping by medical professionals. This is examined very effectively by trans theorist Sandy Stone (1992) in response to Janice Raymond's seminal trans-exclusionary feminist book, *The Transsexual Empire*, which argued that trans people feed gender stereotypes, medicalise gender identity and appropriate women's bodies. Stone (1992) traces the origins of mainstream knowledge about trans people, attempting to construct a counter-discourse to Raymond and challenge misconceptions about trans identity. Stone (1992) explores how Western medical institutions have constructed the category of 'transsexual' as something that can be explicated, diagnosed and cured, guided by normative expectations around biology and identity. Importantly, whilst doctors aimed to explain and categorise trans identity, many trans people simply wanted to access medical treatments and understood they needed to repeat established medical narratives to achieve this (Stone, 1992, pp. 161–162). Thus, sex/gender diversity became homogenised to be made coherent under the sex binary, for example, 'born in the wrong body' narratives (Stone, 1992). Stone's text was a hugely influential transfeminist work. Nevertheless, Chu and Harsin Drager (2019, pp. 106–107) outline how Stone inadvertently inscribed a set of binaries into trans studies: inauthentic vs authentic; medical vs vernacular; transsexual vs post-transsexual. They argue that the fixation on going beyond medical narratives restricts understanding of trans identities.

Instead of ‘anti-normativity’, trans studies should seek to understand trans people’s attachment to norms, whether due to aspiration, convention, or survival (Chu and Harsin Drager, 2019, pp. 107–108).

A response always engages with existing norms and systems, responds *to* them. However, the form of this engagement varies, for example, to affirm, subvert, or expand. A response can not only talk ‘to’, but talk ‘back’, signalling the move towards a liberated voice, speaking to authorities as an equal (hooks, 2014). It is a critical question whether trans self-writing can ever break out of cisgender epistemologies (Choi, 2013). This also fits into the larger question of whether the oppressed can speak through the oppressor’s language (Spivak, 1988). The dynamic nature of language opens constant possibilities for change. While the social context limits the expressive possibilities for trans texts, with each new response to this context, texts may unlock new possibilities for the future (Gailey and Brown, 2016; Earles, 2019). Thus, fissures may appear in the hegemony, making positive change possible (Macgilchrist, 2016).

### **Wages for Transition**

This article now turns to an example of an ‘embodied text’ on sex/gender. The purpose of this is to demonstrate how the text functions as a ‘response’. Additionally, this text exemplifies the ‘relative



**Figure 1: Wages for Transition Cover Page.**

Harry Josephine Giles (2019). Available at: <https://harryjosephine.com/portfolio/3553/> (Licenced under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

freedom’ in this process as the writer effectively works with and against various norms to expand the reader’s understanding of sex/gender. *Wages for Transition* was written by Harry Josephine Giles in 2019. It is described as a “[...] manifesto zine about transfeminism, labour and social reproduction” (Giles, 2019). It engages with sex/gender through the extended metaphor of labour. The oppression of trans people is conceptualised as analogous to the oppression of workers under capitalism. Whilst engaging with aspects of embodiment, especially medical transition, it mainly presents sex/gender through the lens of work, not the body. It is divided into four sections: *Transition is work*; *Trans-Workplace Solidarity*; *Wages Against Transition*; *Trans Strike*. The text’s key points and strategies are summarised and then discussed in terms of what they reveal about sex/gender as a ‘dialogic process’ and a response.

The text begins with a metaphor of ‘gender’ as “unwaged work” (Giles, 2019, p. 5). Giles elaborates on this, outlining how transition entails ongoing labour, whilst the “workplace of gender” involves exploitation, exhaustion, alienation and precarity:

Marked by capitalism as those with too much gender and too little, we work a second shift, a third shift, a fourth, to acquire the resources necessary to produce our genders, to produce genders survivable under capitalism, at least for another year. And further, as those whom capitalism has produced through its cisheteropatriarchal division of sex classes and gendered labour, whom capitalism has spat out as the uncosted externality of gender, we labour to produce the very gender on which capitalism depends. You live in our work.

Our care work is unpaid. Our medical expertise is unpaid. Our gender production is unpaid. Our advocacy is unpaid. Our training is unpaid. Our support work is unpaid. Our teaching is unpaid. Our writing is unpaid. We are in poverty. And so now, at the very point at which our genders are beginning to be renaturalised by liberal capitalism, as the state offers a pittance of funding to our healthcare needs, we demand not merely free healthcare, not merely a place at work, not merely a reparation settlement: we demand wages for transition. (Giles, 2019, p. 6)

The use of pronouns (“we” vs “you”) marks the separation between margin and centre. As a marginalised group, trans people elucidate the boundaries of sex/gender; what is acceptable and what lies beyond. In this

way, trans people also produce sex/gender for the cis population (“you live in our work”). The notion of sex/gender here is quite Butlerian, coming to life through a series of acts. However, for Giles, these are specifically acts of *labour*. This brings the analysis into the field of Marxism, with relevant meditations on production and consumerism. Trans people live in poverty and must work to acquire capital to fund their transitions (for example, clothes, binders, hormones), which feeds back into the capitalist system and produces profit for companies (Giles, 2019, pp. 5–6).

In the first section, *Transition is Work*, Giles elaborates on how trans people labour to produce their sex/gender, viewing this experience through the lens of capitalism, power and exploitation:

Liberal capitalism would cast our transitions as products we buy as individual consumers, or as treatments we receive as individual patients, but in fact a transition under capitalism is a commodity we labour with others to produce, a process from which surplus value is extracted to accumulate capital for bosses and in which everyone else is paid but us.

The GP whom we persuade to refer us to the Gender Identity Clinic is paid to be educated by us, but we are not paid as teachers. For two years we sustain our wounded selves and each other as we wait to be seen, but we are not paid as care workers. When we finally meet the GIC psychiatrist, we must rehearse and perform in the theatre of their office a plausible enough history to be deemed worthy of treatment, but we are not paid as actors. When the psychiatrist produces a diagnosis which is exchanged for a prescription, we are not recognised as co-labourers in that production process. As we shape the raw material of our bodies we are not paid as surgeons, but our surgeons will be paid a considerable fee by the state for the effects they jealously guard. (Giles, 2019, p. 7)

Because trans people are not recognised as co-labourers, their work becomes voluntary and unwaged, their expertise and efforts unrecognised. Importantly, they cannot accumulate capital because they do not control the tools of transition—which are largely owned by the medical establishment—and cannot profit from their own labour. Again, this is analogous to the idea of workers’ lack of control over the means of production. Gender communism is presented as the answer to this. As trans people are often excluded from the “white supremacist ableist capitalist

healthcare system”, trans communities form where trans people share resources, educate and care for each other (Giles, 2019, p. 8). Interestingly, Giles blurs the traditional distinction between productive and reproductive labour. Trans people labour to re-make their community *and* create profit for others in this process as institutions capitalise off trans work, consumerism and culture (Giles, 2019, pp. 8–9). Giles crucially positions transition/labour as both the condition for oppression under capitalism, and the site for resistance (Giles, 2019, p. 10). Transition/labour can be painful, exhausting and oppressive, but when collectivised and egalitarian, it can also be joyful and free.

Next, *Trans-Workplace Solidarity* establishes affinities between marginalised groups: racial minorities, disabled people, women, trans people. Whilst hinted at earlier, Giles now explicitly acknowledges hierarchies of privilege and oppression produced under European imperialism and capitalism. This creates stratification amongst the trans community, where some individuals emerge more powerful than others. The function of the labour metaphor is now clear, because viewing transition as labour allows bridges to be formed with other marginalised groups also oppressed under capitalism (Giles, 2019, p. 11). Capital and labour unite various marginalised classes, from the theft of land and resources from indigenous people under *colonialism*, to the injury and exclusion of *disabled people*, to the treatment of *women* (Giles, 2019, pp. 11–13):

[...] all women labour to be women, and that work is also the work of transition. This is not to say that there is a natural pre-gendered state from which women labour to be women, nor that the marked difference between “trans people” and “women” as intersecting classes is immaterial, but simply that all womanhood is alienated labour for another’s purpose, that all gender is always suspect. To transition is not to cross from one fixed point to another, nor to become the gender that one always was, but rather to engage with dubious agency and fraught embodiment the ongoing work of being gendered. Thus we seek not the happy promise of gender euphoria as closure, but rather better working conditions under gender. Thus we call on all women to join us in our struggle for wages for transition and to take their part of the rewards. (Giles: 2019, pp. 12–13)

Giles engages with the normative views of transition (“to cross from one fixed point to another...”) to reject these. Rather than transition as an experience dividing trans and cis women, transition/labour is used to unite all women. The Marxist notion of alienation is utilised here. ‘Alienation’ denotes the divorce of product from its producer through:

[...] being *appropriated* as private property, and secondly by being *transformed* into a social force that operates outside the producers’ control and against their interests. (Øversveen, 2021, p. 447)

Similarly to transition, Giles characterises womanhood as “alienated labour” performed for another’s benefit. Like trans people, women do not control the means of sex/gender production and can only engage with this through “dubious agency and fraught embodiment”. With a conceptual shift that views bodies according to their level of agency and control, not just biological characteristics, Giles can account for the importance of embodiment, whilst shifting the boundaries between “women” and “trans people”, creating solidarity.

In the final sections, *Wages against Transition* and *Trans Strike*, Giles (2019, pp. 13–16) outlines a vision for a new horizon for both trans people and women, characterised by collectivism and communisation of gender, as well as a route to get there through unionisation, strike, seizing and sharing resources:

We will not gift our transitions to the state, but steal from the state our transitions. The work of transition is the work of class struggle, and only the actions of solidarity that form a revolutionary class consciousness can bring about the abolition of that class. (Giles, 2019, p. 14) [...] Wherever trans people are organising together to redistribute resources, they are undertaking the ongoing communisation of gender, and we now demand wages for the work of transition, so that transitions can escalate until work itself is no more. (Giles, 2019, p. 16)

Thus, Giles (2019, p. 13) presents a potential route to fighting sex/gender oppression by attacking and restructuring capital. The text advocates for the “abolition of gender” through transforming labour relations to make them more favourable for the worker. Interestingly, the text campaigns both for stealing from the system and for change using the system. ‘Wages for transition’ could be compared to the demand for policies like a Universal Basic Income for workers. Giles creates a tension here. The state and its institutions are simultaneously sites for exclusion and oppression, as well as justice and equality.

Giles’s analysis is highly effective, although this article does not specifically endorse a Marxist feminist approach to combat the current gender-critical movements. *Wages for Transition* merely exemplifies how sex/gender functions as responsive and dialogic, as well as one-way feminist politics can engage with corporeality without biological essentialism. This text is clearly designed to challenge systems of oppression by offering a new conceptualisation of sex/gender as work. A response is *to* something and comes *from* somewhere. It is necessary to consider factors like the actor, medium and context for any response. Here, the actor/writer is trans but notably chooses the first-person plural (“we”) throughout the text to take up a collective voice on behalf of the wider trans community. This strategy suits the medium of manifesto. It is written within and towards the current UK-context (Giles, 2019, p. 7), although



**Figure 2: Last Page of Wages of Transition**

Harry Josephine Giles (2019, p. 20).

Available at:

<https://harryjosephine.com/portfolio/3553/> (Licenced under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

some aspects remain generalisable to other capitalist societies. Furthermore, this is an explicitly intertextual work which incorporates Marxist theory whilst re-working earlier, mostly socialist feminist texts, including *Wages for Housework*, *Wages for Advocacy*, and *Radical Transfeminism Zine* (Giles, 2019, p. 17). Giles responds to the other revolutionary texts she draws from, as well as to the existing social structures of capitalism, ableism, white supremacy (etc.). In many ways, the terms of discourse, like those of power, are already set. Social structures impose limitations on subjects, creating real hierarchies in which some are privileged, whilst others suffer exclusion and discrimination. Additionally, Giles cannot produce a Marxist-feminist text without invoking the norms of such an analysis, including its strengths and limitations. For example, despite attempting to discuss various types of discrimination, her text retains the ‘grand theory’ approach of Marxism by viewing capital and labour as the ultimate root of oppression, which can be criticised for being overly essentialist (Jackson, 2001, p. 284). Indeed, Giles (2019, p. 11) admits that not all transition can be viewed through the lens of wage labour, but that this is a strategy to create solidarities. Indeed, the function of metaphor is to illustrate the relationship or likeness between two concepts. It is, by nature, a reductive literary technique, but can also be highly effective.

In summary, viewing sex/gender as a dialogic process is to acknowledge that people are in constant interaction with the social world in which they live. Sex/gender is only ever a response to existing norms and social conditions. To use the metaphor of conversation, no new topic can be started that is not already affected by history, culture and social convention. However, with each new response, comes the opportunity to talk back to norms and power structures, to do something different with them, and shift the terms that have been set. As *Wages for Transition* demonstrates, there is always room for agency, as people can choose how to use the resources available to them. A response engages with social conditions and norms but can do so to repeat, subvert, or transform these. Giles’s response: an embodied text that aims to highlight the ongoing labour involved in both transition and survival under capitalism, and to build solidarity among oppressed groups. Whether such a text can transform social structures is

uncertain, but it can catalyse change and move people. At the very least, it expands understandings of sex/gender, oppression and resistance.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, and in response to gender-critical feminism, this article has argued that it is productive to view sex/gender not as static and fixed but a *dialogic process*. This process entails continuous interaction between the subject and the world around them, including biological factors, culture, social systems, structural conditions and other people. This article has assumed that there is no self or identity before social influence. People inherit complex histories of norms that constrain sex/gender in a sociocultural context, and their consciousness evolves within these constraints. They are always in the middle, with no identifiable beginning or end. They can only ever *respond* to the prevailing structures and conditions in which they find themselves. However, a response may manifest in a multitude of ways, and each response brings opportunities for change. This article has focused on how trans people respond to erasure by writing about their lived experiences. It has discussed an example, *Wages for Transition*, a manifesto zine which expands understandings of sex/gender by repositioning this as another form of labour under capitalism. This article argues that the theme of *response* is well-suited to analysing sex/gender in motion. This heterogenous, dynamic view allows space for regeneration. Contrary to prevailing worries that broadening cultural understandings of sex/gender will erase its meaning, it is this constant negotiation that keeps it alive, open to changes and new articulations, that ultimately imbue it with meaning.

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