

Embodying Autonomous Trans Health Care in Zines

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Abstract This short article discusses recent trans health-care zines that have emerged from collectives rooted in radical care practices and mutual aid in the United Kingdom and Europe. This includes the publications *Dysphoria*, *Power Makes us Sick*, *Radical Transfeminism*, and *Wages for Transition*. It considers the embodied politics that emerge through the manifestos, writing, illustrations, and poems included within these zines, and the forms of bodily being they elaborate. In the context of the second half of a decade defined by fiscal austerity in Europe and the ongoing underresourcing of trans-specific health-care services in the United Kingdom, it details the practices and imaginaries of trans social reproduction, autonomy, and liberation that have emerged through these publications.

Keywords trans zines, trans health care, transfeminism, queer zines, social reproduction

Our health system which demands acceptability within society, the right papers, the right diagnosis, a clear gender marker for the doctor to “understand” our bodies, is a system in which we despise and in which we will clearly fail.

—Power Makes us Sick, *Power Makes us Sick*, no. 3

Trans health is bodily autonomy. . . . We will enhance our collective knowledge, so that the means to understand our bodies is universally available.

—Edinburgh Action for Trans Health, “Trans Health Manifesto”

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.

—Harry Josephine Giles, *Wages for Transition*

Over the past five years, a number of transfeminist zines have emerged in the United Kingdom and Europe that have elaborated and amplified radical perspectives on transgender health care. Zines such as *Dysphoria*, *PMS (Power Makes us Sick)*, *Radical Transfeminism*, and *Wages for Transition*—and the articles, interviews, poems, illustrations, manifestos, and memes contained within them—constitute a significant intervention into popular dialogues and perceptions around trans health. In particular, they use the print medium alongside virtual distribution as PDFs to make arguments that connect trans-specific aspects of health care (such as accessing hormones and surgeries, pathologization, transition, and other treatments) with the broader material conditions of contemporary Europe, including but not limited to regimes of economic austerity, migration and borders, housing and mental health provisions; and ableism, racism, sexism, and transphobia in health care, public services, and culture more broadly. Emerging from practices within trans, queer, and feminist communities of mutual aid and collective care, these zines have developed an important discursive space for the elaboration and expansion of trans imaginaries and the assembly of collective power over trans and queer bodies. In a moment when, in the United Kingdom, accessing state-based trans health-care provisions involves long waiting times and subjection to psychiatric power within conservative gender clinics,¹ these zines propose the importance of activating agency and building bodily autonomy among trans, nonbinary, and genderqueer people through community and collective practices. These positions emerge out of material necessity, as trans survival under devastating economic conditions and within the context of the gender binary as a regime of oppression remains challenging and at times exhausting. They understand that trans, nonbinary, and gender-nonconforming lives are built through mutual support and that gender expressions and embodiments manifest more fruitfully under collectively supported conditions, and they propose communalizing the forms of care labor, technology, and discourses that facilitate trans life. Infused with the spirit of “gender hacking” elaborated in Paul Preciado’s *Testo Junkie* (2008, English translation published in 2013)—to experiment with one’s body and gender expression through chemical and physical prosthesis—these zines reflect the communalization of this ethos within the discussions, work, and praxis of the present moment, as one means among others toward trans liberation.

Trans zines are inextricably linked with queer (and) feminist zine culture, which has typically involved producing independent, photocopied publications, from a do-it-yourself (DIY) or do-it-together ethos, often on little budget, outside institutional contexts, or within their undercommons.² Queer zine culture is typically herstoritized in connection with the Riot Grrrl, Queercore, punk, and third-wave feminist subcultures of early 1990s North America.³ Self-styled

transgender zines have been produced in the UK at least since the mid-1990s—with 1990s publications including the activist, culture, and theory zine *Genderfuck*, later renamed *Radical Deviance: A Journal of Transgendered Politics*, and the drag punk zine *Girly: A Transgender Zine*.⁴ The 2010s has seen the spread of queer zine fairs, distros, presses, and individual publications across the UK and Europe emerging from LGBTQI, feminist, and leftist community and activist infrastructure; this has developed alongside the significant online resources of the Queer Zine Archive Project (founded in 2003) and the POC Zine Project (founded in 2010). Activist organizations (such as the UK trans liberation organization Action for Trans Health),⁵ politicized community spaces, and zines (such as *Dysphoria* zine) operating either physically or virtually as collectives have been key sites for the development of radical perspectives on trans health care, perspectives that have been forged through the production, circulation, and reading of zines alongside internet forums. However, forums like Reddit and Facebook groups tend to be given more importance for the spread of these discourses than zines.⁶ Distros and events have used the internet and social media to spread the word, from advertising wares to calls for contributions.

Focusing on Anglophone writing either produced in the UK or produced elsewhere in continental Europe and explicitly in dialogue with UK activist work, this report from the field on the cultural production of zines brings together some of the perspectives articulated in an array of publications from the last five years. I address a few of the key arguments made within them and the concepts and imaginaries that drive them, such as of trans autonomy, social reproduction, and liberation. I argue that the zines, as an embodied, collectively produced print media, enable the spread of ideas, practices, and wider knowledge that give rise to liberated forms of trans embodiment.

My perspective emerges from dialogues and practices that I have been a part of as a radical transfeminist, queer activist, and coeditor of the zine *Radical Transfeminism*—although these dialogues and practices reach beyond Anglophone transfeminisms. In interrelated Hispanophone, Francophone, and Italo-phonetic contexts, transfeminist discourses have developed since the late 1990s through activist conferences, workshops, discussions, zines, and other avenues.⁷ Deploying transfeminism as a political alternative to Anglo-American formulations of “queer” that abstract from the body, a politics of alliance has been built under its banner that emphasizes the materiality of bodies and the material conditions of embodied life under capitalist heteropatriarchy.⁸ Furthermore, it might be argued that the politics of Anglophone transfeminism has been limited by its own monolingualism and has been challenged in the UK by transfeminism(s) centering migrant perspectives, but I refrain from developing this argument here.

Embodying (through) Trans Zines

Presumably owing to ease of production, most of the zines named at the opening of this article (see fig. 1) are produced as A5 (5.8 × 8.3 in.), stapled publications, featuring scanned illustrations and handwritten sections alongside text formatted on desktop publishing software. *Power Makes us Sick* is, however, produced as 4.0 × 8.3 in. and printed on multiple colored papers (bright yellow, red, pink, salmon, and white). *Dysphoria* is printed in color throughout, with black, blue, yellow, and turquoise pages dotted with slugs, jellyfish, other life forms, and human chests. *Radical Transfeminism* features grey, lavender, pink, red, and yellow visuals on its covers; its front features a shaded, anxious face with scruffy black hair, dark brows, eyes without pupils, and cheeks tugged by hands with short, red fingernails; and its inside covers feature a rich claret-colored background. *Wages for Transition* has an off-white card cover, illustrated with a multitude of arms gripping onto each other in a complex circuit, some hands holding syringes, razors, coins, tubes of lipstick, and hammers, at points snapping the chain that surrounds them.⁹ These two cover illustrations echo each other, with arms reaching out from the latter to relieve the anxiety written on the face of the former.

In comparison to the prevailing, long-term campaigns of transphobia in UK newspapers (and to a lesser extent, television), collectively authored and produced zines create a space and platform for a polyphony of trans perspectives.¹⁰ Combined with writing that foregrounds personal experience, often written from a first-person perspective, trans zines allow for the telling and discussion of intimate experiences and stories that are often belittled or ignored by dominant, normative society or the medical profession, including sexual experiences, experiences of violence, and traumatic medical encounters. Speaking personal truths to an imagined community of empathetic readers, who are often other trans, queer, or intersex people, establishes and develops discourses that reveal the oppressive workings of psychiatric, medical, or otherwise institutional power.¹¹ It also gives space to the intersections of trans and intersex health experiences with the dynamics of racism, sexism, ableism, xenophobia, and sanism. These personal experiences may be situated within wider historical contexts of the operation of these oppressions and the Western colonial project more broadly, linking trans health care to anti-imperialist struggles for bodily autonomy (such as legacies of the work of the Young Lords Party within the United States, struggles against virginity testing of South Asian women in Britain in the 1970s) and against religious clampdowns against proto-feminist healing practices (such as with witch trials in the sixteenth century) (Edinburgh Action 2017; PMS 2018a, 2018b; Qasim 2017). They connect the struggles of poor trans people, who cannot easily procure access to medications or clinics owing to their expense, to the need for a transformative politics rooted in collective social change



Figure 1. Trans health-care zines, in clockwise order: *Dysphoria: A Map of Wounds*, *Power Makes us Sick*, no. 3, *Radical Transfeminism*, *Power Makes us Sick's Building towards an Autonomous Trans Healthcare*, and Harry Josephine Giles's *Wages for Transition*. Photograph by the author.

as a means to forestall despair. In particular, writings by trans people of color within the zines emphasize the need to problematize Eurocentric formulations of gender and gender transition, while recognizing that discourses around trans and health care in the UK don't tend to factor in the maltreatment of Black and brown people, migrants, disabled people, and working-class people within institutional health-care settings.¹² In a context in which the World Health Organization has formally announced the depathologization of trans—although, in the UK context, the gender identity clinics, which are responsible for state provision of trans-

specific health care, remain overseen by psychiatrists—these zines and their producers envision possibilities of the health, embodiment, and being of trans, nonbinary, and other gender-nonconforming people as separated from biopolitical regimes of state management and the ongoing colonial legacies of these states.

These zines attend to the extremities of mental and physical distress faced by many trans people—including that caused by the pathologizing practices of trans-specific health care, and the legacies of forced sterilization practices, past and in places ongoing. Refusing the separation of the Cartesian mind/body divide, these zines attended to and detailed experiences of transphobia, harm, and the mapping of wounds, grazes, and brokenness (Dysphoria Collective 2017; *Radical Transfeminism* 2017).¹³ These affects are situated in the context of political power struggles between neoliberals and ethno-nationalist neofascists on one side, and the antiracist and left-wing social movements on the other. Writing in *Trans Reproductive Justice*, Mijke van der Drift (2019: 8) situates contemporary “debates” regarding the forced sterilization of trans people as part of legacies of eugenics in Europe and Europe’s drive toward progress—within this logic, “what is not seen as better must be repressed, removed, detained.” This holds for the repression of trans reproductive rights and the lives and opportunities of migrants within Europe (8). Also emphasized is the importance of healing practices, which are supported through collective care and accountability. Describing “the DISPOSSESSION of knowledge of healing, and the distancing from a desire to commit to healing above all—from the earth, from elders, from friends and loved ones, from the teachers of our trauma,” *PMS* describes healing knowledge as “a life force because it is literally what remains within us from our lived experiences, provided that we are able to survive” (*PMS* 2018b). Identifying the prevalence of chronic pain alongside other physical health conditions among trans people, Edinburgh Action for Trans Health writes in its manifesto (originally published online but widely reprinted in zines), “We believe that the epidemic of chronic conditions in our communities is a consequence of the war of attrition waged against us over centuries.”¹⁴ By rooting trans experiences within wider historical struggles of minorities against institutional and colonial powers, these zines hold the memory of the (at times traumatic) harm experienced by trans people as a means toward healing and material transformation.¹⁵

As self-produced media used by marginalized groups, zines manifest what Alison Piepmeier (2009: 58) describes as “embodied communities”: “Zines instigate intimate, affectionate connections between their creators and readers, not just communities but . . . embodied communities, made possible by the materiality of the zine medium.” While these trans zines exist in both printed and digital mediums—which, as Brouwer and Licona (2016: 78) theorize, are “distinct and distinctly affective domains, with dis/similar affective possibilities and

constraints, coherences and incoherences, and intensities”—their existence as physical and virtual objects forge and affirm embodied communities of trans and gender-nonconforming people. As printed matter and digital publications, these zines enter different means of circulations, tapping into audiences beyond the reach of their print runs of four hundred to seven hundred copies. Whether in real life or via the internet, the affective and political urgency of these publications has had a transformative impact on the people who encounter them. The zines are creative spaces for the sharing of trans expressions and discussion of cultural production, sex, relationships, and social life more broadly, and questions and issues facing various trans communities with regard to material deprivation—all of which are made possible by their existence as small-scale, personal productions. The stories and experiences discussed in their pages, reflected also in the personal tone of the writing and the illustrations and patterns that surround the words, provide solidarity and reflection for readers who may have experienced similar harms or struggles. The knowledge contained within these zines works to expand the consciousness and practices of their readers in claiming agency over their bodies, encouraging the development of autonomous community health care. For instance, *PMS* regularly reports on mutual aid groups and self-organized health-care projects, while offering herbalist approaches to manage particular stresses and experiences faced by trans and queer bodies.

Wages for Transition and *Transitional Demands* offer poetic and grounded accounts of the work that goes into caring, supporting, and advocating for trans people (including ourselves) (Giles 2019; Cohn 2013). Developing in dialogue with writing and theorizing social reproduction from a queer and trans perspective (Raha forthcoming-a; Cohn 2016; Pitt and Monk 2016), *Wages for Transition* adapts the rhetoric of Marxist feminist manifestos on social reproduction to reveal the relation of trans caring labor to waged labor—that it is unwaged and necessary for the survival of lives in-between capitalism’s hegemonic gender binary and moreover aspires to undo the gender binary as a central pillar of organization of capitalist social life, labor, and the nuclear family. This is work that is additionally complex for nonbinary and genderqueer people refusing this binary while transitioning. Giles (2019: 8) writes: “When we seize workers’ control of the production of our genders, we are struggling towards a transition beyond capital, and kin beyond the family. When transition is taken away from the administration, exploitation and custody of health care institutions, it emerges as a form of collective resistance.” “Transition,” Giles continues, “is the protest of life against capital, the revolutionary productive force for humans” (8). Transition becomes a means to work collectively, to overcome the individualization of trans narratives and social atomization once prescribed to transsexuals by the gender clinic (that is, to disappear into cisnormativity through going stealth). The zines

invite their readers to embody their printed substance—to reflect and consider the political underpinnings of the physical, biochemical, and gendered lives, with the promise that alternative practices might make these lives more possible, livable, and supported.

Drawing on Sylvia Rivera and Marsha P. Johnson's Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR)—a group of brown, Black, and white homeless youth trans women sex workers who housed, fed, and supported each other in early 1970s New York¹⁶—calls for autonomous trans health care are echoed, and sometimes critiqued, across these zines: for trans-led clinics, for research regarding trans-specific health care, such as research into the long-term physical effects of hormone therapy, including on reproductive organs; and for the power of clinics to work for their users (Edinburgh Action 2017; Drift 2019; Giles 2019). Some writers within their pages are careful to acknowledge the importance of collectivity in supporting the decisions of individuals regarding what they do with their bodies, knowing that these decisions are not made in isolation and require community and collective support (Drift 2019: 15). These zines are assembling new dialogues on trans reproductive justice, connecting issues such as the cost of accessing technologies to store gametes, abortion rights and access, and the decriminalization of sex work while critiquing the relationship between models of informed consent and the lack of knowledge around long-term research into biological reproduction for trans people (Drift 2019).¹⁷ The gender binary may not simply fall at the hands of trans printed matter, but the embodied consciousness and forms of organizing that might bring about its obsolescence are readily available among these pages.

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Notes

1. For important, recent critiques of trans health-care provision by gender identity clinics (GICs) in the UK, from sociological and political perspectives, see Pearce 2018 and Gleeson and Hoad 2019. Since the coronavirus pandemic, the Trans Health UK (2020) website has been publishing the waiting times of GICs online, which at the time of writing vary from twelve to forty-six months.
2. On the “trans strike” in *Wages for Transition*, Harry Josephine Giles (2019: 13) writes, “We steal from our bosses, running thousands of copies of transfeminist zines off our zero hours teaching assistant printer budgets.” See also Harney and Moten 2013.
3. For a partial history of zine culture with a North American queer and trans people of color focus, see Daniel C. Brouwer and Adela C. Licona (2016: 74–75).
4. I discuss *Radical Deviance* in my article “Queer Memory in (Re)constituting the Trans Lesbian 70s in the UK” (Raha, forthcoming-b). For an account of *Girly*, see Murphy 2013. The 2000s also saw the appearance of numerous trans zines such as *Masculine Femininities*.
5. Action for Trans Health is a grassroots organization working toward democratic trans health care and trans liberation. Initially based in Manchester and Northwest England, the organization developed into a network of local groups and activists across England and Scotland. At the time of writing, many of the chapters are not active—a few key resources and solidarity funds remain available, and many people who were active in the organization are involved in local mutual aid and prison abolition groups.
6. For instance, Jules Gleeson and J. N. Hoad (2019) emphasize the importance of these virtual platforms for the “pioneering healthcare practices of today’s trans communities.”
7. Karine Espineira and Sam Bourcier (2016) provide an account of the genealogies of transfeminism in France and Spain and deployments of postporn as transfeminist praxis. See also Bourcier’s *Queer Zones* (2018).
8. As Lucía Egaña and Mariam Solá (2016: 75) describe, transfeminist organizers hold that *transfeminism* as a word “feels more embodied and more meaningfully contextualized . . . than *queer*,” whereby transfeminist collectives “focus on the kinds of individuals that traditional feminism hasn’t fully addressed as subjects”—including trans people, “dykes, butches, sex workers, fags, and people with functional diversity to name a few.”
9. The cover images for *Radical Transfeminism* and *Wages for Transition* are drawn by Mukund and Han Deacon, respectively.
10. It is also the case that some of the contributors to these zines are also journalists, whose writing appears in both establishment and independent media outlets—such as that of Travis Alabanza, Kuchenga Shenje, Wail Qasim, and others.
11. In the “Trans Health Manifesto,” discussing the ongoing power struggles and delays (conceived as a form of administrative violence) in seeking trans-specific health care on the National Health Service, Edinburgh Action (2017) write, “We wholly reject the NHS’s attempt to codify the abuse, torment & traumatisation of trans people under the guise of ‘healthcare.’ We demand accountability for the historic & present abuse of power that the NHS has encouraged glorified psychiatrists to carry out. You do not own our bodies, you cannot control our lives, and you will not prevent our needs being met.”
12. In particular, see the writing of Jay Bernard (2017) and Bernard’s interview with Raju Rage (Rage 2017).
13. For an elaboration of the concept “transfeminine brokenness,” see Raha 2017.

14. Reprinted in *Radical Transfeminism* (2017: 56–61) and PMS’s *Building toward an Autonomous Trans Healthcare* (2018a). Trans activists and academics have also translated the manifesto into French and Italian.
15. Healing is of course not the same as a cure, a complex of promises and practices rooted in ableist ideas, as importantly and poetically elaborated by Eli Clare (2017).
16. For a reflective account of STAR, see Rivera 2002; for contemporary reflections, see Tourmaline, Stanley, and Burton 2017.
17. For poetic and scientific accounts of these latter points, see cárdenas 2016 and Fix et al. 2020. Two trans-led clinics providing trans-specific services are now active in Europe—the BPoC-led Trans United clinic in Amsterdam and CliniQ in London.

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