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## Transfeminism and Political Forms of Life

### ***Abstract***

It is sometimes argued that there are pre-political, ‘natural’ characteristics that have a significant role in rendering political subjects, for instance that women are the subjects of feminism. These same arguments criticise transfeminism as a usurper of feminist priorities on the grounds that it shifts focus to the rights of groups whose members are not exclusively women. This essay challenges that criticism. It begins by defining transfeminism as a form of activism and an epistemological tool, in order to address opposing views. I then propose a way out of the conflict by showing how we can make better sense of transfeminism aided by Wittgenstein’s concept of forms of life. Both views contend that there are biological and cultural features that constitute the uniqueness as well as the diversity of the given human form of life, without implying that this diversity leads to relativism. The paper concludes that transfeminism, when conceptualised correctly, can indeed work with other feminisms and political movements to counter institutionalised and market-driven gender politics that only simulate to address feminist concerns.

**Keywords:** Transfeminism, Wittgenstein, forms of life, feminist subject, sex-gender system

### ***1. Introduction***

It is sometimes argued (cf. Stock, 2018; Binetti, 2019) that there are pre-political, “natural” characteristics that define political subjects, for instance, that women are the only proper subjects of feminism. These same arguments criticise transfeminism as a usurper of feminist priorities on the grounds that it changes focus to the rights of groups whose members are not exclusively women. For instance,

lesbian feminists (cf. Jeffreys, 1994; Stock 2019) argue that it eliminates the political subject “women”, and therefore the subject “women who are attracted to women”, or “women who have sexual-affective relations with other women”. This paper aims to contribute to a better understanding of transfeminism by taking a step back to analyse its concepts in order to argue, with the aid of Wittgenstein’s notion of forms of life, that transfeminism is a cogent, useful form of feminist philosophy and politics.

The guiding question of this essay is whether there is a pre-political form of life that delimits the subjects of political movements, and what bearing Wittgenstein’s philosophy, in particular his discussion of forms of life, might have on this question. My answer is that there is no such form of life, or, put in other words, that a subject defined purely in biological or sociocultural terms runs counter to Wittgenstein’s definition of “forms of life”. This, however, will not imply that subjects are denied their biological characteristics; one must simply clarify how these are to be understood. If the argument is successful, it will then make sense to think of (feminist) subjects as open to new meanings, that they are not entirely stable or rigidly defined, but are somehow “in transit”. This leads us to conclude that there is room for understanding that feminism need not be conceptualised as a struggle of individual political agents with one clear common identity, but can instead focus on the form of life that is shared and modified by women, considering they are both particular and diverse beings. It is also important to examine how their needs and emancipatory actions are interconnected, not only among them, but also with other precarious subjects that are made invisible by socioeconomic patriarchal systems.

In the second section I will briefly introduce the concept of transfeminism, making it clear that it is neither a substitute for feminism nor a superior form of it. The third section connects transfeminist views with Wittgenstein’s forms of life, and shows how they can resist accusations of being relativistic in very similar ways. This connection will be explored in two different, though related, approaches, namely Sandra Laugier’s (2018a, 2018b) and Danièle Moyal-Sharrock’s (2015) readings of forms of life. Next, I present a

short discussion regarding relativism and agreement in transfeminist politics. I conclude with my own account of how transfeminism is a solid form of feminism, a valuable tool for building coalition politics that are founded not on identities, but on actions.

## **2. Transfeminism**

I would first like to point out that it is paramount to acknowledge the role that trans folks have played in theorising feminist epistemological tools and resisting the violence to which they are exposed, especially in regions like Latin America and the Caribbean<sup>1</sup>.

It is also crucial to point out that transfeminism would never have been thought of, let alone develop, without the feminists' invaluable efforts, through many difficult stages at different times and places, to extend rights to women. I must equally stress that the essay deals with a particular branch of transfeminist thought<sup>2</sup>, so that in this sense the analysis to be presented here is by no means exhaustive. But I hope it can at least clarify what we are *not* talking about when we talk about transfeminist philosophy.

Transfeminism indeed stems from trans activism but is not limited to it. In Spain, it came about in the late 1980s during a series of feminist working groups which called for the inclusion of trans women into feminist politics (cf. Fernández Garrido and Araneta, in Garriga-López 2019: 1619). In the United States, the term is attributed to Diana Courvant, who used it in 1992 at an event at Yale University. Courvant and Emi Koyama launched the webpage *transfeminism.org*, seeking to introduce the term into academic circles and connect with people who were working with akin concepts. As Emi Koyama puts it, transfeminism is

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<sup>1</sup> See for example violence statistics in Honduras: <https://www.ibanet.org/Fighting-transfemicide-in-the-Americas>. These cases are so pervasive in this part of the world that, after years of protests over the murder of trans women, the crime of 'transfemicide' has been typified in Mexico City. This means that it is recognised and legislated as a specific form of murder given the victim's characteristics as a trans person, and the kind of violence that is inflicted on them.

<sup>2</sup> There are significant differences in the meaning, theory and practise of transfeminism across countries like Mexico, the United States, Spain, Great Britain and Italy, so we cannot treat it as a single, unified concept or movement.

primarily a movement by and for trans women who view their liberation to be intrinsically linked to the liberation of all women and beyond [...] [It] stands up for trans and non-trans women alike, and asks non-trans women to stand up for trans-women in return (2001: 3),

thereby embracing feminist coalition politics from the outset. Transfeminist epistemology analyses the state of transit of individuals and communities. In using the term “transit”, it does make reference to the transition process from the gender assigned at birth<sup>3</sup>, but it does not consist exclusively in the incorporation of transgender discourse into feminism. Instead, it is a theoretical network that acknowledges multiple states of transit: of gender, migration, vulnerability, race and class, and argues that, in order to understand them, these should not be addressed in isolation. Transfeminism’s goal, then, is to open spaces and fields of discourse to all those contemporary practises and subjects and minoritarian becomings which are not directly taken into account by institutional, hetero-white-biologist feminism, that is to say, to all those who are left out of, or actively distance themselves from, the neoliberal appropriation of the feminist critical apparatus (cf. Cabrera and Vargas Monroy: 26), what we now know as “gender politics” or “women’s politics”<sup>4</sup> (Valencia 2018: 31).

The problem with gender politics is it often reduces feminist political struggle to the themes and guidelines of pragmatic and reformist feminism, captured by the State (cf. flores in Valencia 2018: 31). Transfeminism urges us to be critical of policies based on “gender perspective”, which have unjustifiably inserted women from the so-called “third world” into the dynamics of global economic orders, thereby ignoring the contexts of women’s lives and fabricating unrealistic solutions for eliminating their oppressions.

Another way to clarify its tenets is to point out that transfeminism explicitly declares that it is “a form of intersectional feminism founded on the understanding that sexism and transphobia are interlocking and mutually reinforcing systems of

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<sup>3</sup> This is only one view of the transition of trans people. Others undergo a sexual transition, and others transition to leave the man-woman binary. This essay is not the place to delve into the reasons for these differences, but see Guerrero (2020) and Bettcher (2020).

<sup>4</sup> All translations are mine.

oppression” (Garriga-López 2019: 1619). Once we understand the particularity and diversity of women’s lives, we can make sense of transfeminist demands: together with the chief tasks of achieving women’s equality and guaranteeing lives free from violence, feminism must take up issues pertaining to, as alluded to above, racism, classism, sexual dissidence (rejection of heteronormativity), and the lives of trans folks and other precarious bodies. They are all imbricated within the struggles of women. In other words, the scope of transfeminism includes those who are culturally, economically, socially and politically erased because their identities are unstable, given that they do not conform to the standards of contemporary western societies. These groups are characterised by being potentially disobedient, untamed, unruly, whose intersections dismantle sexual dimorphism and denaturalise oppressions (cf. Valencia 2018: 30).

To do justice for these groups, feminisms must outflank both the traditional Left as well as those “women’s voices dedicated to the institutional administration and managing of gender” (ibid.: 40). For example, transfeminism is not exclusively concerned either with anti-capitalism or with women’s politics, but aims to reframe the debate of progressive politics in order to avoid the pitfalls encountered by both movements. Its task is therefore to analyse and counter the sexual oppression of, for instance, working men over working women, and the alleged threat posed by homosexuality to proletarian masculinity; and on the other hand, to criticise how the methods of women’s institutional politics consist mainly in acquiring, say, government grants and political positions that hold them hostage to the will of those in power. Many times, gender politics reforms are “assistentialist”, consisting in seeking economic compensation for vulnerable women without assessing their surroundings or giving them a choice in building liveable lives. In policies like these, as Laugier writes, the precarity of women and the importance of human life go unrecognised, and care is “reduced to a vacuous or condescending version of charity” (2018a: 67)

Certainly, the highly debated question of trans women being unreservedly included as subjects of feminism is at stake here. Bettcher observes that there are at least two competing stances on

the lives of trans women: one that sees them as having been born in the wrong body who then transition to the other side of the binary, implying the plasticity of bodies; the other challenges the very man/woman binary. Bettcher proposes a third approach, one which accommodates trans people who see themselves within the binary while avoiding the pathologisation and naturalisation of gender identity (cf. 2013: 234). Transfeminism would support any of those transitions, but would not reduce them to an aesthetic discourse. These transitions should rather be part of an ethical and political project linked to other interdependent struggles of agents who come from different paths of life, whose corporalities, sexualities, and type of work, for example as carers or in the household, are made invisible by patriarchal rule. They share the goal of building sustainable lives outside of the more traditional economies and politics (Valencia 2018: 38, 39). Transfeminism therefore supports the de-pathologisation and de-stigmatisation of trans bodies, as well as the decriminalisation and empowerment of sex workers on account of the widespread labour discrimination faced by trans women “that pigeonholes them into sex work” (Garriga-López 2019: 1620).<sup>5</sup>

For transfeminism, it is crucial to expand the political subject of feminism (cf. Valencia 2018: 33), to challenge the ways in which contemporary subjectivity is produced and whose sole organising principle is the accumulation of capital (cf. Guattari and Rolnik in Valencia 2018: 35). The goal is to integrate the mobility among genders, corporalities and sexualities into feminist struggles, to create network-like coalitions that do not only battle gendered oppression, but are also concerned with the rights of workers, migrants, homeless and disabled people, and other groups that occupy different spaces of precarity.

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<sup>5</sup> Given the limited space of this essay, I cannot pursue the abolitionist-transfeminist debate. I hope this paper benefits researchers on the topic. See Bettcher (2013) and Guerrero (2020).

### **3. Transfeminism and Forms of Life**

The way transfeminism questions the feminist subject can be briefly put like this: “any effort to give universal or specific content to the category of women, presuming that that guarantee of solidarity is required *in advance*, will necessarily produce factionalization, and that ‘identity’ as a point of departure can never hold as the solidifying ground of a feminist political movement” (Butler 1992: 15). For, “if feminism presupposes that ‘women’ designates an undesignatable field of differences, one that cannot be totalized or summarized by a descriptive identity category, then the very term becomes a site of permanent openness and resignifiability” (ibid.: 16). An objection immediately arises: where does the openness of the meaning of the feminist subject stop? Do the foregoing considerations imply the concept is entirely open-ended? Looking for an answer, I will analyse two different, though connected, accounts of Wittgenstein’s concept of forms of life. Interestingly, both Laugier’s (2018a, 2018b) and Moyal-Sharrock’s (2015) arguments draw heavily from Stanley Cavell’s writings on the topic, but emphasise different aspects of the Wittgensteinian notion.

Wittgenstein reminds us that, when we ask for definitions, the meaning of many expressions does not ultimately rest in its reference to empirical reality, or to any allegedly deeper, more fundamental or abstract, reality. Language is not exclusively a set of descriptions of facts, but consists instead of *language-games*, where “the term ‘*language-game*’ is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life” (PI: § 23). “Giving descriptions” is just one activity in language, a part of its framework (PI: § 240). The whole framework of language in which we describe, order, pray, suggest, joke and perform innumerable other tasks is sustained by the constancy of the regularities and common behaviour of humans, in our agreement in our form of life (PI: § 241). This agreement is not a prior condition or moment before language comes into being, it is a “lived” agreement, an agreement in actions and judgments, not in definitions (RFM: VI § 39). It is the *given* condition from which language emerges (cf. Moyal-Sharrock 2015: 38).

This concept is useful for understanding transfeminism, because the latter similarly draws our attention to the context of use of expressions, the framework from which they come and where they are pertinent, in defining their meanings. It also shares the idea that (political, feminist) language is not only used to name objects, or subjects, nor refer to states of affairs. Language does not depict a scaffolding of facts that one by one make up reality, but is more like an activity that makes us see, as it were, the already complete building of language. As Wittgenstein writes: “the foundation walls are carried by the whole house” (OC: § 248). I believe that this metaphor of the house is not meant to portray language as static, but as habitable. The context of the cited paragraph is Wittgenstein’s discussion of the stopping place of doubt as we search for foundations of meaning. His insight is that there is a point where there is nothing more fundamental to our beliefs other than our being, our acting, convinced of them, such that not acting in accordance with them would be unimaginable, beyond the threshold of what is meaningful. The house Wittgenstein speaks of is the day-to-day form of life where we make sense, live and act.

Going deeper into Wittgenstein’s observations, Cavell warns that one must not read the concept of forms of life exclusively in a sociocultural, contractual or “anthropological” sense, since this would lead to conventionalism in language (cf. 1988: 258). To counterbalance this, he introduces a source of objectivity in the biological sense of forms of life, namely in the characteristics of our physical constitution, specificities like posture, strength, body and voice different from those of other lifeforms. He calls the former a “horizontal” sense of agreement in forms of life, and the latter a “vertical” sense (cf. *ibid.*: 255). Laugier uses this latter sense of form of life, Wittgenstein’s more biologically meaningful “lifeform” (*Lebensform*), to explain her view of a feminist ethics of care. She writes that the fact that the human life is constrained to the life of the human body, which is an expression of the human mind, reveals its vulnerability (cf. Laugier 2018b: 290). An ethics of care should give voice to humans “who are undervalued precisely because they accomplish unnoticed, invisible tasks, and take care of our basic

needs.” (Laugier 2018a: 56) Echoing Valencia’s transfeminist views of precarious subjects, Laugier’s ethics

is not founded on universal principles but rather starts from everyday experiences and the moral problems of real people in their ordinary lives. The notion of care is best expressed not as a theory, but as an activity: care as action (taking care, caring for) and as attention, concern (caring about). Care is at once a practical response to specific needs—which are always those of individual, singular others (whether close to us or not)—an activity necessary to maintaining persons and connections, work carried out in both the private and the public sphere, and a sensitivity to the ‘details’ that count. (2018a: 63)

Laugier thus makes the case that ordinary language philosophy, particularly Wittgenstein’s views, indeed calls on us to pay attention to neglected realities and the inherent vulnerability of the human lifeform (cf. 2018b: 277), a view of vulnerability which resonates with the tenets of transfeminism outlined above. She also makes the important feminist critique of how such neglect has harmed women’s lives by undervaluing the “domestic”, the household activities, particularly of caregiving. We must remember that “private” issues such as gender violence in the family, non-remunerated house work and reproductive rights, all of which affect women disproportionately, are public, political concerns. By directing our attention to see ordinary lives, without intellectual or social hierarchies (cf. *ibid.*: 280), she embraces transfeminism’s purposes of commitment to acknowledging different precarities as they exist, without prejudging their importance.

Moyal-Sharrock, on the other hand, takes Cavell to acknowledge that there is a mutual absorption of the natural or “vertical” sense of form of life, and the social or “horizontal” form of life (Cavell, 1996: 330, quoted from Moyal-Sharrock, 2015: 32), such that the human is irreducibly social and natural. We have characteristically human “ways of acting” as well as “natural living conditions” that make up the human form of life, which is not “a single way of acting [...] but must include innumerable other such ways of acting that cohesively form the necessary background or context or foundation of meaning” (Moyal-Sharrock 2015: 25). In agreement with Gertrude Conway’s characterisation of the human form of life, Moyal-Sharrock quotes that it consists in “the shared ways in which humans

exist and act and the natural conditions in which they live” (Conway 1989, quoted from: Moyal-Sharrock 2015: 28). She acknowledges that there does have to be “a certain constancy within the external world and the human way of being that allows for a characteristically human form of life, as distinct from the form of life of other beings” (*ibid.*). This is how our activities and ways of being within our forms of life become the mechanism that sets our understanding in motion and shapes intelligibility.

I believe this last approach better serves the purposes of transfeminist philosophy, as it is vital for the latter to first recognise and then dissolve the apparent and tricky sex-gender dichotomy, that is, the misconception that there is a given, sexed, human nature which assigns, among other things, a person’s membership to political groups, as well as their place in many artificial, oppressive hierarchies<sup>6</sup>. To shed some light on this, we should keep in mind Butler’s claim that a stably sexed body, core gender identity, and (hetero) sexual orientation are illusions perpetuated through repeated, stylised bodily performances, that is, “the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler 1999: 179). This means that the norms that govern the performativity of sexuality actually precede the question of the “givenness” of sex. Her approach bypasses questions about the “truth” or “originality” of gender expressions, and explains how idealising some of these expressions and banning others (e.g., that men have to be “masculine”, strong, fearless, tough, the only or primary breadwinners in a household) produces a violent hierarchy (cf. *ibid.*: viii).

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<sup>6</sup> Another reason to distance myself from Laugier’s views for present purposes lies in her discussion of just what it is that we accept when we accept a form of life. I concede that our agreement to a practise in language is not given once and for all, nor does it remain unalterable (cf. Laugier 2018b: 299), but I think intelligibility does depend on regimented practises beyond which we cannot make sense. One important point of this paper is to describe how regimented (“congealed”, as Butler would say) practises significantly delimit our notions of sex and gender. In a way, then, my choice as to what I can accept from a form of life is limited by something other than myself and my community, a claim that I take runs counter to some of Laugier’s thoughts on the matter.

To further attack the sex-based patterns of oppression we must understand that

one way the internal stability and binary frame of sex is effectively secured is by casting the duality of sex in a prediscursive domain. This production of sex as the prediscursive ought to be understood as the effect of the apparatus of cultural construction designated by *gender*. (ibid.: 11)

In other words, the sex-gender system is presented as a biological reality in no way altered by cultural, political factors. Butler's purpose is not to destroy the political subject, but to warn us that the coercive, hierarchical sex-gender system is based on our buying the idea that there is a sexed subject prior to gender. Her warning is that we must avoid advancing a political movement based on the supposedly neutral notion of sexed personhood. This can be regarded as an example of a conceptual confusion: the sex-gender system builds a violent *cultural* hierarchy that oppresses women, justified by alleged facts of humankind's *natural* history. For instance, we are told that women naturally tend to take care of the household and rear children, without accounting for the sexual division of labour, the concept of private property and many other social factors that play a role in the explanation of oppression. At issue here is the problematic notion of sex as pre-discursive, that is, prior to culture, as if the body were "a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts" (ibid.: 11).

Butler actually acknowledges that a Wittgensteinian reading of her work on performativity might be able to

assert that sexuality is constrained, and to understand the sense of that claim without taking the added and unnecessary step of then offering a metaphysics of constraint to secure the meaningfulness of the claim. (1993: 265, note 1 to Chapter 3)

For her, the constraints are certain constructions of the body constitutive in the sense that we could not operate without them; without them there would be no "I", no "we". One of these constitutive constructions is gender, for "bodies only appear, only endure, only live within the productive constraints of certain highly gendered regulatory schemas" (ibid.: xi) This, I believe, fits neatly with Wittgenstein's account of how forms of life condition and

embed our meanings in language, including our conception of the sexed body.

However, other feminist philosophers, like Jana CATTIEN, who make use of Wittgenstein's philosophy in their work, contend that there is a risk for feminism if it devotes itself to capturing "complex social stratification across gender, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality, etc., as well as the fragmented and contradictory nature of human subjectivity" (2017: 8). Still, she agrees that it is necessary to deny that the concept "women" is descriptive, and that one must instead attempt to capture the usage and usefulness of the term, especially for the feminist struggle (cf. *ibid.*: 14). Quoting Alcoff, she writes that employing the concept "women" only makes sense in a context of a patriarchy in which women are deprived of resources, opportunities and power *qua* women. This, as we have seen in the arguments presented above, does not mean that there is a distinctive essence of womanhood, but that gender is politically relevant (cf. *ibid.*) I agree with CATTIEN's claim that the oppression of women *qua* women is already charged with political meaning. Of course, there is a biological component of the oppression, which is complemented by a social and political perception, that of the subject playing a role as a sexual object and/or in reproduction, as well as in care-giving tasks. Now, if we ask if trans women are oppressed *qua* women, we can look again at Wittgenstein's elucidations. In PI § 67, he asks

Why do we call something a "number"? Well, perhaps because it has a—direct—relationship with several things that have hitherto been called number; and this can be said to give it an indirect relationship to other things we call the same name. And we extend our concept of number as in spinning a thread we twist fibre on fibre. And the strength of the thread does not reside in the fact that some one fibre runs through its whole length, but in the overlapping of many fibres.

But if someone wished to say: "There is something common to all these constructions—namely the disjunction of all their common properties"—I should reply: Now you are only playing with words. One might as well say: "Something runs through the whole thread—namely the continuous overlapping of those fibres."

Transfeminism considers that the concept of "women" is open to different, related lived experiences. It also highlights the interdependence of the fibres, the different conceptions of women

that belong to the different “women” forms of life (according to, say, ethnicity, or nationality, or being trans, for women are never “only” women) within the human form of life, and the way they are tightly bound to each other, as political subjects and as human beings. It emphasises that there is no central fibre, that is, that there is not one fundamental concept of woman, and no hierarchy among women. For this reason, if we may borrow Wittgenstein’s terminology, we can consider transfeminism a non-foundationalist view of feminism.

#### **4. Transfeminism, Relativism and Agreement**

One of the feminist accusations against transfeminism is similar to an objection sometimes posed against Wittgenstein’s philosophical method: that it leads to relativism. Just as language-games seem to fail to reveal a convincing essence of language, and the concept of form of life can be confusing and hard to accept as the ultimate given, the place where doubting stops, it looks as if transfeminism annuls the materiality of the bodies. Butler’s theory of performativity would then imply that there are no empirically real, objectively definable, sexed bodies. And it would appear as if the feminist subject could be anyone or anything. To such accusations, one should first reply with Wittgenstein’s point that we do not *choose* the regularities we observe and which constitute our form of life.

It is true that *anything* can be somehow justified. But the phenomenon of language is based on regularity, on agreement in action [...] But the criterion for this agreement is not just agreement with reference to definitions, e.g., ostensive definitions – but *also* an agreement in judgments. It is essential for communication that we agree in a large number of judgments. (RFM: VI § 39)

In addition, we must keep in mind Wittgenstein’s warning not to use Procrustean methods to accommodate our craving for definitions or generality. If we wish to account for the feminist subject, we must look at the contexts in which it appears. A term does not have a fixed set of established, appropriate uses, but its meaning “is made and improvised in its integration into practice and

expressivity” (Laugier 2018b: 285): It is precisely by being attentive to the changes and dynamics of ordinary life, the ordinary trials and challenges women from many different backgrounds face, that we can give a more coherent definition of the feminist subject, and adjust the strategies for its more complete emancipation. Put differently, “[a]pproaching ordinary lives sharpens and attunes our perception on what there is and what matters in them” (Diamond in Laugier 2018a: 76).

This is one of the aims of Wittgenstein’s philosophy: not to force concepts into sharpness, but to capture ‘unsharpness’ conceptually (MS 137: 64, quoted from Moyal-Sharrock 2015: 36), in order to remain faithful to the complexity of human contingencies. We do not need nor want a timeless, precise definition of feminist politics or subjects. The limits and scales of our agreements in political praxis are not knowable *a priori*, “no more than one can *a priori* know the scope or scale of a word” (Cavell in Laugier 2018b: 298). That is to say, one cannot determine *a priori* who is the proper subject of feminism, which political alliances are best suited for feminist purposes, or where feminism stands in relation to, for instance, free speech or de-platforming, at a given place and time. This openness allows feminism to grow and perfect itself, and branch out into unforeseeable paths, new avenues of struggle and coalition. “Yet this ‘unsharpness’ does not mean that our concepts are so elastic as to lack a ‘hard core’, or ‘a solid centre of meaning’” (ter Hark, 1990, quoted from Moyal-Sharrock, 2015: 36), for there are regularities in the feminist political form of life, as well as patterns of its struggles, that keep the feminist meaning in check. It is thus possible, perhaps even desirable, to have an unstable, albeit constrained category of “women”, one that is mindful of its changing implications in political theory and activism.

Another accusation lodged against transfeminism is that it risks a proliferation of identities. Critics worry that feminist politics will be split in order to accommodate all sorts of subjects and their particular political goals. But transfeminism, as we have seen, actually questions the very idea of identity, and so rejects the claim that people should be fragmented into different struggles based solely on who or where they are, seeking instead politics of coalition. In other

words, it advises us to be wary of making assumptions about the deeds based on claims about the nature of the doer. One cannot expect political actions to depend so heavily on certain common characteristics of subjects, like gender or class. Transfeminism urges us instead to focus on interconnected emancipatory actions within a shared form of life.

Some gender-critical feminist philosophers are “sceptical of the political value of accounts of womanhood that identify it as essentially involving possession of a feminine ‘gender identity’” and “insist that it’s politically essential to retain a clear conceptual differentiation between males and females, in order to continue to be able to name and refer to sex-based patterns of oppression, and harmful sociocultural stereotypes about the ‘right’ way for males and females respectively to be” (Allen 2019).

To the first part of the criticism, we can respond that, as explained above, transfeminism rejects the idea of rigidly defined identities from the outset. Femininity is a trait that need not belong solely to women and does not have to be denigrating. Consider how trans women are more heavily attacked when they present themselves as feminine, or even “excessively” feminine, but there are two ways to deal with this allegation. First, “excessive femininity” can be pejoratively attributed to anyone. If men show it, they are taken to be weak; if women show it, they are being subservient or immoral; if trans women show it, they are mocking and even being violent towards cis women. Secondly, some trans women have to be extra feminine in order to be more easily identified as women, so that they can obtain an identity card, a driver’s license, documents they need to live and earn a living. At times, this way of presenting themselves is not even an option, it is a must if they want to survive. Transfeminism will be the first to condemn femininity when it is imposed like a stereotype, not when it is freely chosen. If cis women are not criticised by (some) feminists for showing femininity, either in traditional or alternative ways, then why should trans women receive greater scrutiny and be the target of negative remarks, even be attacked, especially if, as has been argued above, their lives sometimes depend on it?

Regarding the second part of the gender-critical objection, if we want to name and refer to sex-based patterns of oppression, we do need conceptual differentiation, but this need not be based on identities. Feminism ought to focus on the lived realities of people, and should particularly include those outside of the Western countries where most of the gender-critical vs transfeminist debate takes place. If we take a closer look at these other contexts, we will be able to see how normative ways of “being a man” or “being a woman” affect everyone, but that trans people are disproportionately targeted in some scenarios, just as mixed-race people, elderly women or girls are in others. Paying attention to these diverse forms of life does not mean that feminism has to split up into a plethora of “priorities” until it breaks apart. It does mean that feminism must work within itself and with other social and political movements in a conjoined effort to achieve more complete, better-informed, long-term results in freedoms and rights.

Bettcher has argued that the conceptual change transfeminism must propose should be

not only an expansion of the category [women], but also a change in use, reflected in the grammar of first and third person assertions. It is no longer merely a question whether the category is truthfully predicated of the object in question. Instead, there is a first person, present tense avowal of gender. The political conflict, at any rate, is framed in terms of competing cultural formations where the dominant one possesses institutional power and the capacity to enforce a way of life and way of seeing the world, regardless of the personal costs to the trans people involved and regardless of subcultural social practices which help give their lives meaning. (2020)

Transfeminism does not intend to make the subjecthood of “women” disappear, but to situate it as a concept that works within various forms of life, in which dominant institutions, like heteronormativity and racism, enforce ways of living that make only selected individuals intelligible, deserving of dignity and recognition. Taking all this into account, the idea that Butler, Bettcher and transfeminist thinkers have advanced is simply that feminism must question and analyse the arbitrariness and the complexity of the sex-gender system, the fact that it implies more than just the oppression diverse men exert over diverse women. A more robust feminist

critique is needed to make sense of how the sex-gender system is invalidly imposed on all aspects of our forms of life, segregating the biological and sociocultural aspects of human sexuality, and violently allocating feminine and masculine subjecthood.

## **5. Final Remarks**

The objective of this paper has been not only to defend transfeminism against the currently pervasive accusations of its being incoherent, relativistic or “anti-women”, but also to help define it more accurately and consider how it might prove valuable in aiding contemporary feminist movements. Moyal-Sharrock’s conclusion that Wittgenstein’s elucidations imply there is no pre-cultural form of life has here been extended to affirm that there are no pre-political subjects, and so one must question how the notion of “women”, as subjects of feminism, is to be understood.

Many helpful insights can be drawn from Laugier’s reading of forms of life. It can help make the case for a transfeminist philosophy, as it directs our attention to ordinary lives, to understand their vulnerability, not just in social terms, but also of their very existence. “This means a vulnerability that connects the social and natural sense of life, the normativity of rules and of life itself, and which is inherent in human encounters” (Laugier 2018b: 290). We may also say that it points us toward seeing bodies and lives that we sometimes consider unintelligible because we cannot fix their identities, or because these are hidden in private, undervalued, disappearing spheres of society. It makes us see that people in transit are not just vulnerable at a social level, but authentically at the level of their humanity.

A related aim has been to bypass the politics of representation, so that feminist practises are not assimilated into the capitalist logic of subjectivity, the much-feared “identity politics”, in order to accurately theorise and criticise the dogmatic standardisation of bodies, affections and desires, something with which gender critical feminists might actually agree.

Transfeminist insights have allowed us to see the binary system of gender in a different light. One could argue that heteronormativity has surreptitiously convinced us that it is an unquestionable, biological given. This points to a confusion: heteronormativity presents a socio-political hierarchy among individuals based not on cultural elements but on biological factors. That is, it is a form of life whose empirical “ingredients” are already charged with political meanings, which creates the illusion that, because women have certain body types or functions, they are naturally subordinate to men, something no political movement can change. Such is the critique of identity that transfeminism presents: not a negation of concrete bodies, but an inquiry into the neutrality of the mechanisms that create identity.

We must remember that when first-wave Western feminism arose, it questioned assumptions regarding who was to be included as the subject of rights, who was entitled to political agency and who spoke for women. The first charter of human rights spoke about men and citizens, but women claimed and tirelessly fought for their rights, and are wise to persist in not taking them for granted. Migrant women and trans women are now fighting to be recognised as citizens, and so the struggle goes on. Butler reminds us that

any totalizing concept of the universal will shut down rather than authorize the unanticipated and unanticipatable claims that will be made under the sign of the “universal”. In this sense, I am not doing away with the category, but trying to relieve the category of its foundationist weight in order to render it as a site of permanent political contest. (1992: 8)

Again, the universal category of “women” does not disappear, but remains open, just as we cannot know *a priori* the scope and scale of a word (cf. Cavell in Laugier 2018a: 60). The category is nevertheless constrained by the context that is the human form of life, which includes both the common behaviour of human beings and the natural conditions in which humans exist (cf. Moyal-Sharrock 2015: 28), for “there is no pre-cultural human form of life; culture is internally related to the *human animal*” (ibid.: 33).

One promising transfeminist hypothesis is that once we accept resistant, subcultural meanings of sex, gender and identity in politics,

the power relations by which trans identities are institutionally enforced from without will become fully visible (cf. Bettcher 2013: 235). This would help to liberate not only trans individuals, but also all forms of subjecthood in which heteronormativity holds us captive. That is, the benefit would extend to many other political movements. This, I believe, is the type of openness needed for feminist accomplishments.

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### ***Biographical Note***

Martha Treviño-Tarango is an independent feminist scholar and activist. She received her MPhil in Philosophy from the University of St Andrews (Scotland) with a dissertation titled ‘On Wittgenstein’s notion of the objectivity of mathematical proofs’. Her research focuses on philosophy of language, feminist philosophy and transfeminism, particularly on the notion of normativity. She currently works with trans collectives and feminist groups aiming to introduce the concepts and political relevance of transfeminism to a wider audience. She has presented several papers on philosophy of language and feminism at national and international conferences, mostly at Mexican universities, focusing on the intersections between Wittgenstein’s and Judith Butler’s work. Since 2017 she has organised feminist philosophy and feminist art events locally, working with higher education institutions and feminist collectives.