

Disclosure and (In)visibility: Acoustic Navigation of the Gender–Sexuality Border in Houston Trans Men

Bethany Townsend
Rice University
bat2@rice.edu

Viktória Papp
NZILBB University of Canterbury
viktoria.papp@canterbury.ac.nz

Abstract

This study investigates the ways that male-identified transgender individuals make use of fundamental frequency in its ability to index both gender and sexuality to denaturalize gendered sexual identities (e.g. lesbian), relocating themselves within their available acoustic spaces to variably align themselves across different contexts as either affiliated with the standardized conception of GLB or T identities, as well as hegemonic masculinity. We demonstrate that their “socio-sexual life choices” are reinforced acoustically as they illustrate complex navigations and renegotiations of visibility and invisibility across and between the gender–sexuality border.

Terminology

FTM : female-to-male transsexual

MTF : male-to-female transsexual

Genderqueer : 1. A person who rejects heteronormativity, the traditional two-gender role system. 2. The feeling of being a little of both genders or no gender at all.

Transgender : Any individual whose identity crosses over or challenges their society’s traditional gender roles or expressions” (Here, we follow the community’s definition. See <http://www.thegenderbook.com/#>)

1 Borders & Dominant Discourses

Butch–FTM border wars (Halberstam 1998; Hale 1998; Rubin 2006:476)

- Result of lesbian feminism - ousted “mannish women” in favor of “women-identified-women” (Devor 1997a; 1997b).
- FTMs and butches engaged in the practice of *authentication* (Bucholtz and Hall 2005:601).
- Some FTMs engage in *denaturalization* to maintain membership in lesbian/queer communities (Devor 1997a; Noble 2007; Zimman 2012)

Sexual orientation

- Claimed to be stable throughout lifetime
 - 40% FTM change in orientation after 1 year on testosterone (Meier et al. in press; n.d.)
- Claimed to be subjective
 - negotiated and renegotiated by both partners over the course of a transition (Brown 2009; Keo 2011)
 - rejected or challenged by members of communities/partners (Bagemihl 1997; Schilt 2009)

2 Case studies

Three case studies examine “socio-sexual life choices” (Campbell-Kibler et al. 2001:1) made by members of the transgender community in Houston that can result in their (in)visibility:

- retention of a lesbian identity several years post-transition

- the identification as queer while attracted only to women as a means to maintain ties to a marginalized community and increase visibility for trans men
- the choice to live in the margins as a means to health and safety

Bobby: “transgenderqueer lesbianmandyke”

- 29-year-old who has been
- taking testosterone 5 years
- variety of different positionings with regard to masculinity and femininity

Excerpt 1

BOBBY; I’m a lesbianmandyke. One word, lesbimandyke.
 BT; That’s what I wrote in for my special question for you. I heard you say this, when you were: talking with X at U of X, and I really wanted you to say more about that identity, and what it might mean for you, and where it comes from.
 BOBBY; Sure:. So I think it’s, you know, (Hx) I share, coming out as lesbian, um: first, with a lot of transmen,
 BT; Mhm.
 BOBBY; or, you know, transmasculine people. And: that was such a big deal, for my life for my family for my belief system, for my v- quote-unquote value system, whatever that means, that that is something I’m not losing.

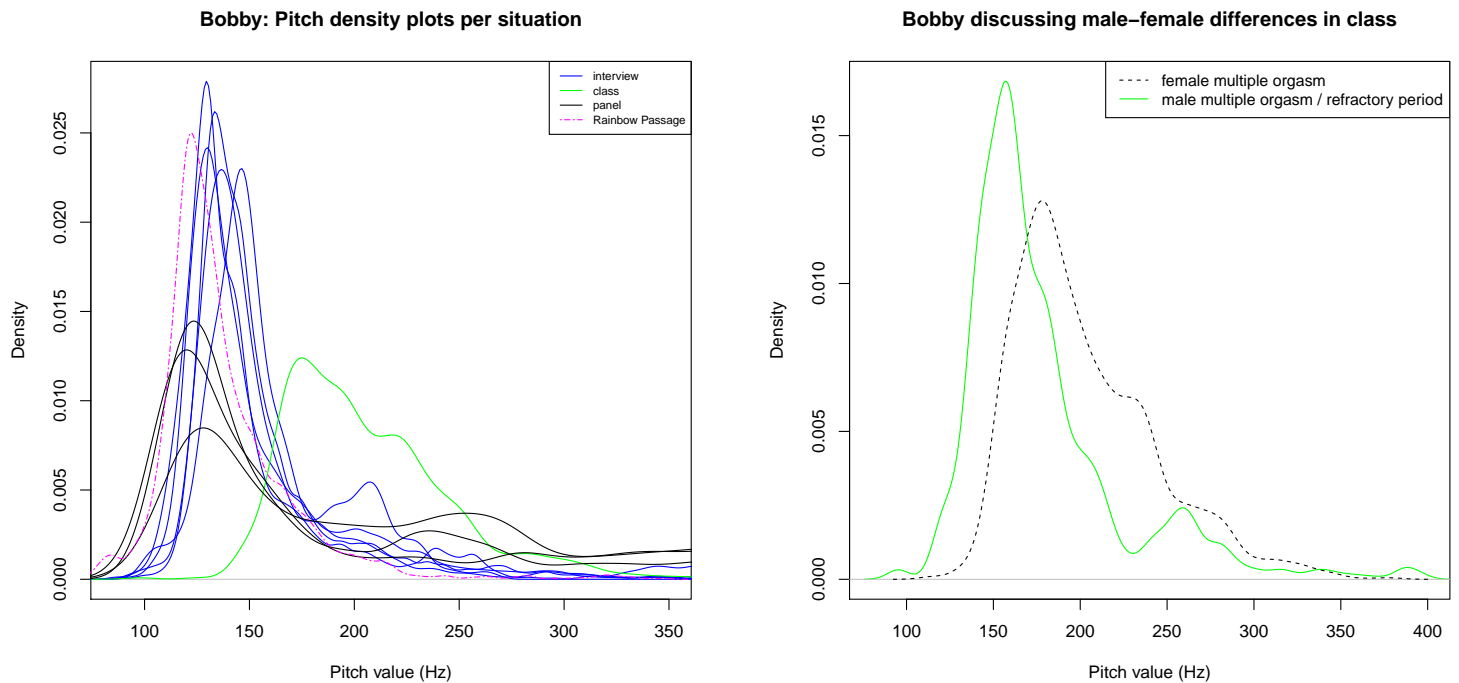


Figure 1: Bobby’s pitch density curves by situation and topic

Tom F.: “queer man”

- 42-year-old, taking testosterone 4 years
- experienced the loss of lesbian identity as grief-inducing and heartbreaking → identifies as queer man, although only attracted to women
- student at a large university - wants to be invisible to peers there
- not okay with being perceived as gay man in spaces where he is invisible as a trans man: places he feels transgender presence should be expected, celebrated, and recognized.

Excerpt 2

TOM; It was heartbreaking. It was so heartbreaking to realize I had transitioned, out of my comfort zone, I'd c- transitioned out of my community. And: where was I? What was I supposed to do? I'm not a straight man, well I am, but I'm not.

BT; Right.

TOM; I'm not a gay man. What happened?

BT; [(Hx)]

TOM; [What do] I do? And so now, there's this really weird, it's like this really weird juxtaposition in my life, like transmen have forever been invisible. I mean, they just- they just didn't exist, until Chaz Bono. There just wasn't any. And um, so I go out in public, and I sit on- I'm- I'm on the GLBT political caucus, um, (H) and I spend a lot of time with gay men, so everybody assumes I'm a gay man. I'm e- slightly effeminate so, and I'm with all the gay men, course I must be a gay man, right?

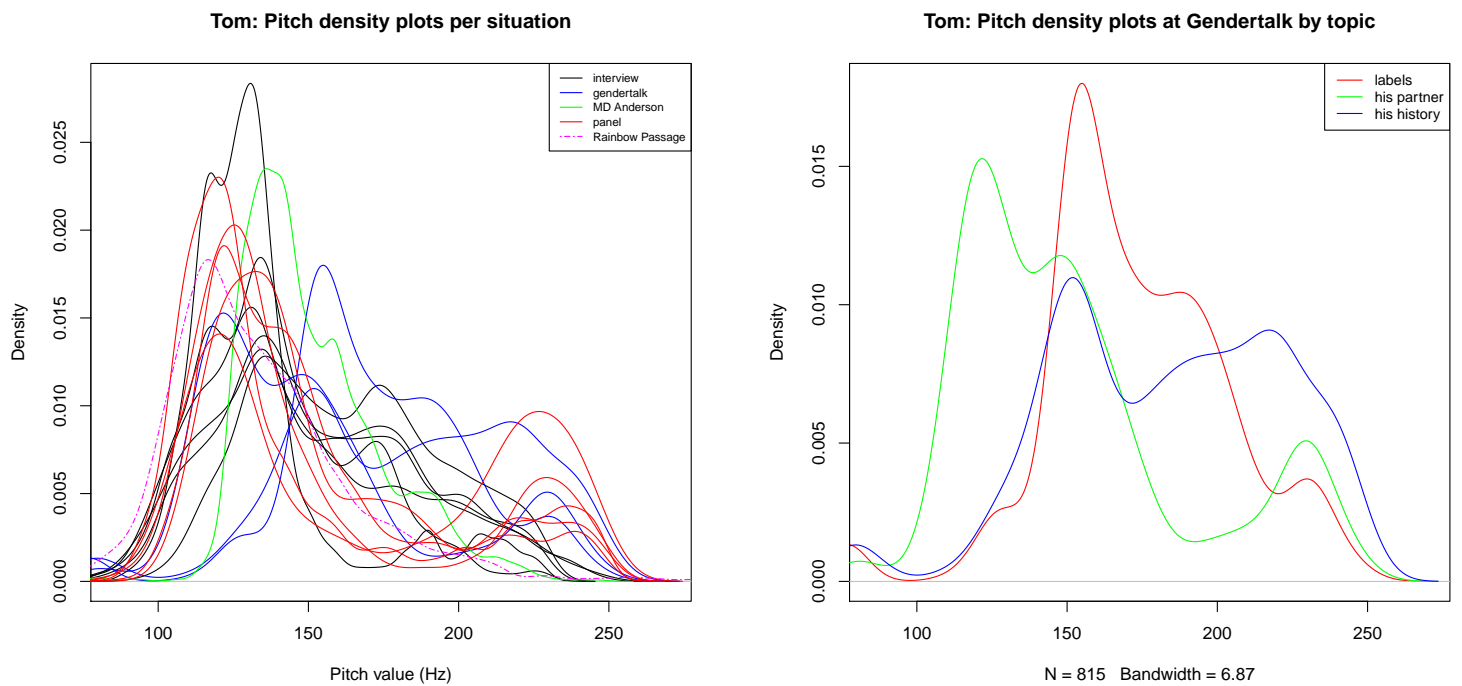


Figure 2: Tom F.'s pitch density curves by situation and topic

Luke: “transdrogynous genderqueer”

- 32-year-old
- not currently taking testosterone because he's scared, but can live in borders
- feels his gender and sexuality are sometimes linked

Excerpt 3

LUKE; It's very vulnerable to transition, right?
 BT; Absolutely.
 LUKE; And um, d- you know, personally I'm, part of my thing with t is like, I'm scared, of that transition.
 BT; Mm.
 LUKE; I can play it right now safe. I can play it as a butch lesbian, or a butch woman, or whatever. (Hx) And as much as I'd love to stand up and say, anything for the cause, and there are people who do that, and that's why I'm able to have this conversation with you right now, the truth is inside I'm scared.

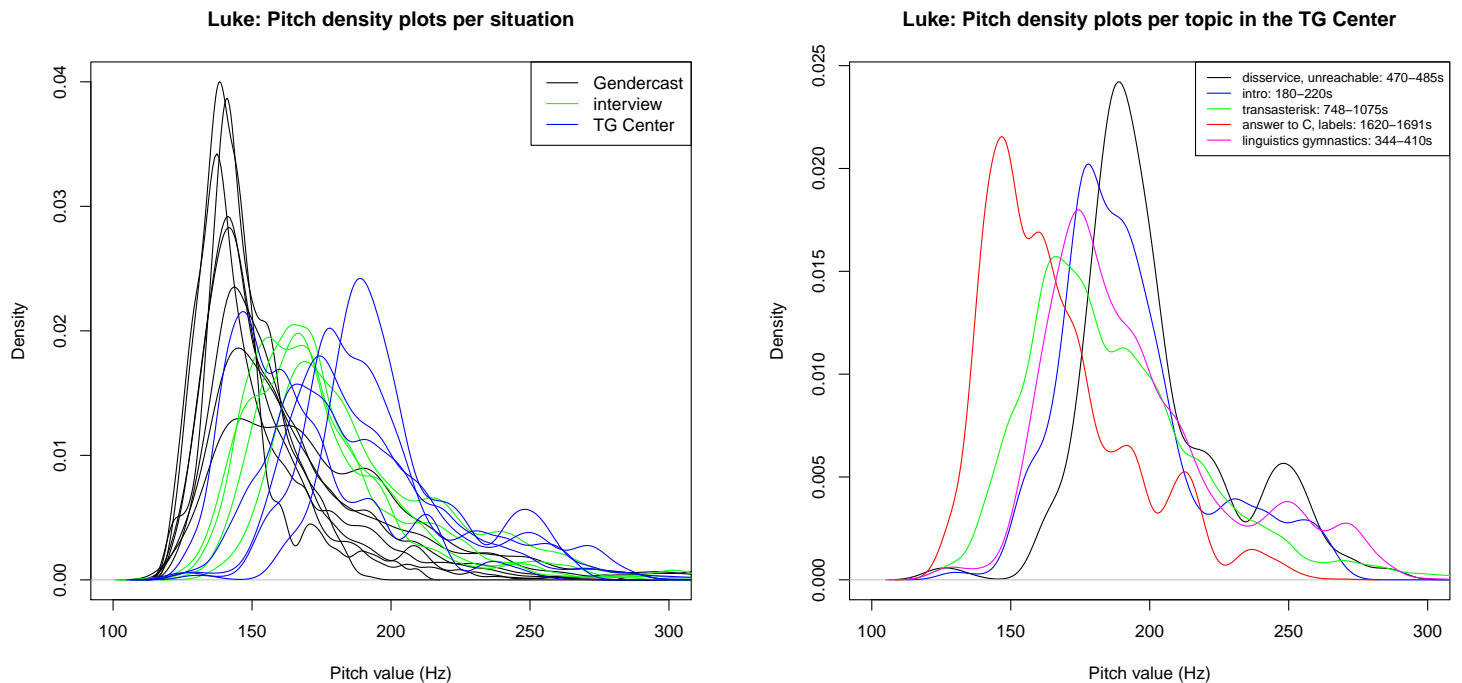


Figure 3: Luke's pitch density curves by situation and topic

Selected references

- Bagemihl, Bruce
 1997 *Surrogate Phonology and Transsexual Faggotry: A Linguistic Analogy for Uncoupling Sexual Orientation from Gender Identity*. In *Queerly Phrased: Language, Gender, and Sexuality*. Anna Livia and Kira Hall, eds. Pp. 380-401. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brown, Nicola R.
 2009 "I'm in Transition Too": Sexual Identity Renegotiation in Sexual-Minority Women's Relationships with Transsexual Men. *International Journal of Sexual Health*, 21(1):61-77.
- Bucholtz, Mary and Kira Hall
 2004 *Theorizing Identity in Language and Sexuality Research*. *Language & Society*, 33:469-515.
 2005 *Identity and Interaction: A Sociocultural Linguistic Approach*. *Discourse Studies*, 7(4-5):585-614.
- Campbell-Kibler, Kathryn, Robert J. Podesva, Sarah Roberts, and Andrew Wong, eds
 2001 *Language and Sexuality: Contesting Meaning in Theory and Practice*. Stanford: CSLI Publications.

- Cromwell, Jason
1999 *Transmen and FTMs: Identities, Bodies, Genders, and Sexualities*. Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
2006 *Queering the Binaries: Transsituated Identities, Bodies, and Sexualities*. In *The Transgender Studies Reader*. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, eds. Pp. 509-520. New York: Routledge.
- Devor, Aaron H.
1997a *FTM: Female-to-Male Transsexuals in Society*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
1997b *More than Manly Women: How Female-to-Male Transsexuals Reject Lesbian Identities*. In *Gender Blending*, Bonnie Bullough, Vern L. Bullough and James Elias, eds. Pp. 87-102. Amherst: Prometheus.
- Halberstam, J. Jack
1998 *Female Masculinity*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Halberstam, J. Jack and C. Jacob Hale
1998 *Butch/FTM Border Wars: A Note on Collaboration*. *GLQ*, 4(2):283-5.
- Hale, C. Jacob
1998 *Consuming the Living, Dis(re)membering the Dead in the Butch/FTM Borderlands*. *GLQ*, 4(2):311-348.
- Keo, Rebecca
2011 *Relationship Satisfaction of Partners of Female-to-Male Trans Men*. Honor's thesis: Department of Psychology, University of Houston.
- Kulick, Don
1998 *Travesti: Sex, Gender, and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Meier, Stacey C., Seth Pardo, Christine Labuski, and Julia Babcock
In Press; N.d. *Measures of Clinical Health among Female-to-Male Transgender Persons as a Function of Sexual Orientation*. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*.
- Nataf, Zachary I.
2006 *Selection from Lesbians Talk Transgender*. In *The Transgender Studies Reader*. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, eds. Pp. 439-448. New York: Routledge.
- Rubin, Gayle
2006 *Of Catamites and Kings: Reflections of Butch, Gender, and Boundaries*. In *The Transgender Studies Reader*. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, eds. Pp. 471-481. New York: Routledge.
- Schilt, Kristen
2009 *Just One of the Guys? How Transmen Make Gender Visible at Work*. *Gender and Society*, 20(4):465-490.
- Valentine, David
2007 *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Zimman, Lal
2012 *Voices in Transition: Testosterone, Transmasculinity, and the Gendered Voice among Female-to-Male Transgender People*. Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Linguistics, University of Colorado, Boulder.