

# **‘Entre el alivio y el palo’: a Spanish trans man’s narrative of transitioning in middle age**

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## **Abstract**

This paper draws on a series of life story interviews with Lukas, a middle-aged Spanish trans man who was previously ascribed the identity of butch lesbian. Specifically it draws on four interviews which date from the months following Lukas' initial self-identification as trans in late 2015. The interviews capture a transitory moment in his gender transitioning. The paper addresses the intersectionality of gender and sexuality and focuses mainly on the way in which Lukas' claiming of his trans man identity simultaneously articulates with his repudiation of his former lesbian identity. In these interviews Lukas presents himself as caught between what he describes as ‘el alivio’ (‘the relief’) of initial self-recognition, and ‘el palo’ (‘the hassle’) of deciding what do next. The hassle arises from the fact that he has what he describes as ‘una vida hecha ya’ (literally ‘a life already made’ for himself), and because many of the choices before him have financial and professional implications. Most significantly however, the hassle is also shown to be inextricably bound up with the ‘neglected intersectionality’ of age.

Keywords: Spanish; female-to-male transgender; intersectionality; gender/sexuality; age

## **Introduction: transgender identity, intersectionality and language**

Identities are, as Stuart Hall (1996) famously pointed out, the result of the subject's successful insertion into the flow of discourse - a process he describes as one in which there is active investment in and identification with what is culturally and discursively available, both temporally and spatially. Since the mid 1990s the flow of transgender discourse originating in the so-called First World has made available a range of new gender positions (Stryker, 2006) – a proliferation which has been made possible by a multitude of interrelated factors, not least of which are the advances in medicine which mean that anatomy is not longer as determining a factor in gender identity as it was previously (Giddens, 1991). Susan Stryker (2006) also identifies the confluence of the AIDS crisis, the new world order ushered in by the collapse the eastern bloc, and the cultural uncertainties associated with the end of the millennium as all contributing to the creation of an historical moment in which those who identify as transgender have been able to seize the moment and make their voices heard.

In this the role of neoliberalism, as the prevailing model of contemporary capitalism, cannot be ignored. It is notable with regard to the flow of discourse on trans men in particular - much of which emanates from the US - that the quintessentially North American ideal of the ‘self-made man’ has been adopted by some trans men communities (Rubin, 2003). An example of how disseminated this idea has become is evidenced by the recent cover of *GX*, a London

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gay bar and club listings/lifestyle magazine, which profiles Jake Graf – a trans film maker who seeks to raise the profile of trans men generally.



Figure 1 Contemporary self-made man. GX Magazine cover 2015

This term deliberately links female-to-male (FTM) transitioning to the struggles of figures such as the nineteenth century ex-slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass, who argued that ‘self-made men [...] are the men who owe little or nothing to birth [...], who are what they are, without the aid of any of the favoring conditions by which other men usually rise in the world and achieve great results’ (Douglass, 1992: 549-50). And he continued: ‘[m]y theory of self-made men is, then, simply this; that they are men of work (p. 560). In the case of trans men, it is the work of physical transitioning itself which is being invoked in their use of the term, as well as that of making themselves both culturally intelligible and socially legitimate. This can be understood as one of neoliberalism’s more paradoxical affordances, and one in which the older notion of being ‘self-made’ can sit relatively comfortably. That said, it should be underlined that the affordances of so-called ‘progressive neoliberalism’ (Fraser, 2017) need not in any way imply a *necessary* adherence to neoliberal values (although see Edelman and Zimman, 2014). As Donna Haraway ([1985]1991: 151) points out in *A Cyborg Manifesto*, a politics designed to produce the loyal self-governing individuals valorised by contemporary neoliberal discourse contradictorily can also serve to produce dissenting and ‘illegitimate offspring [who] are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins’. I draw attention to this here by way of contextual background to the paper as whole. My informant, as will be shown, is very much a ‘self-made’ man – although neoliberalism does not feature in the analysis of the data I present to any great extent.

In this paper I suggest that intersectionality provides a useful heuristic for understanding the complexity of gender transitioning in middle age. Although there is considerable debate

about what is and what is not intersectionality (see Bilge, 2013 for example), complexity is generally seen as being fundamental – hence the definition (followed here) provided by Patricia Hill Collins and Sirma Bilge (2016: 2) which states that '[i]ntersectionality is a way of understanding and analyzing the complexity in the world, in people, and in human experience'. Its roots lie in radical North American Black feminism and in particular the view that experience of racial, gender, sexuality and class oppression are 'interlocking' (Combahee River Collective, 1977) and cannot be disambiguated. Crucially this was originally framed in terms of identity politics:

This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity [...]. We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously (Combahee River Collective, 1977: npn).

As time has gone by the focus has shifted – for some scholars at least - from an exclusive concern with the race, gender/sexuality and class nexus to encompass a wider range and combination of articulating axes of oppression and differentiation such as *inter al.* religion (Rahman, 2010), disability (Mohamed and Shefer, 2015) and age (Hearn (2011)). What makes a study intersectional, I would suggest, is a focus on complexity, the impossibility of completely disambiguating the axes of oppression and differentiation, the tendency for these axes to be experienced subjectively as simultaneous, and – certainly as far a research stance is concerned - an overall commitment to social justice.

This paper follows Lisa Diamond and Molly Butterworth (2008: 366), who demonstrate convincingly the value of an intersectionality approach in their longitudinal interview study of the ways in which gender and sexual identities 'interact and co-create one another' in the lives of four lesbians who over time came to identify as transgender. They argue that the distinction between gender and sexuality at the heart of so much theorising in the social sciences, second wave feminism and lesbian and gay studies has served to obscure the complex ways in which these two categories can intersect and 'mutually influence one another over time' (p. 367); and they go on to assert that 'such intersections and reciprocal influences deserve closer analysis if we are to create developmentally accurate models of gender and sexual identification over the life course' (p. 367).

This paper will show that the interconnections between gender and sexuality – despite the relatively 'peaceful' plasticity of the shifting identifications identified by Diamond and Butterworth - can also involve tension, particularly when identities which are being claimed (such as that of trans man) intersect with other identities (such as butch lesbian) which are concomitantly being shed and repudiated. Such interconnections are also shown to be simultaneously sensitive to the affordances and constraints of age. From this perspective, what might be termed trans intersectionality can be seen as requiring a focus on the ways in which ascribed, repudiated, denied and claimed identities articulate with one another, how such articulations are experienced and the ways in which they are invoked in the speech of trans speakers.

Writing nearly two decades ago on the need for more research into trans speakers' language, Don Kulick wrote:

One of the most urgent tasks facing scholars interested in transgender and language [...] is to start collecting and analyzing data about how transgendered persons actually

talk – how they use language in a wide variety of social situations to engender themselves and others (Kulick, 1999: 615).

Since then a considerable amount of work has been done and there is a growing body of sociological (Rubin, 2003), anthropological (Cromwell, 1999), medical (Obedin-Maliver and Makadon, 2016) and sociolinguistic studies addressing FTM transitioning. The latter includes foundational work by Lal Zimman on coming out narratives (Zimman, 2009) and the impact of testosterone on voice quality (Zimman, 2012, 2017). At the same time, as Kulick observed, research into ‘talking like a man’ also needs to address ‘the ways in which FTMs acquire and use language in their gendered presentations of self’ and ‘the ways in which masculinity is invoked and indexed (and is invocable and indexable) more generally’ (p. 615). This paper aims to build on the growing body of work in this area and specifically seeks to shed light on the complexity of FTM transitioning in middle age. It adopts a narrative analysis perspective (Baynham and De Fina, 2005), and takes the view that the accounts produced within the context of research interviews with a middle-aged trans man provide a unique insight into the ways in which his new sense of himself is linguistically ‘brought about’ (Baynham, 2015) – particularly with regard to his manipulation of the Spanish grammatical gender system and the ‘emplotment’ structuring his narrative (Polkinghorne, 1991; Ricoeur, 1984). At the same time, his accounts shed light on the enduring weight of what is also ‘brought along’ (Baynham, 2015) from what he describes as ‘a life already made’ (‘una vida hecha ya’).

### **Research questions, methodology and informant**

The research questions driving this study are:

What are the features of this trans man’s speech, particularly with regard to the gendered presentation of himself?

What does this tell us about the complexity of trans experience and trans intersectionality?

Although intersectionality research does not presuppose any one method, interviews which elicit life story narratives can be seen as particularly appropriate – both ethically and epistemologically. With regard to the former, by foregrounding subjective knowledge of being transgender, trans informants’ voices are not sidelined in the work of those who are writing *about* them – an all too frequent danger highlighted by Judith Halberstam (2013). With regard to the epistemological aspect, Henry Rubin (2003: 11) points out:

As gender identity has become increasingly detached from particular behaviors or preferences, bodies have become the main way of determining gender. [...] To get our heads around “the body,” we must come to terms with the experiences that subjects have of their bodies. Simply stated *subjectivity matters* (italics in original).

On this view, any attempt to understand the transgender phenomenon has to begin with the experiences of those who are trans. As Stryker (2006) explains, such a perspective in no way implies a privileging of the interiority of subjective knowledge over that which derives from a position of theoretical exteriority (which Rubin argues is also necessary) – rather it simply serves to underline the necessity and the legitimacy of insider voices in trans research (cf. Hale, 2009). From an identity perspective, the foregrounding of informants’ subjective accounts is also important because identities are constructed within the representations we make of ourselves, through what has been referred to as ‘the narrativization of the self’ (Hall, 1996:4) whereby identity is performatively brought about.

Life story narratives have been described as consisting of the autobiographical stories individuals tell about themselves in which they generally attempt to explain to themselves and others their sense of who they are and their understanding of how they came to be the way they are - seen over the course of a lifetime (McAdams and McLean, 2013). Such stories are generally characterised by 'extended reportability' (Linde, 1993: 21) or tellability. Reportability and tellability refer to the speaker's sense of a story's worthiness of being told and its relevance to the context in which it is produced. At the same time, narratives produced in the interactional context of the research interview shed light on what has been referred to the process of 'emplotment' whereby the often random and disconnected events in a life are brought together and sequenced by the narrator, causality is added and meanings are imposed in such a way that that coherence is achieved (Polkinghorne, 1991; Ricoeur, 1984).

The informant, Lukas (a pseudonym), is a UK-based Spanish trans man who was previously known as María (a pseudonym) and ascribed the identity of butch lesbian. He was born in 1960 in Catalonia, a bi-lingual (Catalan/Spanish) region of Spain with a currently powerful pro independence movement. In his late teens he became a heroin addict and a serious alcohol abuser. After recovering in his late twenties, he worked in a variety of jobs - as a taxi driver and as a lorry driver, before migrating to the UK in the mid 1990s, where he learned English. Once in the UK he studied to become a psychotherapeutic counsellor, a job in which he became successful. He realised he was trans about eighteen months before the interviews started in late 2015. The interviews, which are ongoing at the time of writing (summer 2018), are conducted mainly in Spanish (at Lukas' request), with occasional lapses into Catalan and English. The interviews, which began in late 2015, have taken place at two-three monthly intervals, with each interview lasting about an hour. So far eleven interviews has been completed. In this paper I focus on the first four interviews in which he recounts key aspects of his life story (subsequent interviews have dealt with his ongoing transition).

## **Data and analysis**

### *El alivio (the relief)*

In the first interview, Lukas describes himself as being torn between feelings of relief with regard to his new sense of himself, while at the same time being beset by the hassle of having to decide on the best the way forward. I begin by focusing on the relief and what Lukas' manipulation of the Spanish grammatical gender system, and the emplotment structuring his narrative, appear to tell us about trans intersectionality as it was then being lived by him. Nouns, pronouns, adjectives and articles in Spanish are marked for gender and number and when using adjectives to refer to themselves, speakers are obliged to index their own gender (e.g. a man might say 'Soy alto' ['I'm tall'], while a woman would say 'Soy alta' (I'm tall')). As other scholars have shown (Borba and Ostermann, 2007; Hall and O'Donovan, 1996; Kulick, 1997, 1998), trans speakers' use of masculine and feminine forms across a range of languages marked for grammatical gender reveals a considerable degree of flexibility and creativity with regard to the ways in which they position themselves and others through their linguistic choices.

At the time of the first interview, Lukas was at an early stage in his trans journey. He was still known to friends and colleagues as María – although those closest to him knew that he was in the process of choosing a new male name for himself. Some minutes into the first interview while we were talking about his Catalan background the following exchange took place:

#### **Extract 1 (17/11/2015)**

##### Spanish

J tú / te identificas con Cataluña o no↑ (laughing)\*

L hmm (sighing) / sí y no [J: hmm hmm] / sí soy catalana (FEM) [J: hmm] pero / pero me da un poco igual

English translation

J you / do you identify with Catalonia or not↑ (laughing)

L hmm (sighing) / yes and no [J: hmm hmm] / yes I'm a Catalan (FEM) [J: hmm] but / but it doesn't make much difference to me

\*transcription conventions are listed at the end of the paper

This use of the feminine form of Catalan ('catalana') is typical of the way in which Lukas positioned himself initially as a female speaker. Earlier when responding to my statement that he did not have to answer any questions he felt uncomfortable with, he told me not to worry, saying 'I'm very open' and used the feminine form of the adjective ('yo soy muy abierta'). That said, the final expression ('it doesn't make much difference to me') may tell us something about the hierarchical nature of Lukas' then current identifications and the ways in which these were grammatically encoded. Identifying with Catalonia (notably at a time of growing Catalan nationalism and calls for separation from Spain) was clearly not felt by Lukas as particularly consequential personally. However, when asked another question about identification later in the same interview about a trans men's group he joined, we find a somewhat different use of grammatical gender:

**Extract 2** (17/11/2015)

Spanish

J entonces cuando me decías antes que / en la escena lesbiana\* que nu- nunca sen- / nunca te sentías pues err como / como ellas / ahora con es- / con esos trans men en X por ejemplo / como / como te sientes↑

L to-tal-mente (.) identificado (MASC)

J sí↑

L sí [J: hmm] / no / estoy totalmente segura (FEM) o seguro (MASC) ya no sé como hablar a veces (inaudible) / erm de que soy trans [J: sí] / no hay ninguna duda [J: hmm] / no hay dudas [J: hmm] / y estoy desde que lo sé / estoy mucho más tranquilo (MASC) / porque por lo menos SÉ (.) lo que soy [J: hmm] / sabes↑

English translation

J so when you said earlier that / on the lesbian scene that (you) ne- never fel- / never felt well err like / like them / now with th- / with these trans men in X for example / how / how do you feel↑

L com-plete-ly (.) identified (MASC)

J really↑

L yes [J: hmm] / no / I'm completely sure (FEM) or sure (MASC) / sometimes I don't know how to talk any more (inaudible) / erm that I'm trans [J: right] / there is no doubt / there are no doubts [J: hmm] / and since becoming aware of it / I'm much calmer (MASC) / because at least I KNOW (.) what I am [J: hmm] / you know↑

\*This should be 'el ambiente de lesbianas'. Lukas does not correct my occasional literal translations as he is familiar with such English speaker errors.

Here we see the first notable shift to masculine concord – 'completely' is said with great deliberation syllable by syllable followed by his choice of the masculine form of 'identified' ('identificado'). The 'self correction' involving which form of 'sure' ('segura/seguro') to use, and the masculine form of 'calmer' ('más tranquilo') suggest that grammatical gender is something Lukas is conscious of and that it *does* make a difference when what is being encoded is linked specifically to his new sense of himself as a trans man. The metalinguistic comment about not knowing how to speak is a reminder that such choices for him at this early stage in his transition are marked – and in fact feminine grammatical choices are found across all the early interviews. Apart from the examples of the types just shown, such choices are also made when Lukas talks about his childhood – 'when I was a little girl' ('cuando era niña), or about female friends from school days who continue to be his friends in the present – 'we're friends' ('somos amigas'). By saying 'amigas' (and not 'amigos') Lukas includes himself as a female among a group of friends whose formation pre-dates his recent self-identification as a trans man. Significantly, when talking about feeling alone as a child (as a result of not being recognised as a boy) he uses the masculine form for 'alone' ('solo'). Like the example of 'completely identified' above, this choice of the masculine form of 'alone' suggests that it was *as a boy* that he felt alone as a child. So although there is a noticeable 'undecidability' (Derrida, 1977) at times in the linguistic choices Lukas makes, it would appear that where his sense of his maleness is uppermost or most deeply felt, he opts for masculine forms.

Concomitant with Lukas' self-identification as a trans man, is the realisation that he is not a lesbian – notably this is also described as a relief, and his repeated repudiation of a lesbian identity runs across all the early interviews. His descriptions of becoming a lesbian and living as one are important in terms of the process of emplotment of his story. Lukas suggests on several occasions that his drug and alcohol abuse which began just after puberty were a direct consequence of silencing what he refers to as 'my inner boy' ('mi niño interior'), his need to conceal what appeared to be his gender-inappropriate attraction to girls, and his dislike of his own post-pubertal body. While in rehab he met an out lesbian and through her got to know other lesbians with whom he began to have relationships. Despite not feeling entirely comfortable with the term he began to apply it to himself:

### **Extract 3** (17/11/2015)

#### Spanish

L entonces decidí que / bueno que /lesbiana /pues sería lesbiana (.) [J: hmm] / y me puse esto↓ / [...] / mira lo más cercano a lo que yo debo ser / es que no sabía lo que era [...] / pero nunca me sentí integrada↑ (FEM) con las lesbianas↑ [...] / luego llegaron las inglesas / y decían tú eres una lesbiana butch / y yo pensaba una mierda (pulling a face) [J: laughing] / yo no soy una lesbiana butch / pero bueno / parece que es lo que había no↑ [J: hmm] / entonces me quedé con esto / lesbiana butch

### English translation

L so I decided that / ok/ lesbian / then I'd be a lesbian (.) [J: hmm] / and I called myself that↓ / [...] look the nearest thing to what I must be / I didn't know what I was [...] / but I never felt integrated↑ (FEM) with lesbians↑ [...] then the English women arrived / and they said you're a butch lesbian / and I thought bullshit (pulling a face) [J: laughing] / I'm not a butch lesbian / but ok / it seems that's what there was no↑ [hmm] / so I stuck with that / butch lesbian

Here we see lesbianism being taken on because it was all that was culturally and discursively available at that time ('it seems that's what there was') and because it was the identity category that matched most closely the way Lukas felt ('the nearest thing to what I must be'). It is also notable that the category of butch lesbian accompanied the arrival of young English lesbians in the Catalan city he moved to in the early 1980s. Many of these women were escaping the economic austerity of Thatcher's Britain and in pursuit of work as English language teachers (the present writer was their gay male equivalent), and they brought with them a new terminology corresponding to their own understanding of sexual and gender identity. Having decided to call himself a lesbian, Lukas finds that he is in fact seen by the English women he met as a particular type of lesbian. His use of the term 'butch' as a Spanish adjective ('lesbiana butch') is also a reminder of the way in which the flow of gender and sexuality discourses referred to earlier can also be connected to migration. Lukas would return to this several times and in the second interview he did so with particular vehemence.

### **Extract 4** (09/02/2016)

#### Spanish

Quiero ser yo / [...] da mucha rabia cuando tienes que tener una identidad que no es tuya / un label no↑ / butch lesbian / a que soy butch lesbian / y pienso yo no soy butch lesbian / [...] a mí lo que me molesta es eso / que me dan una identidad que yo no soy

#### English translation

I want to be me / [...] it is really maddening when you have to have an identity that isn't yours / a label no↑ / butch lesbian / so I'm a butch lesbian / and I think I'm not a butch lesbian [...] what bothers me is this / that they give me an identity that isn't me

In this extract Lukas' response to being labelled by others as a butch lesbian suggests it is *currently* felt by him as a form of misrecognition – a point underlined by his use of the present tense. His use of the word 'label' (rather than the Spanish equivalent 'etiqueta') is also notable, as it is clearly not being used to fill some kind of lexical gap. It is worth noting that labelling in general with regard to gender and sexuality-based identities is more prevalent in Anglophone circles in than in Spanish ones. Previously, as we saw, in Extract 3 Lukas referred to himself as 'una lesbiana butch', placing the word 'butch' after the noun as though it were a Spanish adjective. This is an unremarkable borrowing as there is no positive Spanish term for 'butch' – the Spanish term 'bollera' for a such a lesbian is entirely pejorative (and in fact 'butch' is now widely used by Spanish lesbians). His choice of the English terms 'butch lesbian' and the word 'label' in Extract 4 appear significant therefore, as these choices could be held to indicate a linguistic distancing from the concept of butch lesbian, as literally a foreign label applied *to* him from the outside in a way that does not correspond to his internal sense of himself in the present. Interestingly, throughout the interviews, he does not at any stage repudiate being a woman – although he explicitly laments the arrival of breasts and

menstruation at puberty. Rather his identification with the gender identity of trans man is repeatedly made with reference to the simultaneous disidentification with the sexual identity of lesbian, such that the two might be said to interact and co-create one another. Furthermore, Lukas' use of the feminine form of 'integrated' ('integrada') ('I never felt integrated') in Extract 3 above is also interesting in this respect. This is could be seen as a repudiation of any homophilic identification with lesbians – i.e. that he never felt *as a woman* with the women he became associated with. Paradoxically however, it was through becoming a lesbian, despite his reservations then, and his repeated repudiation of lesbianism now, that Lukas became culturally intelligible to others and was enabled him to feel good about himself for the first time:

**Extract 5** (17/11/2015)

Spanish

L y y empecé como / a sentirme como les gustaba / entonces esto para mí ego era muy bueno / [...] / entonces empecé a ver que sí que era / era muy guapa (FEM) y [J: hmm]/ guap- guapo (MASC) más bien [J: sí] / pero erm sí / estuve muchos años así

English translation

L and and I began / to feel how I was attractive to them / so this was very good for my ego / [...] then I began to see that yes I was / I was good-looking (FEM) and [J: hmm] / hand- handsome (MASC) rather [J: yes] / but erm yes / I was like that for years

Again we see a masculine form being selected after some hesitation as the most appropriate to describe his sense of his own attractiveness to women. Feeling attractive to women was good for his self-esteem, or his ego, as he puts it – even if this meant being part of the lesbian community he did not identify with. However, he claimed being on the lesbian scene was worth it because it meant that 'at least I'm with girls' ('por lo menos estoy con chicas'). Such accounts are a reminder that explanation (of oneself to oneself and to others) is a key function of narratives which purport to tell the story of one's life.

Overall, in terms of the relief, we can say that Lukas' sense of himself as a trans man is discursively produced in a complex variety of ways. Firstly, through his manipulation of the Spanish grammatical gender system in which he uses masculine forms to index his emerging sense of himself as a trans man; secondly, via the repeated repudiation of his formerly ascribed and weakly claimed lesbian identity; and thirdly (and paradoxically), through an emplotment in which 'becoming' a lesbian is shown to have enabled him to escape the abjection which had led initially to drug and alcohol abuse. Becoming a lesbian allowed him to have relationships with women and to feel that he was attractive to them, specifically he explains, in terms of his masculine good looks.

*El palo (the hassle)*

At the same time, bisecting this narrative of relief (and repudiation) is the narrative of the hassle. This is first mentioned alongside his first reference to relief:

**Extract 6** (17/11/2015)

Spanish

L [...] y ahora lo sé lo que me pasa [J: hmm hmm] / entonces (.) para mí es un alivio [J: hmm] / por un lado (.) [J: sí] es un alivio [J: sí] / por el otro (sigh) es un palo / es un palo porque (inaudible) ahora qué hago↑ (2) / sabiendo todo esto [J: hmm] / hago algo↑ [J: hmm] sabes físicamente [J: sí sí sí sí] / me quedo como esto:y↑ [J: hmm] sabes es un palo / tengo cincuenta y cinco años

#### English translation

L [...] and now I know what is happening to me [J: hmm hmm] / so (.) this is a relief for me [J: hmm] on the one hand (.) [J: yes] it's a relief [J: yes] / on the other (sigh) it's a hassle / it's a hassle because (inaudible) what do I do now↑ (2) / knowing all this [J: hmm] / do I do something↑ [J: hmm] you know physically [J: yes yes yes yes] / do I stay the way I a:m↑ [J: hmm] you know it's a hassle / I'm fifty-five years old

And again in the third interview he returns to this point, nuancing it further.

#### **Extract 7 (15/03/2016)**

#### Spanish

L no tengo ninguna duda de que soy un trans man [J: hmm] / pero (3) claro tengo cincuenta y cinco años sabes / y tengo que pensarlo bien [J: sí] / porque yo creo que cuando lo hacen tan jóvenes / la transición / no tienen nada que perder / no tienen nada [J: hmm] / no pero yo he trabajado mucho para tener lo que tengo / y: (.) hay muchas cosas en mi vida que yo estoy / estoy contenta (FEM) o contento (MASC) de /de /de tenerlas no↑ / entonces no quiero que están afectadas por [J: hmm] / si hago (.) toda una transición [J: hmm] / no sé [J: hmm] / creo que quizás hay cosas de me identidad que no quiero (.) perder

#### English translation

L I'm in no doubt that I'm a trans man [J: hmm] / but (3) of course I'm fifty-five years old you know / and I have to think about this carefully [J: yes] / because I think when they do it so young / the transition / they've got nothing to lose / they've got nothing [J: hmm] / no but I've worked a lot to have what I have / a:nd (.) there are lots of things in my life that I am / I am happy (FEM) or happy (MASC) to / to / to have no↑ / so I don't want them to be affected by [J: hmm] if I make (.) a complete transition [J: hmm] / I don't know / I think perhaps there are parts of my identity I don't want (.) to lose

In both these extracts the hassle is directly associated with age and Lukas' being already middle aged. In Extract 6 it is introduced as the flip side of the relief. Although he now knows what he is, at fifty-five this new knowledge of himself triggers another set of problems about what to do next. In Extract 7 more light is shed on the nature of this particular hassle. Having again mentioned his age, he says that he has to think carefully about how to proceed, and he immediately contrasts his situation with that of young trans men who physically transition and who 'have nothing to lose' ('no tienen nada que perder'). In these early interviews Lukas repeatedly differentiated himself from the younger trans men he reported meeting, many of whom were already taking testosterone. They are generally described negatively as 'young boys' ('niños jóvenes') who unlike him are without the weight of what he called 'a life already made' ('una vida hecha ya') - but who have the advantage of having everything 'very clear' ('muy claro') in their own heads, on account of their youth. The implication of his remark that they have nothing to lose is that *he* does – and he continues by

saying that he has worked hard to achieve what he has and that he does not want those areas of his life that he is happy ('contenta' / 'contento') with to be negatively impacted by physically modifying his body. Elsewhere in the second interview he made it clear that his professional identity was achieved through hard work and that he feared being rejected by his clients if his transitioning became more visible, resulting in a possible loss of income. In this respect he is speaking very much as a self-made man in the older sense of the term, as someone whose achievements are the result of individual effort and for whom the work of transitioning and engendering himself as a self-made trans man presupposes a risk to his current professional success, as well as the potential loss of his relative economic security as a health professional. In the fourth interview, which took place on 12<sup>th</sup> April 2016, Lukas would express the need to meet 'professional people' ('gente profesional'). He explained that he had arranged to meet a young trans man who 'looks to be a kid from a good family, he's a primary school teacher and he works' ('parece un chico bien, es maestro, y trabaja'), specifically with a view to seeing how he had integrated his transitioning into what Lukas described as 'a normal life' ('una vida normal'), understood as a life involving work. The collocation in Spanish ('un chico bien') has clear class connotations. Significantly, he contrasted this young professional with one of the 'young boys' who he described negatively as being 'such a benefits (recipient) and he spends all day watching pornography and jerking off and doesn't do anything else' ('es tan benefits y se pasa el día mirando pornografía y haciendose pajas y no hace nada más'). In describing the 'young boy' thus, Lukas momentarily aligns himself with those who see state benefits recipients as work-shy (a recurrent neoliberal mantra) and the moral opposite of self-made men (in the older sense) such as himself. His alternation between masculine and feminine forms in Extract 7 may also possibly serve to index his recurring ambivalence about the best way forward for him at that particular moment in his trans journey – hence the need to get to know trans men who continue to work while transitioning.

One of Lukas' fears regarding the loss of clients is that taking testosterone might make him less empathetic - particularly if it made him behave like a teenage boy, which was something he saw as a possible side effect. This was based on his observation of the 'young boys' in the trans men's group he attended. It was also, I would suggest, related to his own understanding of his hitherto suppressed masculine nature. The notion of his 'inner boy' mentioned above runs throughout the early interviews and is directly related to his understanding of age and the way in which it intersects with his emerging trans identity. Having explained in the first interview that he always felt himself to be a boy, there came a time – when he was 10 years old more or less - when he felt he had to stop talking about this. The verb used to refer to this decision is 'callar' ('fall silent' or 'keep quiet'), while those used to refer to the inner boy are 'encerrar' ('lock up') and 'enterrar' ('bury').

When I asked him in the first interview how he came in contact with the notion of trans man Lukas claimed this had happened while watching a German film called 'Romeos' (2011, Bernardi) on television. The film tells of the travails of a young trans man who is taking testosterone and waiting for chest surgery to remove his breasts and ends with a shot of the young man, alone on a beach, talking off his T-shirt to reveal that the surgery has taken place. He runs into the sea with outstretched arms in a gesture of embrace suggestive of the possibilities that now lie ahead of him. It was this scene which Lukas said made such an impression on him:

**Extract 8 (17/11/2015)**

Spanish

L: al ver esta última escena / que destapó mi olla (inaudible) y salió el niño este que estaba enterrado [J: hmm] / desde (.) sabes desde los diez años [J: sí] / más o menos [J: sí] / y salió allí [J: sí] / entonces me volví loco (MASC)[J: hmm] / con esto / y ahora qué hago no↑ [J: hmm] / sí fue como una / una locura hace un año y medio más o menos

### English

L: when I saw this final scene / which took the lid of things (inaudible) and the boy got out who was buried [J: hmm] / since (.) you know since he was 10 years old [J: yes] / more or less / and he got out there [J: yes] / then I went mental (MASC) [J: hmm] / with this / now what do I do no↑ / [J: hmm] / yes it was like a madness / a madness a year and a half ago more or less

What is most significant about this ‘small story’ (Georgakopoulou, 2007) within the bigger life story narrative is that Lukas’ masculine self, referred to in the third person, is seen as still being a young boy, some forty-five years after being buried. The idiom ‘destapar la olla’, which I’ve translated as ‘to take the lid of things’, literally means ‘to take the lid off the pot’ and is generally used to convey something hidden being revealed. In the second interview he returned to this saying ‘I buried the boy’ (‘enterré el niño’), only to discover as an adult that ‘the boy is alive’ (‘el niño está vivo’). He now feels that it is necessary ‘to do him justice’ (‘hacerle justicia’), ‘to draw the boy out’ (hay que sacar el niño’), ‘to allow him to express himself and to feel safe’ (‘que se exprese y que se siente safe’). The use of ‘safe’ (as opposed to the Spanish ‘seguro’) may be an indication that the inner boy will do his growing up in English in the UK. Such a process, if accompanied by taking testosterone, clearly implied the possibility of some kind of second youth (also noted by Jan Morris [1974] on beginning female hormone therapy) – but with the inconvenience of having to go through several years of male puberty and feeling sexually aroused (‘muy caliente’) and aggressive (‘agresivo’) all the time. Regardless of Lukas’ understanding of what male puberty entails, these hypothesised changes related to a second youth were at the heart of the hassle confronting the fifty-five year old adult whose professional identity had been so hard won.

### Discussion

What then does all this tell us about Lukas’ gendered presentation of himself and the complexity of trans experience and trans intersectionality? Beginning with the former, we can say that although Lukas’ self-identification as a trans man preceded the four interviews drawn on here, his linguistic system is shown to be in a state of flux. There is an indeterminacy on occasion (‘sometimes I don’t know how to talk any more’) particularly with regard to grammatical choices regarding masculine and feminine forms which may be hypothesised as correlating with the early stage of his transition and (in all probability) with his own ambivalence about some of the life choices before him. This state of flux can also be understood in terms of Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of linguistic habitus (Bourdieu, 1991). Habitus is Bourdieu’s overarching term for the wide range of socially acquired and almost programmatic set of dispositions regulating human behaviour from modes of thought through to ways of behaving. Linguistic habitus can be understood as:

a sub-set of the dispositions which comprise the habitus: it is that sub-set of dispositions acquired in the course of learning to speak in particular contexts (the family, the peer group, the school, etc.) (Thompson, 1991: 17).

Although Bourdieu is not concerned with grammatical gender (he is more interested in accent and standard language), the socialisation which requires male and female speakers to select grammatical forms which are congruent with their socially ascribed gender, as is the case with Spanish, can also be seen as a dimension of linguistic habitus. Bourdieu's (1991: 86) linkage of this to the body is also particularly relevant in the case of trans speakers:

The sense of acceptability which orients linguistic practices is inscribed in the most deep-rooted of bodily dispositions: it is the whole body which responds by its posture, but also by its inner reactions or, more specifically, the articulatory ones to the tension of the market. Language is a body technique, and specifically linguistic, especially phonetic, competence is a dimension of bodily hexis in which one's whole relation to the social world, and one's whole socially informed relation to the world, are expressed.

Applying Bourdieu's point to trans speakers such as Lukas, it could be argued that 'talking like a man' may depend on more than self-recognition as a trans man and then deciding to speak accordingly (however that is understood). For some trans men, it may also be a matter of embodiment and social recognition *as a man*. In the first interview Lukas spoke of wanting to be seen to be a man 'in front of the whole world' ('delante de todo el mundo'). He returned to the issue of social recognition in the second interview with explicit reference to embodiment when he said: 'if you have no breasts and you have hair on your face, you are a man for people, for society' ('si no tienes pechos y tienes pelo en la cara, eres hombre para la gente, para la sociedad'). At the time of the interviews presented here Lukas had made no modifications to his body – his transition was still largely at the level of individual recognition *of self* and not yet one of social recognition *by others*. Although he had bought a binder to conceal his breasts he had not plucked up the courage to wear it in public.

At the time of writing (summer 2018), Lukas has been taking testosterone for nearly two years and has altered significantly in appearance as a result. He is currently awaiting chest surgery to remove his breasts and he wears the binder in public all the time. He has come out to his family, friends, neighbours and clients and is now only referred to only by his male name. Perhaps not surprisingly, his speech today is characterised by an abandonment of those grammatical forms which would characterise him as a female speaker of Spanish. Thus the data presented here may be said to capture a transitory moment in this particular trans man's journey – one in which his (middle-aged) female embodiment and its concomitant linguistic habitus, both the products of 'a life already made', continue to exert a powerful influence on his speech and on the way in which he presents himself.

With regard to the complexity of trans experience and trans intersectionality, one of the most noticeable features of Lukas's claiming of a trans man's identity is his repudiation of his former lesbian identity. The tension between butch lesbianism and FTM transgenderism has been written about extensively (e.g. Detloff, 2006; Halberstam, 2013; Rubin, 2003). Rubin (2003: 64) argues that the reason for the rise in numbers of FTMs is 'the unintended consequence of identity work in the lesbian community' and in particular the rise of middle-class political lesbian feminism in the 1970s. On this view, '[t]he woman-identified woman was now the hegemonic definition of lesbianism. Male-identified, female-bodied subjects had to find new ways to make sense of their lives'. Whatever the merits or otherwise of Rubin's argument, there is no evidence in the data that Lukas ever felt excluded from the lesbian community. Rather, lesbianism (although never fully assimilated) is shown clearly to have provided him with a way out of the abjection of drug and alcohol abuse, and to have made it possible for him to find love. However, although candid about his dislike of his breasts, and

his childhood desire to have a penis, Lukas does not dwell significantly on his repudiation of his female embodiment in these early interviews, preferring instead to direct his ire at being labelled a butch lesbian. How can this be accounted for in Lukas' case? Perhaps it goes back to the point made earlier by Diamond and Butterworth (2008), namely that the distinction between gender and sexuality is blurrier than is sometimes assumed. Lukas cannot deny the materiality of his female embodiment, but he can deny that he was ever a lesbian – and as Evan Hazenberg (2016: 271) reminds us 'someone is only a lesbian if they are also a woman'. Seen thus, Lukas' repudiation of lesbianism can be read as a proxy for the more difficult repudiation of his (as yet) undeniable female embodiment.

Finally, age is also shown to play an important part in Lukas' sense of himself. Jeff Hearn (2011: 94) points out that age is 'an unusual social division, in its apparent universality yet constant change'. And indeed age is shown to be particularly complex in Lukas' case. On the one hand, the fact that he is in his fifties and that he is relatively secure in his professional life means that he views body modification with some trepidation, as he feels there is a risk of destroying what he has achieved. If he were to lose his job, as result of alienating his current set of clients, he also stands to lose his hard-won sense of his own professionalism. At the same time, if he is do justice to his inner boy, he has to allow this aspect of himself to emerge and to grow – and to pass through an adolescence, but one which will be experienced in a fifty-five year old body. His attitude to the majority of the 'young boys' he has come into contact with, all of whom have experienced this second adolescence (or are still experiencing it), suggests that he sees his situation as very different from theirs, largely on account age.

By way of conclusion, it can be said that the ways in which gender, sexuality and age intersect in this trans man's life tell us much about the complexity of trans intersectionality – and in particular about the particular challenges of transitioning in middle-age. Ultimately, the data may be said to underline what Gust Yep (2016) has referred to as the case for a *thicker* view of intersectionality in which categories such as trans man are not seen as undifferentiated – but rather in need of an approach in which the messiness of experience is not eschewed and in which the complexities involved are brought to the fore. This is also important because, as David Block and Victor Corona (2016: 519) suggest, an intersectionality approach to identity research is what 'makes activism more possible' - given its overall concern with social justice. With that in mind, and cognisant of Kulick's (1999) call for transgender research that would also be of use to trans people in their struggle for recognition and acceptance, it is my hope that this paper might be of use to FTMs – particularly those embarking on their journey under the weight of 'a life already made'.

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### **Transcription conventions**

Slash (/) marks a chunk of talk

↑ rising intonation

↓ falling intonation

CAPITAL letters mean raised voice

(.) very short pause

(number) two or more second pause

[] comments by interlocutor

(FEM) feminine ending

(MASC) masculine ending

: elongated vowel sound (e.g. (esto:oy / a:am)

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