

Science and Ideology: The Blanchard-Bailey-Lawrence Model of Transsexuality

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Abstract

By Élise Hendrick (reprinted with permission) *Autogynaephiles, Homosexuals, and Fabricators: The Blanchard-Bailey-Lawrence Taxonomy of Trans Women I. A Hypothetical* Let us suppose that someone claimed to have found that rape is primarily a function of the sexuality and presentation of the victim, and proposed a binary taxonomy of rape victims: (1) The provoker: Provoker-type rape [...]

Article

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Autogynaephiles, Homosexuals, and Fabricators:

The Blanchard-Bailey-Lawrence Taxonomy of Trans Women

I. A Hypothetical

Let us suppose that someone claimed to have found that rape is primarily a function of the sexuality and presentation of the victim, and proposed a binary taxonomy of rape victims:

(1) The provoker: Provoker-type rape victims are heterosexual women no older than their mid-to-late twenties at the time of the incident. They are generally sexually active, and are characterized by general attractiveness and a preference for attractive, even provocative modes of dress and behavior. In these women, the rape is the subconsciously desired result of their behavior and presentation.

(2) The confabulator: The confabulator, like the provoker, is heterosexual, but homely and unattractive, and at least in her late twenties or thirties. She is not sexually active, nor does she dress in a particularly attractive or provocative manner. She is most likely to have convinced herself that she was raped in order to deceive herself into believing that she is sexually desirable despite her age and appearance.

Let us further suppose that the person who has “discovered” these categories also claims that there are no categories outside of the two above, and that any woman who claims not to fit within these categories in any particular is either lying or delusional. In dealing with these claims, rational people will likely do as suggested by Noam Chomsky in *The Case Against B.F. Skinner*[1], and ask: “What is the scientific status of the claims? What social or ideological needs do they serve? The questions are

logically independent, but the second type of question naturally comes to the fore as scientific pretensions are undermined.”

The scientific pretensions of the provoker/confabulator taxonomy would most likely be dismissed with derision by all rational observers because this binary taxonomy accords no validity to the accounts and experiences of the women involved, implicitly privileges the rapist’s claims over those of the victim, and is not falsifiable, i.e., any example that might lead the rational observer to question the validity of the model is automatically deemed a fabrication or a delusion.

If the proponent of the hypothetical model sketched above were to respond to serious questions about his methodology and the substance of his claims with derisive comments about “political correctness” or insinuations that critics were mentally unbalanced or improperly motivated, this would be taken as proof that even the proponent of the model considers it indefensible (as already suggested by the built-in “liar/delusional” catch-all).

Thus, the scientific status of the claim would be recognized virtually immediately as nil, and rational observers would quickly move on to examine the social and ideological needs that the provoker/confabulator model serves. They would turn their attention to the significance of repeated assurances that rape victims are generally liars and to lurid and detailed descriptions of the attractiveness of the proponent’s research subjects. They would note that the entire taxonomy operates to validate the rapist whilst marginalizing and dismissing his victim.

It would, thus, quickly become clear that the provoker/confabulator/ liar model is a pseudoscientific fabrication put forth for the likely purpose of validating the perpetrator of rape and harming the victim. Its proponent and adherents would be ipso facto discredited, and attention would be returned to real scientific work.

II. The Blanchard-Bailey-Lawrence Autogynaephilic/”Homosexual” Model

In the 1980s, Ray Blanchard, of the disreputable Canadian Clarke Institute, proposed a model of male-to-female transsexuality (like many of his colleagues, he ignored female-to-male transsexuality altogether), at the heart of which was a binary categorization very similar to the hypothetical one sketched above:

(1) “Homosexual[2] [sic] transsexuals”: “Homosexual” transsexuals, i.e. heterosexual trans women, are sexually attracted to men, present in a conventionally feminine manner, are attractive as women, and transition at a relatively young age.

(2) “Autogynaephilic (AGP) transsexuals”: Autogynaephilic transsexuals are trans women who transition later in life, are not conventionally feminine in appearance or behavior, are not particularly attractive, are sexually attracted toward women, and are sexually aroused by the idea of themselves as women.

It must be stressed that, as in the hypothetical above, the BBL model claims that these categories encompass all trans women. While this taxonomy in itself would seem trivial, Blanchard (and his adherents Anne Lawrence and J. Michael Bailey) added to these two discrete, all-encompassing categories assertions about causality. “Homosexual” (i.e. heterosexual) trans women transitioned in

order to be attractive to heterosexual men, while “autogynaephilic” trans women transition out of a “mis-directed” heterosexual sex drive that leads them to sexually fetishize the idea of themselves as women.

The BBL model attributes male-to-female transsexuality entirely to sexuality: Matters of identity not only take a back seat to sexual desire as the driving force behind transition; they are actively dismissed as fabrications. In his *The Man who Would be Queen*[3], Bailey writes as follows:

Most people--even those who have never met a transsexual-- know the standard story of men who want to be women: “Since I can remember, I have always felt as if I were a member of the other sex. I have felt like a freak with this body and detest my penis. I must get sex reassignment surgery (a “sex change operation”) in order to match my external body with my internal mind.” But the truth is much more interesting than the standard story.

(Bailey, p. 143; emphasis supplied). Thus, in a few short sentences, Bailey has relegated an account that will resonate with many (if not most) trans women to a significant degree to the “standard story”, a piece of conventional wisdom that is much less interesting than the “truth”.

“One way”, Bailey continues,

that the standard transsexual story is wrong is in its singularity. Two types of men change their sex. To anyone who examines them closely, they are quite dissimilar, in their histories, their motivations, their degree of femininity, their demographics, and even the way they look. We know little about the causes of either type of transsexualism (though we have some good hunches about one type). But I am certain that when we finally do understand, the causes of the two types will be completely different.

(Bailey, p. 145). Thus, the “standard story” is juxtaposed against the “truth”: a binary typology about which Bailey admits to nothing more but a “hunch” and his certainty that “when we finally do understand, the causes of the two types will be completely different”. This is, in itself, an odd claim to be making in a purportedly scientific work. It is one thing to propose a direction for future research, a direction that may or may not be promising or have intuitive appeal; it is quite another to state that there is reason to be “certain” about the ultimate result of inquiry into an admittedly poorly understood subject. Claims like this should make us suspect any scientific pretensions in a work that makes them.

Bailey explains the fact that the observations of the general public and the relevant medical community do not generally confirm the BBL model by asserting that “members of one type sometimes misrepresent themselves as members of the other.” Indeed, “they are often silent about their true motivation and instead, tell stories about themselves that are misleading and in important respects false.” (Bailey, p. 146) The claim that trans women who are not consistent with the BBL model are deceptive is a pervasive feature of the model.

In discussing the “autogynaephilia” category invented by Blanchard, Bailey dismisses out of hand the single most consistent feature in trans people, the painful lifelong inconsistency they feel between their gender identity (“subconscious sex,” in geneticist Julia Serano’s phrase) and their superficial physical and social sex, asserting that

Autogynephilia is not primarily a disorder of gender identity, except in the obvious sense that the goal of the transsexual is to become the other sex. At the cross-dressers' meeting I attended, the wife of one of the men asked me: "When they say they feel like women, how do they know what that feels like?" This question, which reflected the woman's skepticism about the men's account, is profound. How do we ever know that we are like someone else? Unless you believe in extrasensory perception (and I don't), the answer must be found in overt behavior, which somehow signals fundamental similarity. Evidently, the woman did not get those signals from the men. (If instead of being the wife of an autogynephile, she were the sister of a homosexual transsexual, I doubt she would have asked an analogous question.) The fact is that despite their obsession with becoming women, autogynephilic transsexuals are not especially feminine.

Bailey supports his claim about "autogynaephilia" with an example drawn not from the trans women he claims to be describing but from cross-dressers, many of whom have no desire to transition. One could as reasonably draw conclusions about schizophrenics by making observations about LSD enthusiasts.

Also notable is his insistence on remaining at a superficial level, even to the extent of reporting the views of the wife of one of the cross-dressers whilst completely ignoring anything the cross-dressers themselves might have to say. In reporting the rhetorical question of the wife of one of the cross-dressers at the meeting, he does not point out that "to feel like a woman" has more than one meaning. While it can certainly mean "to feel similar to a woman" (or "to want [to do] something", come to that), in this case the more likely meaning is "to feel one is a woman", i.e., to have a persistent sense of inconsistency between one's social and superficial gender and one's gender identity/subconscious sex. Except where the context is truly ambiguous or where one is being intentionally obtuse, a normal speaker of the English language will instinctively assign the respective interpretations to the phrases "I feel like a meatball sandwich", "I feel like a woman," and "I feel like you do". Bailey has no time for such niceties, and thus does not hesitate to select the most easily dismissed interpretation.

Having thus elected to interpret "I feel like a woman" as "I feel similar to how a woman feels", Bailey seeks to dismiss this statement:

How do we ever know that we are like someone else? Unless you believe in extrasensory perception (and I don't), the answer must be found in overt behavior, which somehow signals fundamental similarity.

Here, Bailey seeks to discredit what is in reality a rather hackneyed, stereotypical phrase by setting up a false dichotomy (as he is wont to do). Either one believes in ESP, and therefore can claim to "feel like" someone or something in Bailey's preferred sense (his failure to even mention empathy is unsurprising), or one must remain at the entirely superficial level of "overt behavior". If one's overt behavior is not "especially feminine", then, Bailey decrees, one cannot claim to have a female identity. Or, as Bailey puts it, "Supposedly, male-to-female transsexuals are motivated by the deep-seated feeling that they have women's souls. However, - - - men who want to be women [sic] are not naturally feminine. There is no sense in which they have women's souls[4]." (Bailey, p. xii)

How, then, Bailey - despite his avowed skepticism about ESP - can claim to know that what others feel is not what they say they feel, is a mystery on which I feel no overwhelming urge to speculate.

Thus, for Bailey, all women behave in a stereotypically feminine manner and overt behavior is a reasonable basis for drawing far-reaching conclusions about a person's identity. The possibility that

these “autogynaephilic” trans women might have learnt early on that feminine gender expression in someone perceived to be male would be met with severe consequences, and thus learned to project masculinity to the extent they were able as a defense mechanism, does not even occur to Bailey. Either you demonstrate a satisfactory degree of conventional femininity, or can lay no claim to a female identity. One wonders how the butch lesbian community took the news.

Thus, the identity of trans women whose superficial behavior is not sufficiently conventionally feminine to satisfy Bailey is at best an “obsession”. One might think, therefore, that Bailey might be more inclined to portray the second BBL category, the “homosexual” transsexual, in a more humanizing fashion. Alas, while Bailey certainly finds the latter category - trans women who are more conventionally feminine, are heterosexual in sexual orientation, and transition at a younger age - more attractive (“There is no way to say this as sensitively as I would prefer, so I will just go ahead. Most homosexual transsexuals are better looking than most autogynephilic transsexuals” [Bailey, p. 180]), this does not stop him painting this category with equally derogatory stereotypes.

Attractiveness aside, Bailey is no more respectful of the identities of “homosexual” trans women, who “simply lust after men” (p. 191), than he is of those of “autogynaephilic” trans women. These women, in Bailey’s eyes, are “a type of homosexual man” (p. 146) with a “short time horizon, with certain pleasure in the present worth great risks for the future.” (p. 184) “Prostitution,” Bailey notes, “is the single most common occupation that homosexual transsexuals in our study [a sample found by “cruising” bars frequented by sex workers] admitted to.” (Id.) “Nearly all the homosexual transsexuals I know work as escorts after they have their surgery.” (p. 210)

When not discussing the occupational similarities in a sample of trans women selected from venues likely to have a high percentage of sex workers, Bailey moves on to his other favorite subject: their sexual attractiveness (to him) and willingness to sleep with men. In this vein - apart from the already-quoted line - Bailey states that “Many of the transsexuals we interviewed in the course of this study were more attractive than the average genetic female.” Consider also his description of “Kim”:

I start upstairs to get the panoramic view, and I see Kim for the first time, on the stairs, dancing, posing. She is spectacular, exotic (I find out later that she is from Belize), and sexy. Her body is incredibly curvaceous, which is a clue that it might not be natural. And I notice a very subtle and not-unattractive angularity of the face, which is also not clearly diagnostic on this tall siren. It is difficult to avoid viewing Kim from two perspectives: as a researcher but also as a single, heterosexual man. As I contemplate approaching her, I am influence by considerations from each perspective. I have this strong intuition that I am correct about her, but if I am not, I may have the unpleasant experience of simultaneously insulting, and being rejected by, a beautiful woman. [...] in a tribute to her beauty, I decide for now not to approach her.

(p. 141-142; emphasis supplied). When we move on to “Terese”, we are regaled with pronouncements such as “In many ways Terese has blossomed since her surgery. She looks great. Not only do people fail to notice that she is a transsexual, but most men find her sexy and attractive. Depressed and in self-imposed isolation when I first saw her, she is flirtation, energetic, and socially busy now. Among other things, she models lingerie [at least it’s a representative sample with such common professions]. (p. 150; emphasis supplied) Later, we are told that “homosexual [sic] transsexuals aspire to be objects of desire.” (p. 180) “Homosexual” transsexuals express femininity because “they want to

attract men, and they get constant feedback (in the form of propositions from men [...])...This allows them to hone their presentations faster than the autogynephilic transsexual, who has spent most of her femme life looking at the mirror by herself.” Reading all of this, one is forced to wonder whose sexual proclivities this book is supposed to be about.

In addition to prostitution, for which Bailey believes that “homosexual” trans women, with their “male” psychology, are “especially well suited” (p. 185), Bailey uses a combination of rumors and sweeping generalizations to tell us of another supposed occupation of “homosexual” trans women: theft:

As for shoplifting, homosexual transsexuals are not especially well suited as much as especially motivated. For many, their taste in clothing is much more expensive than their income allows. Transsexual call girls are among the few who can afford expensive clothes. In female impersonator shows, transsexuals often wear designer gowns, which are widely believed (by other transsexuals) to have been acquired via the five-fingered [sic] discount.

(Id.)

It is, of course, possible to propose another model that accounts for all of the characteristics on which the BBL model is purportedly based. One could begin by noting that there is nothing particularly unusual about one’s sexual fantasies including oneself in the body of one’s identified sex. Indeed, it seems reasonable to assume that non-trans men and women, regardless of sexual orientation and gender expression, generally have sexual fantasies in which they are men and women, respectively. Both groups would likely have a great deal of trouble achieving arousal whilst imagining themselves in the body of a member of a sex inconsistent with their own gender identities. One would further note that these “autogynaeophilic” fantasies generally subside once trans women begin living in their identified sex, and therefore cease to feel the dissonance the BBL group are at great pains to ignore, and posit that such fantasies are a function of the deep, subconscious need to live and be perceived as their identified sex, rather than the other way around.

Once we remove the constraints imposed by the assumptions of the BBL model, it is also not hard to deal with one of Bailey’s admitted stumbling blocks: the fact that there are gay men who are highly feminine in gender expression but nonetheless do not transition. If we accept the BBL model, this datum is a true riddle, because it is based on the assumption that sexual orientation equals gender expression, and that gender identity does not exist. Thus, the existence of men and women - regardless of sexual orientation - who do not have any desire to transition and live as the other sex despite having gender expression typical of the other sex, cannot be explained. However, once we give credit to the accounts of trans people and others who have long reported a lifelong, persistent sense of dissonance between their assigned sex and their gender identity/subconscious sex, all of these mysteries quickly evaporate. It is only by Bailey’s refusal to accept what he admits is the consensus of the relevant professional community that the answers to questions like these become unattainable.

Not only is a model like the one sketched above - which reflects the essential contours of the scientific consensus - able to provide adequate answers to questions that lead BBL adherents to throw up their hands and change the subject; such a model is capable of providing consistent explanations of the bulk of the available data on issues of gender identity, expression, and transsexuality without the need to resort to so many assumptions. Unlike the BBL model, this model has no need to assume that trans people

are fundamentally deceptive or deluded, that trans men are somehow a completely different species, or that identity simply cannot be the motivation for the desire or decision to transition.

II. The Scientific Status of BBL-Style Taxonomies

Ultimately, Bailey's account (and the underlying BBL model) is abysmal from a scientific standpoint. It does not meet one of the basic - and most easily met - requirements for a scientific theory, falsifiability, because it pervasively paints trans women as liars who will misrepresent themselves to avoid being placed in one of the two categories. Thus, it does not even attempt to account for the many lesbian and bisexual trans women who are conventionally feminine in appearance and gender expression and transition in their twenties or earlier and do not have a history of erotic cross-dressing, nor does it seriously contemplate trans women who, at least prior to transition, manage a conventionally masculine gender expression, but transition young (thus undermining its ability to adequately describe and explain a wide range of pertinent data). The ink that could have been dedicated to these vaguely important issues is instead dedicated, in substantial part, to Bailey's "hot or not" judgements about trans women. It is not exactly a great shock that this "theory" has failed to gain acceptance in the relevant professional communities.

However, the above discussion of the BBL model does not mention its most salient characteristic: its vapidness. It takes little to no intellectual effort to invent BBL-type taxonomies for any imaginable group of people. One is reminded of a popular joke: "There are two kinds of people: those who say that there are two kinds of people and those who don't." Indeed, about all one needs to do in order to create a BBL-type taxonomy is to start by (1) declaring that there are two kinds of people. Then, carefully following Bailey's injunction to stick to the superficial (lest one appear to believe in ESP), (2) one delineates the specific characteristics of the "two kinds of people" identified. In order to escape triviality, the dichotomy must then be (3) enhanced by making assertions about causation: the overarching category to which these "two kinds of people" belong exists because of a common superficial characteristic allegedly shared by the two groups. Once this is all in place, all one has to do to render one's BBL taxonomy immune to contrary evidence (particularly non-superficial contrary evidence) is (4) to claim that "members of one type sometimes misrepresent themselves as members of the other," and that both types "are often silent about their true motivation and instead, tell stories about themselves that are misleading and in important respects false."

It is instructive (or, at the very least, amusing) to illustrate this by creating a BBL-type taxonomy for the BBL clique and their adherents. Essentially, one would say, BBL adherents break down into two fundamental types: deluded BBL adherents (DBAs) and mendacious BBL adherents (MBAs). Both groups commonly claim that they are fundamentally scientists, and that their adherence to the BBL model is scientifically motivated, and (the former type in particular) may indeed actually believe that this is the case. However, the argument would go, the careful observer will discount these protestations (after all, who can truly claim to be a scientist unless they actually know how it feels to be a scientist, by ESP perhaps) and instead look at the common denominator in the overt behavior of the two groups. They both are obsessed, in different ways, with sexualizing trans women. DBAs need to believe (and MBAs, similarly, need to convince others) that trans women are, in fact, men, who transition either out of a pathological need to have sex with large numbers of heterosexual men or out of a pathological need to achieve sexual arousal and climax by seeing themselves as women.

According to this model, these types are not readily visible to the untrained eye, since MBAs commonly misrepresent themselves as DBAs (and may even come to believe this themselves), and both types are often silent about their true motivation, and instead tell stories about their “research” and “findings” that are misleading, and, in important respects, false. Why, a proponent of this model would ask, do BBL adherents exist, given that there can be no true scientific motivation in a group of pretend scientists? One answer would quickly commend itself: both groups spend an inordinate time - even at the risk of public ridicule and the loss of their careers and credibility - sexualizing trans women and portraying them as men. This pathological need could be termed *alloandrophilia*[5] (*aloe-andro-feel-ya*), a need to achieve sexual arousal and climax by viewing others as hypersexualized men.

Both DBAs and MBAs will often take offense at being assigned to either diagnostic category, and try to downplay the erotic aspects of their fixation with viewing trans women as men. Many will invent long, detailed narratives of their “research” and even go to the extent of founding “scientific” journals to create the superficial impression in the uninformed public that they are in fact real scientists, despite the fact that their overt behavior will often appear to be anything but scientific. In any case, the argument would go, we must discount anything we may hear about the “true” motivations of BBL adherents. While one occasionally encounters open and honest BBL adherents of both types, who admit to the erotic nature of their obsessions, most BBL adherents are desperate to convince both others and themselves of the validity of the standard BBL narrative.

Because it is easily possible to shoehorn any group one wants into a BBL type taxonomy (though the above case has at least empirical validity speaking for it), its scientific status is even more undermined. The BBL taxonomy fails to conform to the criteria of a scientific theory in multiple respects. First: it lacks explanatory and descriptive adequacy in that it fails to adequately explain, or even describe, a wide range of pertinent data. Second: it seeks to create an unsupported catch-all (lying) in order to discount any contrary data, thus rendering it unfalsifiable. Third: the BBL taxonomy is vacuous and lacks any serious theoretical content, and thus is accurately termed trivial.

Accordingly, the scientific status of the BBL taxonomy is nil.

III. The Social and Ideological Function of the BBL Taxonomy

Moving on to the second issue, the social and ideological needs served by the BBL claims, Bailey himself inadvertently tips his hand in a section dedicated to the issue of public and private funding for sex reassignment surgery:

My undergraduate students at Northwestern are surely more liberal than average [...] but even most of them balk at the idea that the surgery should be subsidized. They are especially hesitant to support surgery for non-homosexual transsexuals, once they learn about autogynephilia. The idea of men sexually obsessed with having vaginas is incomprehensible to them, and like most Americans, they are too puritanical to give sexual concerns much priority in the public trough. But even when I invoke the standard transsexual narrative - “Imagine that you have felt your entire life that you had the body of the wrong sex” - they balk. When I press them, they say something like the following: “But they don’t have the wrong body. They are mentally ill.”

(p. 206; emphasis supplied) In other words, Bailey expressly acknowledges that the effect of teaching the BBL model, especially to inexperienced undergraduates who may not know any better, is to bias them

against the legitimacy of the needs of trans women. By inculcating in these students “the idea of men sexually obsessed with having vaginas”, he is - by his own account - able to eliminate any empathy or understanding the students might have for the “standard” (i.e. actual) narrative. The typical response Bailey claims to get when he presses these students is exactly the one he has been at great pains to propagate: “They don’t have the wrong body. They are mentally ill.” (Id.)

Thus, while not capable of even attempting to explain the vast range of gender-variant identities and behavior without resorting to broad, sweeping assumptions, the BBL model is quite suited to the ideological and social needs of those who seek to do serious harm to the social, political, and legal position of trans women. This also explains why Bailey would choose to address his book to a lay audience, rather than the relevant scientific community: like the undergraduates he describes, the lay public is unlikely to have the sophisticated understanding of the issues that would allow his colleagues to recognize his work as nonsense.

IV. Conclusion: Conforming Popular Ideology to Reality

Returning to the hypothetical case we considered initially, it is important to remember that it is not particularly hypothetical. While the terminology and pseudoscientific window-dressing are products of my own imagination, the basic ideas that the model put forth were common coin just a few decades ago. Why, then, would the hypothetical provoker/confabulator model now be likely to be dismissed with derision, while the long-discredited and fundamentally flawed Bailey-Blanchard-Lawrence fetishist/effeminate gay man model can be published by an imprint of the National Academy of Sciences? Why can the proponent of such pseudoscience, after being exposed, be portrayed in the media as the victim, and those who seek to counteract his propaganda as the aggressors?

I would submit that the answer ultimately lies in the hypothetical case. What happened that caused the scientific community and the public to go from generally accepting the ideas about rape underlying the hypothetical provoker/confabulator model to recognizing it as the misogynistic nonsense it is? The data did not change. The ideas underlying the model were no more objectively valid before than they are now. However, the political position of victims of sexual assault has changed. Through the feminist movements, these and other (cisgendered) women have demanded a voice in defining their lives and their experiences, and their fundamental right to self-determination and personal autonomy. One sign of the moderate success they have enjoyed in these efforts is the fact that a proponent of a model of rape like the hypothetical one sketched above would be immediately recognized by most as a misogynist and an apologist for rapists.

Trans women, on the other hand, have not yet been successful in their struggle to define their own lives and experiences, much less in vindicating their right to meaningful personal autonomy. Because of this, the proponents of the BBL model can play to the media (the only forum left since their colleagues have long since rejected it), and expect the prevailing climate of ignorance and cissexism to prepare fertile ground for their propaganda. However, the response of a number of trans women - scientists, educators, lawyers, and others - to *The Man who would be Queen* is a definite step in the right direction. Their immediate efforts to debunk the BBL pseudoscience and document the severe methodological and ethical irregularities of Bailey’s work[6] successfully led to Bailey’s forced resignation from his post as department chair at Northwestern, and caused the National Academy of Sciences to remove his book from their website. While those who would seek to prevent trans women

telling their own stories on their own terms were quick to cry “censorship” and blame the justified outrage of those defamed by Bailey’s work on “political correctness” or “identity politics”, it is only through persistent, vocal, and public challenges to bigoted propaganda such as Bailey’s that the ideological climate will be forced to catch up to the realities of trans women’s lives.

Life After Gonzales

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