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# The Trouble with Nature

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*Sex in Science and Popular Culture*

ROGER N. LANCASTER

*University of California Press*

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My suspicion is that the universe is not only queerer than we suppose, but queerer than we *can* suppose.

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J. B. S. HALDANE

Naturalism has served as deceptively in the modern world as supernaturalism ever did in the past.

KENNETH BURKE

We have to understand that with our desires, through our desires, go new forms of relationship, new forms of love, new forms of creation.

MICHEL FOUCAULT

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# Acknowledgments

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Let me say right off that I feel like I've been wading through a toxic waste dump of ideas for the better part of several years, pressing little exhibits into my media scrapbook like Doris Lessing on a bad day. Actually, it didn't start off that way. A materialist with a bit of a vulgar streak, I began this project more than a little weary of the airy idealist conceits that have dominated recent discussions of sex in anthropology and cultural studies. Looking for approaches that might put some *body* in the discussions of the body, I had hoped to discover sophisticated new biological perspectives on sex and sexuality. What I encountered instead was the same old reductivism warmed over: the belief that complex social identities are scripted in strands of DNA. The notion that desires are coded microscopically, in the genes. Ideas about social good (and ill), staged as media-savvy evolutionary just-so stories.

Lots of scholars feign sophistication on these matters, but my research methods for this project were simple enough: I read newspapers and news weeklies to monitor what kinds of science studies made headlines, and to track how scientific claims about gender and sexuality entered into public discourse. For a time, I almost imagined subtitling this book *Reading the New York Times Science News* (with apologies to Catherine Lutz and Jane Collins), for it seemed that if a science story was deemed newsworthy in that influential paper, chances were good you'd also see it in the *Washington Post* or in *Newsweek* or in some other national news source. In addition to reading the papers, I watched network news and, *à contretemps*, TV entertainment programs, taking notes on treatments of gender and sexuality in those very different venues. (Okay, I admit it: I would probably have watched a certain amount of TV anyway—probably not ABC's *Home Improvement*, but definitely WB's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.) Over time, I've tried to tame a free-flowing series of impromptu notes into something more closely resembling book chapters. The ensuing text follows the flickering line between media studies and science studies, lesbian and gender studies—as informed by my more conventional academic training and research in anthropology and specifically by my interest in cultural studies.

I cannot say whether this book is a work of the auto-ethnographic sort, or whether it belongs to the genre of cultural criticism. I hope it represents a bit of both. My role models are Roland Barthes, who appropriately camped up a reading of nature at the confluence of Marx, Lukács, and Saussure's *Mythologies*; Marshall Sahlins, who dispatched the first wave of sociological ideas with considerable panache in *The Use and Abuse of Biology* (a book whose basic arguments have not been superseded in twenty-five years); and the "Left biologists"—Anne Fausto-Sterling, Stephen Jay Gould, Ruth Hubbard, and Richard Lewontin. I've drawn special inspiration from gay-studies scholars like Li Duggan, Lauren Berlant, and Michael Warner, authors of exceptional talent who've written about mass culture and have sometimes attempted to mediate between the often recondite field of queer theory and the public sphere. (I cribbed this book's title from Warner's *The Trouble with Normal*.)

A number of readers have indulged me with helpful and selflessly critical readings of earlier drafts.

of various chapters: Andy Bickford, Susan Bordo, William Byne, Samuel Colón, Marcial Godoy Anativia, ~~Deborah Heath, David Kaufmann, Bill Leap, Micaela di Leonardo, Michael Higgin~~ Jonathan Marks, David McBride, Ann Palkovich, Richard Parker, Adolph Reed, Nancy Scheper-Hughes, Naomi Schneider, Paul Smith, Susan Sperling, Judith Stacey, Suzanna Walters, and Eric Zinner. Alan Dundes generously pointed me toward some profitable readings in folklore and mythology. Anne Fausto-Sterling was most helpful, sending me in draft form a portion of her new book, *Sexing the Body*, while Bill Byne, Jon Marks, and Suzanna Walters each supplied me with drafts of material then in press. Gina Maranto engaged me in a delightful and informative online conversation about the social construction of normality, and my research assistants, Lynn Constantine and Joanne Clarke Dillman, lent considerable help with portions of the research and editing. At the University of California Press, my editor, Naomi Schneider, shepherded this project through the usual hazards. Erika Büky capably oversaw production. Bud Bynack and Sue Carter did a great job with copyediting, while staffers Annie Decker and Sierra Filucci kept things moving along (and did more than their share of hand-holding with an anxious author). Staff seldom get the credit they deserve for the work they do. Zina Santos, the Cultural Studies Program's administrative assistant, ran the office with admirable efficiency, which freed up my time to write and do research. Zina also volunteered to help locate illustrations and request permissions. Special thanks, then, Zina, for service beyond the call of duty, to my partners in crime, Micaela and Paul, for several close readings of the text, and to my partner in life, Samuel, for the same—and for putting up with all that goes into the production of a book. Obstinate and perverse creature that I am, I have not always followed my fellow-travelers' advice. Hence, the traditional self-curse: Any resulting omissions, mistakes, or misrepresentations are, of course, my own.

*RNL*

# Introduction:

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## Culture Wars, Nature Wars

### *A Report from the Front*

Nature is, first of all, a wish.

HARVIE FERGUSON, *The Science of Pleasure*

A series of TV greeting-card commercials broadcast in the mid-1990s followed the conversations of a young, attractive, and presumably married couple on a variety of special occasions: holiday anniversaries, and birthdays. Over the course of these ads, the woman has let her husband in on one of her sex's many little secrets. Women always—and, if they are well practiced, *discreetly*—turn the card around to inspect its logo, to see if it's a Hallmark®. So went an entire genre of mass media representations at the time: coy expositions on the role of sexual difference in modern courtship, romance, and family life. Vignettes on the true nature of men, women, and desire.

In 1997, Hallmark aired a variant of this ad in which the young man presents his infant niece—his wife's sister's daughter—with her very first greeting card. TV viewers hear the baby's cooing and giggling. From a perspective at the side of the bassinet, we see the card rear up, then turn around. With the young man's shocked face on screen, the voice-over queries: "*Could it be this need to look for Hallmark on the back is . . . genetic?*" At the same time, molecular geneticist Dean Hamer—National Institutes of Health scientist famous for genetic research on the causes of male homosexuality—was lending gravitas to scenarios not far removed from Madison Avenue whimsy. At a Harvard conference on biology and sexuality, Hamer announced that his present research indicates the existence of two genes, each with two variants. One gene determines the frequency with which people like to have sex: once a week or more, versus less than once a week. The other gene, Simon LeVay puts it, determines whether we prefer multiple partners, "unusual" positions, and sexual "experimentation" or whether we prefer monogamy and sexual repetition.<sup>2</sup> Alas, it becomes difficult to parody the claims of science on the "nature" of desire.

### MEANWHILE, BACK AT THE SEXUAL REVOLUTION

Even though popular science of the past decade tends to deliver emphatic parables about a timeless human nature, empirical happenings on the social ground suggest little in the way of certainty about sexual identities or gender roles. Quite the contrary. At the unfolding of the new millennium, as in the waning years of the twentieth century, American society is in turmoil over sex, and presumably will remain so for a long time to come.

The cultural (as opposed to economic) issues that came to the fore in the 1960s continue to dominate politics in the United States, where elections more often than not turn on conflicts over abortion, homosexuality, marriage, family life, and relations between the sexes. The old feminist slogan "The personal is political" finds new life in a consequently altered social landscape: in the "tabloidization" of news, in sex scandals of the rich and famous, in John and Jane Q. Public "human interest" stories that purport to monitor the health and definition of modern families, and in general in what Lauren Berlant has described as a "privatization" or "downsizing" of citizenship—the notice

“that the core context of politics should be the sphere of private life.”<sup>3</sup> This is to say nothing of recent technological advances in assisted reproduction and cloning, from which have ensued not only bioethical quandaries, but also existential dilemmas over the meanings of sex, conception, and personhood.

All said, in that long interregnum between the close of the Gulf War in 1991 and the terrorist attacks on New York and the Pentagon in 2001, the defining news topics of the decade amount to a now hidden, now open struggle over what it means to be a man or a woman. These struggles continue unabated today—not only in contentions over family law, welfare benefits, pornography, or the right to choose, but also in deliberations over the aims of foreign policy or the justifications for military intervention, and in controversies about funding for international institutions that deal with sexual health and reproduction. But after eighty years of universal suffrage, decades after the first salvos of the sexual revolution, and after thirty years of modern feminism and gay liberation, the sides have diversified, the issues have grown more complex, and just what it might mean to be male or female is anybody’s guess. Basic meanings and practices are, as it were, up for grabs.

Is a real man tough or nurturing, self-reliant or relationship-oriented? Does he eat steak, or does he eat quiche? Should a woman, in Henry Higgins’s quaint phrase (as in the recurring quandaries of feminism), be “more like a man”—or decidedly less so? Is the properly politicized feminism anti-pornography, pro-sex, or (I think here of the so-called babe feminists) downright sleazy? And what is the point of ongoing struggles for sexual equality: to claim a legitimate place for everyone with expanded definitions of male and female, church and family, community and state? Or is it time for a queer coalition of fags, dykes, sissies, butches, misfits, and rebels to secede forever from True Man and Real Woman, and other fake universals?



Figure 1. Abortion activists pro and con confront each other outside the U.S. Supreme Court Building in Washington, June 30, 1992. Photo by Marcy Nighswander. AP/World Wide Photos.

Indeed, just what *is* a man or a woman? Contestation, confusion, and equivocation dramati-

manifest themselves around these basic questions in public discourses today—and not only American society.

When British Army officer Sergeant Major Joe Rushdon announced his plans to undergo male-to-female gender reassignment surgery, it was unclear whether he would be discharged from the service. Homosexuals were (at the time) still barred from military service in Britain. In response to Rushdon's announcement, the Defense Ministry hastily cobbled together a new policy allowing transsexuals to serve in the military—while continuing to bar homosexuals. “There is a clear difference between homosexuality and transsexuality,” a Defense Ministry spokesperson told BBC News, hypothesizing on the nature of desire and claiming clarity where others have seen murk. “Transsexuality is a gender issue, not one of sexuality,” he continued. Invoking an analytical distinction between “gender” and “sexuality,” the Defense Ministry cited one of the sturdier dualisms of feminism and gay liberation. But by asserting a wall of separation between the two, the improvised policy implied anything but liberatory effects. Instead, it suggested a nervous patrolling of unstable identities. Christine Burns, speaking for the transgender civil rights group Press for Change, underscored the weird ironies and implausible consequences of the government's position. Rushdon, she pointed out, “will physically be a woman but legally be a man. Given the Army's ban on homosexuality, it is not clear whether she will be allowed to have sexual relations with a man or a woman—if anyone.”<sup>4</sup>

#### THE CHANGING CONTEXT

Such confusions about basic rules illuminate wider conflicts and uncertainties in the changing, ever more interconnected worlds of gender and sexuality. Nowadays, as in the past, men and women come of age in a society dominated by male prerogatives and heterosexual values. But unlike past generations, young people now come to adulthood in a society where those values are openly questioned from every possible angle and in every conceivable forum. From bedroom to boardroom, in classrooms and on the streets, the “culture wars” have become an inescapable backdrop of modern life: a many-sided struggle in which old allies no sooner achieve some small victory than they part company, an ongoing revolution in which every loss renews the fight on another front, an all-around crisis in which even individuals are torn between hostile camps.

In the aftermath of oppositional contest and institutional compromise, a certain social transformation has already occurred. Family, marriage, and community, by all accounts, are not what they used to be, which has been a cause for celebration on one side and lamentation on the other. Gay institutions, which three decades ago occupied a shadowy realm on the margins of public life, now anchor a substantial portion of cultural and economic life in every major American city. It is difficult to imagine the modern metropolis without its Village/Chelsea complex, its West Hollywood, its greater Castro, its South Beach, or its Dupont Circle area.<sup>5</sup> The cultural values expressed in mainstream mass entertainment, too, have changed. To the consternation of cultural conservatives, Disney cartoons strive to teach multicultural, inclusive, and tolerant values, while an up-to-date Popeye and a thoroughly modern Olive Oyl solve their problems together using brains, not brawn. Feminist issues (fat, body image, domestic violence, sexual freedom, and sexual coercion) are robustly debated for the masses on afternoon talk shows, while suburban parents agonize over the social effects of traditional, gendered toys—guns for boys and dolls for girls—and conspire to minimize gender disparities among their sons and daughters.

In a time of contested, changing values, even moralistic finger wagging takes on an oddly nuanced tone. Opining in *Newsweek* on the Clinton sex scandals, senior editor Jonathan Alter tilts against permissiveness with the following precariously balanced sentence: “There's something to the idea that



the welcome and long-overdue tolerance of blacks, women, Jews, foreigners and gays has left us indiscriminately tolerant.”<sup>6</sup> Push such a rickety contention one way or the other and it might well seem something intolerant. But because it is caught in the tow of its own historical moment, it merely expresses the author’s uneasiness about his own moralizing.

In more ways than one, the Monica Lewinsky affair proved a sensitive barometer of ongoing changes in American sexual culture. The Starr Report made it clear that President Bill Clinton and White House intern Lewinsky enjoyed a wide gamut of nonreproductive sex acts (manual stimulation, digital penetration, fellatio, cunnilingus, anilingus, and penetration by phallic objects). These revelations triggered virtually no public talk about “unnatural sex”—despite the fact that a good number of the couple’s steamy passions remain illegal under many states’ sodomy laws.<sup>7</sup> In the end, Clinton survived impeachment for lying under oath about the affair and staged an obligatory, brief and not very convincing performance of spiritual contrition. Voters punished pro-impeachment Republicans in the 1998 off-year elections, and public opinion proved so blasé about the entire affair that leaders of the religious Right conceded that “Moral Minority” might be a more appropriate term for Christian conservatism than “Moral Majority.” Subsequently, Hillary Rodham Clinton’s 2000 run for a United States Senate seat in New York provided the opportunity for yet another round of speculation about the first couple’s private lives: Republican commentators attempted to revive the characterization of Hillary Clinton as “The Great Enabler,” while tabloids gossiped about the first lady’s flings with Lesbian “gal pals” . . . to no avail. HRC won handily.

Meanwhile, even that bulwark of social retrenchment, evangelical Protestantism, seems unable to resist the flow of certain social currents, having appropriated much of the style and some of the substance of post-sixties social movements: youth programs, hip music, quasi-feminist “consciousness-raising” discussions, a rhetorical emphasis on therapeutic introspection and self-actualization.<sup>8</sup> A quick perusal of the home schooling section of a Christian bookstore in my area turned up a surprisingly large representation of progressive ideas—notions not altogether consonant with the aim of educating children within the constraints of a narrow and sometimes bigoted tradition (e.g., tailoring instruction to the unique individual, making everyday happenings into learning experiences, encouraging creativity, empowering little girls to learn, etc.). In the 1970s and 1980s, Christian fundamentalists had built political capital by tapping widespread homophobia; by the late 1990s, it had become clear that sexual intolerance ran contrary to social tides and alienated even conservative voters. So in 1999, the Reverend Jerry Falwell, founder of the aforementioned Moral Majority, and supporters at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia—ground zero in the culture wars—met with gay and lesbian Christians in an effort to “lower the rhetoric” and to encourage a change of tone in discussions of religion, homosexuality, and gay civil rights.<sup>9</sup>

In short, times have changed. They continue to change, and people with them. A great mass of people—gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgenders, surely, but also live-in couples, working mothers, single mothers, even apparently “conventional” married couples—no more recognize their lives in the old nostrums and received wisdom than working-class families of Marx’s day could recognize themselves in bourgeois mores.<sup>10</sup>

#### THE ALL-AMERICAN QUEST FOR A SELF: QUEER DILEMMAS

Recognition, precisely—re-cognition—is the heart of the matter: the wound that hurts, the vital link between personal turmoil and public troubles. For how do we catch a glimpse of ourselves in the midst of revolutionizing metamorphoses? How might we make sense of our changing practices, to ourselves



and to others? And how could we ever hope to attain certainty about something so multifarious and evanescent as a self?

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Such are the exhilarating and vertiginous questions usually associated with gay and lesbian “coming-out” experiences—a dramatic contest for existence that pits a heroic self against so many social obstacles, a search for authenticity that opens up fundamental (and ultimately unresolvable) questions about manhood, womanhood, selfhood. But today, it is not just gays who are party to such existential questions. Everyone is.

I still remember the jolt of surprise I felt reading a newspaper article about the thirtieth anniversary of the 1963 March on Washington (a feeling not so different from the psychic bump I experienced some time around the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Stonewall Riots when in a send-up of the investigative interview technique used by some TV talk shows to conceal a speaker’s identity, *Tom the Tiger* began urging adult enthusiasts of Kellogg’s Frosted Flakes to come out of the closet). A young woman attending the commemorative march described the original civil rights event as “national coming-out day” for black people. Perhaps the speaker’s analogy got the historical process backward (the gay/lesbian movement borrowed tactics from the civil rights movement, not vice versa—historically, black pride comes before gay pride), but her conflation underscores a simple and more immediate truth: coming out has become a general trope in American popular political culture. Anyone can emerge from denial, evasion, and secrecy to embrace a public identity. We all have to decide for ourselves what it means to be a man or a woman, to be black or white, to have this body or that. Everyone “comes out” today.

Perhaps this was always so, for much is old about our current dilemmas. When the new social movements politicized identity—when feminists first raised consciousness and gays first came out—they broke with institutional structures and ideological strictures. But they also acted as heirs of a recurring and peculiarly American injunction to find ourselves, to know ourselves, to be true to ourselves—a modernist moral quest that set Thoreau by Walden Pond, drew Huck Finn’s raft down the Mississippi, and did not end with Holden Caulfield contemplating a patch of rye or John Reel hustling his way across the American nightscape. “Identity politics”—the *bête noire* of cultural traditionalists, the supposed source of all that divides us—is actually as American as apple pie, canonized in our literature and lived as the national mythos.<sup>11</sup>

Modern identity politics is “self-making” in an era when “man”—implicitly straight, white, property-owning man—is not the only one who makes himself. What is new about today’s dialectic of identity and identification, then, is that it now encompasses groups, interests, and ideas that were traditionally excluded. And what is unprecedented is just how problematic the quest for an authentic self becomes in the wake of feminism, gay liberation, and other social movements that challenge received notions of masculinity and femininity, of “proper” ways of inhabiting this or that body, and the power relations these conventions structure.

“Be Yourself” is still the quintessentially American catchphrase—the message of every self-help book and the gospel according to Hollywood—but everyone now knows what slippery work that is and how much ruse and artifice go into every staging of self. In the ensuing cacophony, where moral imperative meets fissioning identities on a many-sided battlefield, those durable categories that once grounded the search for meaning—Man, Woman—have been thrown to the winds of historical contingency, ambiguity. The call “Be a man” still rings, still finds its echo in the civil rights claim “I am a man”—but it is no longer clear exactly what this means, or even whether men should aspire to be it. “You Make Me Feel like a Natural Woman” still gets airplay—but what once seemed like a transparently earnest yearning for spiritual communion now sounds more and more like a camp put-on, destined from the beginning to serve as a TV ad for hair dye. In an era appropriately presided over

by a succession of transvestic cultural heroes—movie characters who can't decide which sex they're opposite, trickster pop artists who go both ways on the gender divide—everyone is compelled by rapidly changing circumstances to participate in an ongoing quest for self-definition. Today that quest is, unavoidably, a perpetual crisis over the true nature of sex.

#### FLASH: SCIENTISTS CLAIM TO DECIPHER SECRET OF LIFE

Not coincidentally, while identities everywhere are caught up in epistemic flux and volatility, American culture is at the same time awash with highly publicized (and publicity-sensitive) studies asserting a genetic source, a hormonal cause, and/or a hardwired, gendered brain as the basis for a particular manner of human traits and practices—from individual preferences and aesthetic judgments to broad cultural meanings and social structures. Hallmark's TV ad alludes, playfully, to a familiar litany of scientific claims about gender, genetics, and genitivity—to notions given an increasingly wide hearing, from popular culture as in the culture of science: Men give gifts; women receive (and appraise) them. Men are competitive, women cooperative. Men are direct creatures whose acts go straight to the point; women's thoughts and deeds are immersed in webs of social ties, emotional bonds, and intricate complex interpersonal calculations. Men are from Mars, women from Venus. So goes a series of popular claims—snapshots, cartoons—about how men and women really are, in their deepest, most abiding nature. Tales of stability and permanence whispered in the maelstrom. Old bromides decked out in scientific drag.

What is most obvious about these naturalistic and naturalizing representations is that they are emphatic on matters about which recent history has been so equivocal. They conjure nature as a stopgap boundary, a hastily drawn edge to limit and hem in ceaseless introspection and analytic regress over Man, Woman, Love, and the nature of human affinities. Incantations of symmetry, once mythic and mathematical, they summon nature as a golden mean, an exemplary center, a principle of balance. In the resulting scientific models (as in the modern folklore from which they draw sustenance), it is the mutual lust of man and woman that insures and perpetuates this oh-so-balanced complementarity, the conjoining of opposites. It is thus *desire* that anchors the "I" of identity, even as everything else is swallowed by storm: a desire to recognize, to identify, to know the true nature of men and women, a desire to know the truth of desire. A desire to beat a hasty exit from the world of history and struggle and becoming.

In the long shadow of the Human Genome Project, with its dream of deciphering once and for all the Book of Life—thus, in the geneticist vulgate, settling with mathematical precision both the question of identity and the question of true human nature—the one thing slips into the other. Nature as legible as a greeting card, becomes desire, then the "nature" of desire, which flows into an unrequited longing for nature as an uncomplicated condition of authenticity.<sup>13</sup>

#### SEXUAL SCIENCE AND ITS DOUBLE-EDGED CLAIMS

It was in the wake of neuroanatomist Simon LeVay's 1991 "gay brain" study—the first of a recent series of scientific studies purporting to document an organic, hormonal, or genetic basis for homosexuality—that I began collecting newspaper articles, magazine essays, and scientific reports on what I would later gloss the "'nature' of desire."<sup>14</sup> At first, I was primarily interested in depictions of same-sex desire as a genetic tendency or organic condition and in the all too explicable media and political attention these claims received. My interest in the subject was at once personal, political, and professional.

As a gay man, I was—and remain—skeptical of attempts to understand homosexual desire by reference to an underlying organic condition supposedly affecting a distinct minority of the human race. Claims of this order are, of course, nothing new. Homosexual rights advocates have leaned on innatist paradigms since the mid-nineteenth century, when gay rights pioneer Karl Ulrichs first surmised that same-sex desire was a congenital condition. Ulrichs claimed that male same-sex desire expresses “psychic hermaphroditism,” the carnal and emotional longings of a “female psyche” trapped in a “male body.” Working with a few simple assumptions about the dynamics of erotic attraction, Ulrichs elaborated a general typology of sexual instincts and sexual beings. There was nothing nefarious about Ulrichs’s courageous and humane publications, which expressed the author’s heartfelt conviction that he and others like him had been “born different.” Ulrichs was optimistic that if it could be shown that men who were attracted to men were not “choosing” their feelings—that if sexualities were thus situated in the domain of nature, rather than that of religion—then dispassionate science would dispel prejudice and superstition against same-sex desire.

Subsequent developments reveal the naiveté of this optimism. The emerging field of psychiatry took up the theme of the homosexual body, held to be physiologically distinct from other bodies. Indeed, the notion became central to early sexological concerns. But where Ulrichs had seen benign variation, Richard von Krafft-Ebing and a host of others saw pathological deviation. Drawing on Spencerian notions of biological evolution and racial regress, Krafft-Ebing depicted “contrary sexual feeling” as a degenerative disorder of the central nervous system. This theme of sexual “degeneracy” pervaded the texts of early psychiatry and medicine. It loomed large in Nazi pseudoscience, where homosexual bodies were among those marked “unfit.” It informed decades of sham “therapies” and violent “treatments”—just as it haunts the discourses of sexual science today. Modern variations on the theme include homosexuality as hormonal imbalance, homosexuality as fetal stress syndrome, homosexuality as a genetic disorder associated with fetal wastage, and so on.<sup>15</sup>

As my thumbnail sketch ought to indicate, biological explanations of same-sex desire have a long and problematic history, not the least problem being that they promote a dangerously medicalized view of human sexuality—a conception of sexual orientation that still resonates to the ideas of nineteenth-century scientific racism, eugenics, and phrenology. But it is not just that these explanations represent bad politics. Like their nineteenth-century antecedents, they represent bad science (and especially bad *social* science), as well.

## THE CULTURE OF NATURE

Since the Enlightenment, the natural sciences have been recognized as the disciplines that ought to guide our understanding of the world around us and how it works. As such, the natural sciences enjoy enormous cultural prestige. Their findings are the object of considerable interest by non-scientists whose curiosity about new scientific discoveries on subjects ranging from particle physics to global ecology is served—and stoked—by a variety of electronic and print media, including cable TV channels, popular magazines, and weekly newspaper supplements. Interest is particularly keen in the biological sciences, especially as these touch on how the human body works or fails to work, on medical treatments and their efficacy, and, perhaps especially, on human evolution and genetics.

Fields like evolutionary biology and genetics have always been subject to ideological influences—to the sway of received opinions and untested beliefs about the nature of men, women, and desire. The proximity of their subject matter to folkloric ideas about human nature and heredity has also long sustained the correlative flow of less-than-scientific ideas in the culture at large. The resulting two-way traffic between science and popular culture has perhaps never been more intensive than it

today, and much of this circulation happens in the serious public sphere. Just ask any regular reader of the *New York Times* or *Time* what biological science is good for, and chances are s/he'll tell you that helps us understand the evolution and biology of human nature. It tells us how men and women got to be the way they (supposedly) are. At best, it might give us some leverage over the genes and hormones that control our lives.

In popular culture today, when it comes to questions about “human nature,” biology is almost always taken to be sociobiology, a set of claims organized around the assumption that biology determines destiny for humans, that genetic predispositions determine (or ought to determine) our behavior toward others and our institutional forms. Sociobiology and its offshoot, evolutionary psychology, which explains our attitudes and behaviors in terms of natural selection and sexual selection, are therefore reductive, and unapologetically so: they reduce culture to nature, pure and simple—and to a very simple conception of nature, at that.

Sociobiological conceits have come to organize an extensive body of writing in popular science and in science journalism. Opinion leaders are so confident in the truth of the naturalistic origins stories they relate that they seldom even name “sociobiology” as such. Rather, they take its assumptions for granted. Entertainers, journalists, and scientists alike invoke its style of argumentation, its reduction of social actions to genetic causes, and especially its pat claims about what the real man does and the natural woman wants. Indeed, so do scientists, particularly when explaining and legitimizing their work in public pronouncements. Assumptions of a sociobiological order undergird some of the urgency and much of the hype associated with the Human Genome Project—no small quarter of scientific practice today. Scientists working in many fields invoke sociobiological stories about human origins in their models of the biology of sexual differences. Neural and hormonal correlations with anatomical sex—no matter how tentatively documented or poorly understood—are instantly interpreted by many scientists in terms of speculative evolutionary stories.

A 1999 episode of the Fox TV show *Ally McBeal* provides a window onto the resulting entanglement of scientific claims with common sense in popular culture. A fictional lawyer, Richard Fish, summarizes his arguments to the jury in terms that all too accurately distill claims widely aired in the serious public sphere as scientific fact. “When we talk about men and women as Mars and Venus, it’s because on some issues the two genders really are from different worlds,” Fish begins. “And when it comes to sex, basic anthropology tells you [that] the female species [*sic*] looks for one mate while the male innately looks to spread his seed with as many mates as possible—to propagate the long-term survival of the species itself. Even a gay anthropologist will tell you so. Men and women are guided by a different missile.”

The misidentification of anthropology with evolutionary psychology (never mind the unfounded claim about what a gay anthropologist might say) is symptomatic of just how confused questions related to sex, science, culture, and human nature have become in the public sphere. It wasn’t even thus. As Micaela di Leonardo reminds readers, when *Time* magazine ran its front-page story on the then-new field of sociobiology in 1977, it gave extensive space to rebuttals by prominent anthropologists Marshall Sahlins and Marvin Harris as well as Harvard biologists Stephen Jay Gould and Richard Lewontin.<sup>16</sup> The year before that, in a polemical treatise that distilled a devastating anthropological critique of sociobiology, Marshall Sahlins had written of the “good possibility that [sociobiology] will soon disappear as a science, only to be preserved in renewed popular conviction of the naturalness of our cultural dispositions.”<sup>17</sup> Sahlins, it turns out, was half right. Sociobiology has become common sense. But by that very virtue, it has by no means disappeared from the scientific scene. The interchange between common sense and sociobiology, as between folklore and science, is continuous and multifaceted one.



Throughout the 1990s and into the twenty-first century, science journalists at *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the *New York Times* have essentially served as cheerleaders for evolutionary psychology's proclamations on the "nature" of gender and sexuality. The very different reception for reductivist paradigms in today's marketplace of ideas corresponds to no new scientific discoveries that would clinch the case for "nature" over "nurture" on any question of social import. On this point, the facts remain much what they were in 1984, when Richard Lewontin, Steven Rose, and Leon J. Kamin wrote "Up to the present time no one has been able to relate any aspect of human social behavior to any particular gene or set of genes. . . . Thus, all statements about the genetic basis of human social traits are necessarily purely speculative."<sup>18</sup> Indeed, it is almost embarrassing to point out that sociobiology, which purports to derive human nature from simple genetic models, transmutes into evolutionary psychology, which attributes the origins of human nature to supposed norms of hominid behavior over eons of evolutionary time, *precisely* as an intellectual retreat from the former's strong but ultimately undemonstrable empirical claims.<sup>19</sup>

What has contributed in part to the ubiquity of sociobiological discourses today is the declining visibility of credible "public intellectuals" steeped in the social science traditions, and the consequent erosion of what C. Wright Mills used to call "the sociological imagination" in public affairs. Sociobiological claims once faced systematic, factual rebukes from anthropologists, sociologists, and even biologists—critiques that were informed and substantial but that could still be put in educated laypeople's terms—whereas today's biological reductivist claims face decidedly less decipherable responses from a generation of scholars weaned on the arcane vocabulary of deconstruction and poststructuralism. Advances on the intellectual front have thus drawn heavily against loans on the political front. The resulting dumbed-down public space has been largely ceded to those who can serve up bite-sized homilies and comforting quotes.

The enthusiastic reception for reductivist ideas today no doubt reflects both a changing sociopolitical climate and changes—some subtle, some dramatic—in the staging of claims about human norms and human nature. Reductivism's adjustments, ameliorations, and "softening" over the years have contributed to its present public respectability while facilitating its accessibility—as has a steady stream of sympathetic media reports. Its "positive" spin, crafted through evolutionary psychology's tales about how men got to be risk-taking but protective, how women got to be nurturing but savvy, and thus how the two ought to get together and cooperate (copulate), has ultimately proved more palatable and more marketable than the first drafts of the sociobiological argument, which largely set out to explain and rationalize the "nasty" side of human behavior, most frequently in misogynist terms. (Everybody likes a happy ending, it would seem, and evolutionary psychology-sociobiology lite—thrives on the art of spin.)

Identity politics—the quintessentially modern justification of political action and social redress by appeal to supposedly deep-seated, essential identities—also provides fertile ground for bioreductivism. (And it ought to be clear that "identity politics" is by no means the exclusive strategy of excluded, oppressed, or oppositional groups: women, gays, racial minorities. It is also the means whereby dominant groups define themselves and pursue their interests.) Real-life political columnists pitching the supposed interests of misunderstood straight men invoke evolutionary scenarios much like the one drawn by fictional lawyer Richard Fish to justify his client's actions. Activists steeped in cultural feminism or gay identity politics rush to selectively embrace those parts of biological determinism that serve their purpose—the idea that women are inherently nurturant, or the notion that homosexuality is an inborn condition. More than anything, today's reductivism offers to stabilize identity in the *points de capiton* of biology—that is, it purports to secure stability and certitude in an era when nothing much seems anchored about either identity or biology.<sup>20</sup>

The subsequent pages are critical of the reduction of identity and social relations to biological determinants. In what follows, I shall take my pokes at a number of currently fashionable bioreductivisms: evolutionary just-so stories, neurohormonal essentialisms, and “genomania” in general, the explanation of all manner of happenings and mishaps in terms of genes. But far from being a reflexive science basher, I’m the first to give science its due. I take it as axiomatic that most of us who live in the developed world enjoy modern science’s considerable benefits: in a cultural tradition that values free inquiry and reasoned explanation, no less than in elevated living standards and extended life expectancies. I also have no doubt that means and modes of scientific knowledge have advanced dramatically in recent years.<sup>21</sup> It seems that each week brings reports of new discoveries about the nature of the universe, the development of solar systems, the origins of life on earth, and the evolution of human beings. The sci-fi enthusiast in me reads a headline from 2001 with adolescent wonderment: “Scientists Bring Light to Full Stop, Hold It, Then Send It on Its Way.”<sup>22</sup> I marvel in particular at recent breakthroughs in the fields of genetics, stem-cell research, and therapeutic cloning, with their implications for how we might some day live—for instance, the discovery of genetic correlates for a number of hereditary diseases, the first apparently successful application of gene therapy to a medical disorder in human beings, the subsequent identification of a genetic mutation that roughly doubles the life span of fruit flies, the use of embryonic stem cells derived from cloned mice to grow healthy organs or organ tissue, the use of gene therapy to restore sight to blind dogs . . .<sup>23</sup> Still, I cannot help but note that many of the more consequential breakthroughs in medicine have occurred in less technical fields. I think here of the development of simple but highly effective physical therapy techniques for the aggressive treatment and rehabilitation of stroke victims.<sup>24</sup> And I remain skeptical of the aura acquired by big science in the 1990s. If it seems incontrovertible that scientists working in many fields have greatly refined their methods for investigating certain questions about the *natural* world, it also seems clear that recent advances in science have fed a kind of generalized rage for bioreductive explanations for questions about the *social* world.

The problem is that the latter mania does not follow from the former success stories. Good as it is at solving certain kinds of problems, science cannot answer every question (a point “the official boy of science journalism” John Horgan has been at pains to make).<sup>25</sup> Advances in genetics notwithstanding, not everything has a genetic explanation.<sup>26</sup> And not every proposition advanced in the name of science is actually scientific. It’s when those claiming the authority of science give vent to unwarranted reductivisms or when scientists themselves turn from controlled experimentation with well-defined natural phenomena to unchecked (and uncheckable) claims about social life that become critical—for it is precisely on these grounds that science mutates into something more unscientific: biological folklore, fables contrived out of prejudice, and related forms of preternatural knowledge. Not coincidentally, much—though by no means all—of what critics treat as the dark side of the Enlightenment springs from this unscientific practice of science: medical misogyny, scientific racism, and homophobic biology.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, this book proceeds on two tacks. First, because innatist claims about human sexual orientation have never stood up to careful investigation, the perpetual attachment of scientists to such conceits suggests an ideological fixation, not a legitimate scientific interest. In the following chapters I try to untangle various permutations of this fixation, to trace the meandering course of an ideology against the historical backdrop of changing sexual formations. Second, because such double-edged notions continue to exercise a strong appeal among advocates for gay/lesbian rights—because naturalistic and naturalizing ideology seems to give stability and uniformity to something phenomenologically volatile as *desire*—it is necessary to examine critically the deeply felt logic

deduction that first becomes visible around the question of same-sex attraction sometime in the mid-nineteenth century: “What desires I do not will or control belong to my inborn nature, my biology.”

#### SPECIOUS CLAIMS AND LOGICAL FLIP-FLOPS

To a practitioner of cultural studies, as to an anthropologist trained on the analysis of cultural variation and historical change, nothing could seem more naive than the notion that sexual preference is somehow indelibly written on the body or “coded” in one’s genes. But this is precisely where matters become complicated—where mythic conceptions of nature sprawl in a kinked and languorous way through contested representations and changing practices, in the culture of science, no less than in popular culture.

Take, for example, the phrase that hangs over nineteenth-century models of homosexuality: “contrary sexual feeling.” Although Karl Westphal coined the term in 1869, the concept was implicit in Ulrichs’s earlier ideas, first published in 1864. The notion that one’s sexual feeling might be “contrary” sustains a set of key oppositions and relations that appear in other terms from the period—“sexual inversion,” “homosexuality,” “intermediary sexual type”—that were appropriated by Krafft-Ebing in 1877.<sup>28</sup> In inaugurating this chain of associations, Ulrichs took it for granted that same-sex desire was “contrary” to the ebb and flow of *natural* attractions: Men were drawn to women and women to men by force of a mysterious “animal magnetism” whereby opposites attract. That very notion, in turn, marks an earlier cultural revolution. As historian Thomas Laqueur shows, the phrase “opposites attract” was actually a novel idea at the beginning of the eighteenth century. And as gender studies researcher Hubert Kennedy notes, by Ulrichs’s day, this aphorism already seemed to occupy the status of a timeless universal: Ulrichs conjectured about same-sex desire in a milieu in which attraction to the “opposite” sex had been naturalized.<sup>29</sup> Ulrichs resolved the apparent inconsonance of same-sex desire by simply asserting that inside the body of the man who desires other men is the mind of a woman—for whom attraction to men is proper and consonant. He thus brought what Christian prejudice deemed “unnatural” lust within the purview of nature by folding it under the rule of heterosexual symmetry. Same-sex desire thus turned out really to have been heterosexual desire all along—in disguise, perhaps, or confused by the outward signs of the body.

A delightful series of logical involutions happen when any of this is taken literally—meanders and flip-flops that used to give my smart-aleck friends and me late-night giggles during college sleepovers. For example, a gay man in love with a straight man expresses psychic heterosexuality, but only so long as he desires to play the “female” role. Reciprocal male homosexual desire would actually seem to be a special case of lesbian psychic desire, since it involves the minds of two women. Contrariwise, lesbians are “really” gay men trapped in women’s bodies. Like an excellent transvestite gag, nothing is quite what it appears to be. However, the man who wishes to penetrate another man remains something of a puzzle under Ulrichs’s associations—unless one conjectures that he is really a “straight” man attracted to the “woman” inside the desired gay man.

The logic of this position was no better a hundred years ago than it is today. Still, it is amazing how often one encounters similar propositions, entanglements of vernacular gender with common-sense nature in essentializing representations of sexuality. In myriad contemporary discourses, gay men, lesbians, and transsexuals continue to be represented as individuals whose gendered brains are somehow out of sync with their bodies. Such a preconception has settled uneasily into the received wisdom. It guides every search for a “gay brain,” a “gay gene,” or “gay neurohormonal” patterns. (One can hardly understate the naive literalism of present-day science on these matters: scientists still look for the supposed anatomical attributes of the opposite sex embedded somewhere in the invert’s brain.)

or nervous system.) And this notion now enjoys a second, third, and even fourth life in political discourses. It is by appeal to such conceits that Aaron Hans, a Washington, D.C.-based transgender activist, reflects on his uncomfortable life as a girl: “I didn’t *think* I was a boy, I *knew* I was a boy.” Hans elaborates: “You look at pictures of me—I actually have great pictures of me in drag—and I literally look like a little boy that’s been put in a dress.”<sup>30</sup> Far, far be it from me to cast doubt on anyone’s sense of discomfort with the ascribed gender roles. Nor would I question anyone’s sense that sexual identity is a deeply seated aspect of who they are. But testimonies of this sort and appeals to the self-evidence of perception beg the obvious question: Just what is a little boy or girl *supposed* to look like? The photograph that accompanies Hans’s interview shows a somewhat robust girl. Is this to say that (real) girls are necessarily delicate and (real) boys athletic? (If so, virtually all of my nieces are “really” boys, since not a one of them is delicate or un presupposing.)

There is indeed something compelling about such intensely felt and oft-invoked experiences—“I knew I was gay all along”; “I felt like a girl”—but that compulsion belongs to the realm of outer culture, not inner nature. That is, if “inappropriate” acts, feelings, body types, or desires seem to throw us into the bodies or minds of other genders, it is because acts, feelings, and so on are associated with gender by dint of the same all-enveloping cultural logic that gives us pink blankets (or caps, or credit cards, or I.D. bracelets) for girls and blue for boys in maternity ward cribs. When we diverge one way or another from those totalizing associations, we feel—we really feel, in the depths of our being—“different.” Therein lies the basis for an existential opposition to the established order of gender associations. But therein also lies the perpetual trap: Every essentialist claim about the “nature” of same-sex desire in turn refers to and reinforces suppositions about the “nature” of “real” men and women (from whom the invert differs), about the “naturalness” of their mutual attraction (demonstrated nowhere so much as in the invert’s inversion), about the scope of their acts, feelings, body types, and so on (again, marked off by the deviation of the deviant).<sup>31</sup> Aping the worst elements of gender/sexual conservatism, every such proposition takes culturally constituted meanings—the correlative associations of masculinity and femininity, active and passive, blue and pink—as “natural facts.” In a twist as ironic as the winding of a double helix that goes first this way, then that, the search for gay identity gradually finds its closure in the normalcy of the norm as a natural law.

In the end, I am not convinced of the basic suppositions here. I doubt that most men are unfamiliar with the sentiment given poetic form by Pablo Neruda: “It happens that I become tired of being a man.” Even psychiatrists who treat “gender dysphoria”—a slick term for rebellion against conventional gender roles—admit that at least 50 percent of children at some point exhibit signs of mixed or crossed gender identity or express a desire to be the “opposite” sex.<sup>32</sup> A century after Freud and fifty years after Kinsey, the rectitude of the heterosexual is as doubtful as the monosexuality of the homosexual. In the throes of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries’ ongoing cultural revolution, it should scarcely be a matter of great controversy to say that desire, like identity, is compound, complex, and volatile. You can’t even convince me that feelings of homosexual desire are in any sense the exclusive domain of a distinct minority. One has only to read novels, watch movies, or talk with one’s straight friends to realize that everyone agonizes over queer feelings of “difference.” One has only to watch the evening news or read the daily papers to see that everyone, gay and straight, participates in a modern identity crisis.

#### WHY I DON’T BELIEVE IN THE GAY GENE

My perspective on these matters is informed by serious, careful study, but I have little doubt that my relentlessly constructionist view of sexuality—the notion that identities are socially “made,” not



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