Coming Out to the Future: The Gay Gene Debate and the Heteronormative Discourse

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Abstract
The “gay gene” debate sparked by Simon LeVay’s and Dean Hamer’s biogenetic researches in the early 1990s has opened up a new discursive space for gay/queer identity politics within the contemporary “heteronormative” culture. This paper examines this debate, probing the positions taken by both sides, in part to explore the degree to which gay/lesbian resistance to heteronormative domination has been shifting and/or lapsing in the last decade, and in part to investigate those contradictions and paradoxes within gay/queer identity politics, which the gay gene debate itself has helped to uncover. The emphasis will be on how biogenetic science can provide a new conceptual framework to generate gay/lesbian self-reflections on the current strategies of homonormative identity politics. It is argued finally that an inevitably expanding future role for biotechnology will serve to clarify the inherent instabilities and unpredictabilities of both homonormative and hetero-normative discourses and values.

Keywords
gay gene debate, biogenetics, gay/queer identity politics, coming out, heteronormative, homonormative, nature/culture, LeVay, Hamer, “origins”
Introduction

After Simon LeVay and Dean Hamer published their discoveries of an apparent genetic basis for homosexuality in the early 1990s, this “gay gene” theory generated a vehement debate between and among scientists, cultural critics, activists, and socio-political theorists. Of course, whether genetics alone can determine the cause of homosexuality still remains a puzzle. According to evolutionary theory, the interactions between cultures and genes can also play an important part in human sexual orientation. Some therefore concluded that the debate was futile: neither side could win. Others questioned the relevance of such scientific interventions since homophobia and the ill-treatment of homosexuals was after all based on moral, not biological reasons. In the meantime, more new discoveries concerning the sexuality-biogenetics connection have been made in the past decade. It seems increasingly likely that biotechnology of the future will affect the whole human population on matters ranging from procreation to artificial intelligence. Yet these developments have had little impact on recent gay/lesbian identity discourses.

Do gays and lesbians disregard recent biogenetic research because they think it is irrelevant, so far unable to have transformed the heteronormative system (heterosexual cultural standard)? Or because they fear it will uncover a biological basis for their condition, or fail to do so? In her criticism of modern behavioral science, Donna Haraway points out how the female body has been subject to “biological reductionism” and victimized by “the basically capitalist ideology of culture against nature” (Simians 10). But this was the old science; Haraway is not at all hostile toward the “new biology” and the recently expanding field of biogenetics. She believes that the new myth created by biotechnology may replace “the old myth that assigns women to the category of nature” (Halliwell and Mouseley 178). Biotechnology, in Haraway’s view, may be able to invent “new creative roles out of old binaries,” “potential citizens” with self-activating bodies out of “female/colonized/laboring/animal bodies” (Halliwell and Mouseley 178). If this 1970s herald of “woman as cyborg” is correct in claiming that the forthcoming biogenetic advances may emancipate female bodies and identities, why can’t new genetic discoveries do the same for male and female homosexuals?

In the first place, even if genes can’t fully explain the origin or cause of homosexuality, this doesn’t mean they cannot illuminate some aspects of it. The “gay gene” debate is not futile or irrelevant. If we start to reconsider the premise that genes and cultures always work together, we must ask what kind of gay culture
is developing, and in what ways it may interact with, or affect interactions with, genes over time. We can also gain new insights into our currently emerging cultures through a biogenetic lens, even if scientific advances are themselves, like moral condemnation, a cultural product. While it has yet to be learned whether genes play a lesser or greater role in predisposing sexual orientation, and whether accumulated scientific evidence will eventually change those current cultural rules that support heterosexual dominance, this is an issue which gays and lesbians should be vitally concerned.

This paper therefore examines the “gay gene” debate and argues that it is, in fact, productive for gay/lesbian movements. The author will probe the positions taken by both sides in order to establish a standard by which to judge whether gay/lesbian resistance to heteronormative domination has been lapsing and/or shifting. The author will also investigate those contradictions and paradoxes, inscribed in gay/queer identity politics, which the debate itself has made clear. By taking a close look at the debate as well as the discoveries claimed by LeVay and Hamer, he will try to determine to what degree this debate divides the gay/lesbian movements and/or reflects the shared experiences of recent gay/queer identity politics.

Starting in the late 1990s, gay/lesbian movements took a new turn. They began to be increasingly focused on legal rights and social acceptance, and increasingly prone to rely on the social rather than the natural sciences regarding the construction of gay/lesbian identities—as in the social or cultural “construction” of gender. Many prominent gay and lesbian rights organizations now embrace agendas that vie for acceptance within contemporary economic and political systems, and endorse family-oriented formations associated with domestic partnership, adoption, and so on. Gender-normative social roles seem to be replacing the earlier commitment to establishing a broader sense of sexual or gender identity, presumably because it has (at least to a certain degree) already been accomplished. Indeed, these new (arguably more pragmatic) attitudes already began to surface during the “gay gene” debate, as the paper will also show.

Therefore, it will be argued, genetic research can be effective not just in determining the origin of homosexuality, but also in generating gay/lesbian self-reflections on the current strategies of their identity politics. Thus, for instance, when both cultural and genetic elements are taken into account, we can reevaluate the implications of the closet and of coming out, looking at these in a different light. How to rework the gay/queer identification system is a problem that needs a more interdisciplinary discourse. The conversations between (not just social but) natural
science and the humanities are crucial to the future of homosexuality, because they will open up new positions not only in battling heteronormative domination but also for other minorities to resist any type of normative values in our contemporary patriarchal heterosexual societies.

**Nature vs. Nurture?**

In the twentieth century, the relationship between gay/queer politics and scientific studies was full of paradoxes. On the one hand, gay/queer politics had to fight the heteronormative domination inscribed in the medical institution; on the other, it relied on potential new discoveries, placing its faith in clear evidence that could eradicate prejudice based on misunderstanding. In the early era of so-called “gay science,” although the focus of scientific studies was mainly on breaking the link between homosexuality and “perverse” criminal activities, the scientists sometimes inadvertently provided a political platform for the discussion of citizens’ rights and the debate of ideological issues. Ironic as it may seem, some of the scientific theories and experiments on human sexuality would later be proved inaccurate, or even labeled as homophobia; however, gays and lesbians more often than not have successfully used them as opportunities to raise public awareness of gay rights and heterosexual oppression.

Mafnus Hirschfeld, who formed the first gay-rights organization WhK (the Scientific-Humanitarian Committee) in 1897 in Berlin, and later pioneered the world’s first institute for sex research in 1919, might have suffered from a limited view of homosexuality; however, his advocacy of gender nonconformity was radical from the standpoint of the reactionary Nazi dogma. In 1974, as a result of tremendous pressures from other psychiatrists and gay activists, the American Psychiatric Association finally agreed to declassify homosexuality as a form of mental illness. For the activists this was a milestone victory, which would, they hoped, lead to changing the public’s attitude toward gay persons. Edward O. Wilson, the pioneer biologist, who outlined the first full theory of gene-culture co-evolution, remarked in his 1978’s *On Human Nature*, “There is, I wish to suggest, a strong possibility that homosexuality is normal in a biological sense, that it is a distinctive beneficent behavior that evolved as an important element of early human social organization. Homosexuality genes may be the genetic carriers of some of mankind’s rare altruistic impulses” (143). Therefore, “it would be tragic to continue to discriminate against homosexuals on the basis of religious dogma supported by the unlikely assumption that they are biologically unnatural” (Wilson 147). During the
late 1980s, the alliance between science and gay/queer politics became more urgent than ever because of the AIDS crisis.

Getting support from psychological and biological studies, gay/lesbian movements made progress not only in increasing their visibility, but also in changing the conventional view of gender and sexuality. But no scientific theory has caused more vehement debate than the “gay gene” theory of the early 1990s. The attitudes of heterosexuals toward gays and lesbians are inextricably tied up with beliefs about what causes them to be homosexual. For most gay people, however, the question whether being gay is an inborn condition or a choice may seem irrelevant or redundant. Andrew Sullivan, a well-known gay activist and author, once was asked by his audience at a speech: “What evidence do you have that homosexuality is far more an orientation than a choice?” He simply answered: “My life.” He then went on to say: “This is not, of course, the end of the matter. There’s a lamentable tendency to try to find some definite solution to permanent human predicaments—in a string of DNA, in a conclusive psychological survey, in an analysis of hypothalami, in a verse of the Bible—in order to cut the argument short” (16). Yet in saying that genetic evidence is just another shortcut to “solve” a rich, complex, “permanent human predicament,” Sullivan seemed to overlook some crucial questions: To whom is genetic research relevant, and why? Does supporting “gay gene search” inevitably lead to a further stigmatization of homosexuality? Might boycotting this research be another way of “cutting the argument short” by evading or ignoring it?

It would be wrong to blame the “gay gene search” on heterosexual prejudice, since many scientists engaged in this search are either gay-friendly or gay themselves. In 1991 the openly gay neuroscientist Simon LeVay published his famous findings on the hypothalamus, claiming a possible connection between male homosexuals’ brains and their sexual orientation. Later he admitted that this report made him the target of accusations from many sides. When Roy Porter criticized LeVay’s “Sexual Brain” theory, he wondered if some homosexual activists would “read it as a kind of suicide note”:

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1 A New York Times/CBS News poll taken in 1992 found that the U.S. population is about equally split into those who believe homosexuality is “something people choose to be” and those who believe it is “something they cannot change.” See the article by J. Schmalz. Another example is the questionnaire designed by two psychologists, Julie Piskur and Douglas Degelman, who concluded from the results that the group who had been given reading materials of biological basis for sexual orientation expressed significantly favorable attitudes toward gay people than other groups who either read unsupportive information for that basis or read nothing. See their article in Psychological Reports.
After all, no black scientists have been so crazy as to try to prove that black intelligence is genetically “different.” Didn’t Dr. LeVay grasp that in everyday speech, “different” means “inferior”? . . . Dr. LeVay continues to peddle the (in my view) naïve idea that proof of the homosexual brain will convince a hostile public that homosexual difference should be accepted, just like left-handedness. . . . [But] why shouldn’t bigots simply say that they, too, can’t help it? (Porter, pars. 2-5)

Another attack came during the taping of a TV show, when the editor of the *Journal of Homosexuality* said to LeVay, “You’re just trying to prove it’s not your fault you’re gay” (LeVay, *Queer Science* 283). LeVay replied that “biologically oriented researchers are more gay-friendly” and that “people who think that gays and lesbians are ‘born that way’ are also the most likely to support gay rights” (282).

In 1993, the molecular biologist and genetic researcher Dean Hamer and his colleagues reported that they had found a region of the X chromosome, named Xq28, where DNA “markers” shared by thirty-three out of forty gay twin brothers can be traced. Despite Hamer’s caution that “we didn’t isolate a ‘gay gene’; we only detected its presence through linkage,” his research drew enormous attention from the media as well as the general public (*Science of Desire* 147). Although the term “gay gene” has become widely used since then, much later scientific research has suggested that the cause of sexual orientation could be a more complicated interplay between genes and environments (LeVay, “Sex” 17). Furthermore, some earlier publications of findings, including those by LeVay and Hamer, have been either retracted or called into question when later investigators failed to replicate the results.

Nevertheless, the scientific pursuit of the “gay gene” has hardly been discouraged. In 2005, more biological, genome-related projects announced new evidence. In May, Swedish researchers reported finding important differences in the way the brains of straight and gay men responded to two compounds—one from women’s urine, the other from male sweat. Brain scans showed that when straight men smelled female urine their hypothalamus lit up, whereas this didn’t happen with gay men. Instead, gay men’s hypothalamus lit up when they smelled male perspiration, which is the same way straight women had responded. But while these are putative effects rather than causes of different sexual orientations, in June 2005

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2 Please see Coyne.
3 Please see Swidey.
scientists in Vienna announced that they had isolated a “genetic switch” for sexual orientation in the fruit fly. Meanwhile a large-scale, five-year genetic study of gay brothers received $2.5 million from the National Institute of Health in the U.S. There is increasing scientific evidence to suggest that the linkage exists, even though a human “gay gene” has not yet been singled out.

While “gay genes” may not be the sole determining factor of one’s sexual orientation, this does not mean they will not affect gay people culturally and politically. The hypothetical gay genes bear on them many imprints, making them less a (potentially) simple fact or material reality than a virtual focal-point for debate, a stage, or a platform for the airing of different positions, agendas, gay/queer discourses. And the most fundamental issue is of course that of whether gay genes (if they are shown to actually exist) will be mainly constructive to gay/queer identity politics or mainly detrimental to it—and thus perhaps still ignored.

In any research into the causes/origins of homosexuality it is necessary to avoid the nature-versus-culture trap. That is, an intimate (potential) connection between physiology and politics should be presupposed, as it is in the “socio-biology” of Edmund Wilson and more specifically his influential biogenetic speculations on the origins of homosexuality. Wilson believes that “human sexuality can be much more precisely defined with the aid of the new advances in evolutionary theory” (147). But he also consents to the role played by environments, by culture and society, in the formation of one’s sexual orientation. Thus on the one hand Wilson thinks “human behavioral genetics provides one of the crucial links in the track from genes to culture. The discipline is in its infancy and hampered by formidable theoretical and technical difficulties” (147). On the other hand, he admits that “Because human beings cannot be bred and reared under controlled conditions . . . heritability does not apply to individuals; it is used only for populations” (139). Whereas Wilson believed in 1978 that homosexuality can be scientifically defined, he sounded reserved and vague about how genes and culture interact in his 1998’s Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge, where only one ambiguous passage touches on the hypothesis of (in effect) gay genes: “Gender differences are an especially productive paradigm, even though politically controversial. . . . [The] facts may not satisfy everyone’s ideological yearning, but they illustrate in another way that, whether we like it or not, Homo sapiens is a biological species” (157).

Indeed, Wilson’s theory becomes increasingly opaque, due not just to the technological difficulties faced by genetic research but also to the cause-effect trap
he steps into. His study of “origins” makes the common mistake of building a sort of hierarchical structure into its own methodology, as he puts in *On Human Nature*:

> Homosexual behavior is common in other animals, from insects to mammals, but finds its fullest expression as an alternative to heterosexuality in the most intelligent primates. . . . Human beings are different in one important respect. There is a potential for bisexuality in the brain. . . . But in full homosexuality, as in full heterosexuality, both that choice and the symmetry of the animal pattern are lost. The preference is truly homophile: most completely homosexual men prefer masculine ones. As a rule, effeminate mannerisms in men are mostly unrelated to their choice of sexual partners. (144-45)

By defining homosexuality as an “alternative” to heterosexuality, Wilson reveals his presupposition of an original unified standard or universal which is itself heterosexual. And in his use of terms like “heterosexuality,” “homosexuality,” “masculine,” and “effeminate,” Wilson’s view of sexuality is seen to be dichotomous as well as hierarchical. No matter how “natural” homosexuality appears to him, his assumption that these “truly homophile” (“loving the same”) homosexual men are more attracted by the masculine than by the feminine qualities of their partners might also be influenced by his own (unacknowledged) prioritizing of masculine heterosexual “norms.”

Yet for the cultural historian Jonathan Katz, even the hetero/homosexual distinction is suspect:

> Research on the homosexual past inspires us to question the necessity of the present division of persons, activities, and feelings into heterosexual and homosexual. . . . If we have trouble imagining a world without heterosexuals or homosexuals, a historical perspective is useful. The term “homosexual” was only invented in 1869. The first use of “heterosexual” listed in the *Oxford English Dictionary Supplement* dates to 1901. [The most recent *Oxford English Dictionary Supplement* revises the latter date, setting it at 1892, and traces the term “homosexual” back to 1868.] (10)
Katz argues that, although Freud and Kinsey have reinforced the “heterosexual mystique” in their studies, the “heterosexual hypothesis” has been widely distributed “only in the last three quarters of the twentieth century” (14). Foucault’s perspective on the category of “homosexuality” is also relevant here. Foucault claims that before the nineteenth century, “sodomy was a category of forbidden act”; later “homosexual became a personage, a past, a case history, and a childhood. . . . Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transported from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species” (43).

From sodomy to sexual species, homosexuality exists as both cultural imaginary and biological hypothesis. A brief consideration of the question of homosexuality’s heritability can further illustrate why homosexuality cannot be seen as the result of either nature or culture. If gay people don’t engage themselves in reproduction, why haven’t they vanished from the earth? To say this is because many gay people still remain in the closet, getting married and having children due to social pressure, would be an incomplete and simplified answer. Scientific explanations tell us that men carry X and Y chromosomes, while women have two X chromosomes, and that consequently, if the gay gene does exist in the X chromosome, it has a fifty-percent chance of being carried by the heterosexual female siblings of its male owner. But what causes the heterosexual female to carry gay genes is another question. Gay genes, therefore, might not only come from homosexuals, but also possibly from other origins. And that is why scientific researches still cannot explain why homosexuality is not always found in both identical twins. Another explanation of how gay genes are passed down assumes that some gay genes are latent, passive, dormant, waiting for certain environmental stimuli to initiate them; this fits with the theory that homosexuality is caused by an interplay of culture and nature.

The heritability of gay genes provides a different angle on the cause of homosexuality, since now the problem of determining the “origin” of homosexuality inevitably becomes a cultural as well as scientific one. Whatever makes a gay person different from a straight person is the same thing that makes a straight person different from a gay person. As Wilson has remarked, heritability can only be used for populations, the variables during the evolutionary process of homo sapiens can only be hypothesized. The existence of the heterosexual majority in human population cannot stand as an exclusive and persuasive reason to negate the possibilities of either its co-evolution with homosexuality or its evolution from
homosexuality. The so-called “majority” only exists in recorded history. Besides, given the moral judgment on sodomy since the rise of Christianity, homosexuality, unlike racial and sexual attributes, can be disguised and is therefore difficult to detect. Without complete data, to decide that the heterosexual majority is adequate to establish the paradigm will obstruct, and even mislead inquiries on other heritable traits in human beings. If Kinsey’s theory about homosexual desires in every human being can be proven, even the existing heterosexual paradigm would be called into question. At this point, there is no way for us to determine which comes “first” unless social and cultural norms are established in the first place. The fact that the category of heterosexuality forms the normative background against which the category of homosexuality is judged and measured may lead us to wonder whether bisexuality and transgender are similarly subcategories under that of homosexuality. Are they too to be “unnatural” over against that of the “genetically correct” homosexuals? The key point here is that all such categories based on norms presuppose dichotomies that may themselves be suspect.

Yet these dichotomous forms of categorization—where we have only two categories, A and B—are still being adopted by most modern scientific researchers, including Dean Hamer and Simon LeVay. The volunteers for LeVay’s and Hamer’s experiments were all self-identified “homosexuals.” Yet there was no way to determine whether they were “biological” homosexuals to begin with, which already put into question the two-way grouping (homosexuals/heterosexuals). Later the samples from the two groups were compared for differences based on the premise that heterosexuality is the “norm” against which homosexuality can be measured. Yet, isn’t it also a valid question that homophobia might be genetic as well? Given that homophobia tends to lead to various forms of discrimination and even (in the more extreme cases) violence against the homosexual minority, it seems that homophobic heterosexual brains should also be measured against non-homophobic heterosexual brains as a means of reducing this problem. And the fundamental problem of A-over-B (A as “origin” of B) hierarchical categorization, as Nietzsche points out at the opening of *Beyond Good and Evil*, is again that we could just as well invert the hierarchy and say that A “comes from” B, which really means that they come from each other and form a circle. Thus when most scientists theorize the connections between genes and sexuality, they are oblivious to the

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4 See LeVay’s and Hamer’s methods and procedures in LeVay’s report “A Difference in Hypothalmic Structure between Heterosexual and Homosexual Men,” and Hamer’s “A Linkage between DNA Markers on the X Chromosome and Male Sexual Orientation.”
irony that, if gay genes explain the “origin” of homosexuality, so do certain different type(s) of genes explain the origin of heterosexuality.

Therefore, if we are to explore the question of why and for whom the genetic research on homosexuality is relevant, it seems advisable not to focus only on the ostensible object of some misconceived researches—the question of origins. It would be more reasonable, and ultimately more useful, to be content with showing how the “gay gene” debate has illuminated gay/queer identity politics by analyzing in greater depth the arguments on both sides of this debate. Such a discussion would bring the object of the researches in a more mediated context. An analysis which points out the weakness in arguments both pro and con can also disclose the hidden positions assumed by these arguments; this in turn can illustrate more clearly how the hypothesis of “gay genes” may be a useful conceptual framework for the reconsidering of gay/lesbian movements. Such an analysis also brings us back to the “cultural” side of the nature/culture divide, and ultimately keep it an open question as to whether any sort of human behavior patterns are caused by certain complex interactions between the biological sphere and the socio-cultural one.

Normal but Queer?

Those who have learned anything from the history of genocide, and a fortiori from the Holocaust, will certainly tend to be suspicious of the “gay gene” experiments. Unlike studies of the connection between genes and illness (cancer, Alzheimer’s, or heart disease), which will uncover what was heretofore unknown in order to create better medicines and other forms of medical treatment, “gay gene” research (in spite of its best intentions) works to normalize homosexuality rather than to validate gay identities. Gay people tend to be the victims of religious condemnation and societal injustice rather than biological or physical illness.

Take racism for example. The discrimination against ethnic groups persists, regardless of the fact that they are all “born that way” and are “unchangeable.” According to the philosopher Richard Mohr, discrimination against homosexuality derives from the “moral vision that lesbians and gays are lesser moral beings” (85). The ill-treatment of gay people “chiefly take[s] the form of denials of equality” (77), because “society chooses to treat gay men and lesbians not as agents of their own destiny, but simply as having a degenerate status for which questions of action and accountability are irrelevant” (81). But in another context or on another “level,” one could also argue that to claim “gay gene” theory is irrelevant, on the basis of a certain moral and religious bias, is another sort of “moral condemnation.” Rejecting
its relevance is different from rejecting the actual research itself; many have rejected cloning and stem-cell research for the same reasons they might reject abortion, and there are ethical arguments on both sides in all such cases.\textsuperscript{5}

Curiously, Hamer also expressed doubts considering the implications of his biogenetic research. He was very concerned after a father told him that he [the father] now forgave himself and his gay sons because of Hamer’s report:

> Perhaps I should have been gratified by testimony like this. Every scientist wants to think his or her work matters. . . . Instead, I was saddened. . . . [What] if the experiment had failed? Or what if we gave his family a blood test and found they didn’t have the “gay gene,” that the sons were gay for some other reason? Would this father go back to blaming himself for raising two gay sons, and would they be less worthy of his love? (\textit{Science of Desire} 19)

We may infer from this confession that Hamer’s finding of chromosome Xq28 was employed in a rather passive way by some gay people and their parents. It serves as an excuse for being who they are, rather than as an affirmation of this identity, a positive assertion of who they want to be.

Kenji Yoshino, a law professor at Yale University, thinks that the “born-that-way” defense of a gay identity is flawed. If genetic evidence shows that homosexuality is “immutable,” one can argue “cultural attributes”—including different linguistic and aesthetic traditions on the views of gender—“can also be immutable.” Yoshino argues that immutability is “an implied apology”:

> It resists the conversation demand by saying “I cannot change,” rather than by saying “I will not change.” It suggests electroshock treatment for homosexuals is wrong because it does not work. But such treatment would be no less wrong if it did. Such a defense also leaves bisexuals, who can choose to express only cross-sex desire, without a defense for any expression of same-sex desire. (48)

\textsuperscript{5} In some extreme cases, e.g. Nazi experiments involving the attempted mating of women with dogs, the relevance of the purpose might of course also be (severely) questioned. The possible contribution of the gay gene research to our knowledge of human sexualities is yet to be decided. Therefore, to consider whether the research will lead to attempts to eradicate the gay gene is a premature concern out of fear toward the application of the future result, instead of a question of the research itself or of its relevance.
As Yoshino observes, “the historical line between ‘good’ straights and ‘bad’ gays has shifted in some quarters to distinguish between ‘good’ straights and normals, on the one hand, and ‘bad’ queers on the other” (78). As a result, “gays feel increasing pressure to pledge an allegiance—to fade gratefully into the mainstream or to resist in the name of persisting difference . . . [Gays] are splitting between normalcy and queerness” (78). As a gay Asian-American, Yoshino admits that “I have come to see myself as normal on some issues and queer on others” (79). Yoshino argues that equal rights will be the next step for gay/lesbian movements, because gay identity is not a fixed concept and resists definition. In spite of his bravado in emphasizing that “I will not change,” Yoshino contradicts himself later by saying “I have elaborated my own gay identity by covering in some ways and flaunting in others, and will doubtless change that balance over time”; after all, he is “not against all covering, but only against coerced covering” (92-93). His view that the issue of gay genes is totally irrelevant to gay identities also makes no sense when we consider that, even within the legal system, the presence of such genes would challenge conventional thinking. For instance, is it gay gene, homosexual sex, or gender-bending lifestyle that will qualify a person to resort to anti-discrimination laws?

By using civil rights for leverage, Yoshino’s strategy runs the risk of pushing gay people back into a “semi-closet,” for being gay will then be left less room for gender options and sexual freedom, let alone the “alliance” with other gay people. Conventional domestic roles and censorship of desires will be resurrected in this new “normative” cultural environments consisting of gay marriage, gay adoption, gay families and so forth. That will inevitably place culture above nature in the formation of gay identities. In some ways, the appeals to gay marriage right become strategically necessary, if not ideologically or sexually appealing to all gay people. Imagine there is a campaign for gay equal rights bills organized by radical queer activists who promote, not gay marriage but non-monogamous relationships, the pleasures of S/M and the freedom to be a transvestite. Can this campaign win over the heterosexual majority? On the other hand, bisexuality and transgender would be further marginalized by the legal rights appeal, as will the ethnic, disabled, economically disadvantaged members of gay communities. While fighting for gay rights, many activists have already been concerned that the positions of minorities within gay communities are often compromised. As far as gay rights are concerned, the equally important issues of class, race, and sex ought not to be neglected. How to enable a gay African-American female living in the ghetto to benefit as much from the equal rights bills as an upper-middle-class, white homosexual male from
the suburbs further demonstrates the complex realities faced by the gay civil rights battles.

Coming back to the legitimacy of scientific research on homosexuals, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick does not share Haraway’s optimism with regard to biotechnology as potential liberating force. Instead, she believes that all biological practices have controlled, repressed, and manipulated human sexuality for two centuries:

Increasingly it is the conjecture that a particular trait is genetically or biologically based, not that it is “only cultural” that seems to trigger an estrus of manipulative fantasy in the technological institutions of the culture. . . . What whets these fantasies more dangerously . . . is the presentation, often in ostensibly or authentically gay contexts, or biologically based “explanations” for deviant behavior that are absolutely invariably couched in terms of “excess,” “deficiency” or “imbalance”—whether in the hormones, in the genetic material or, as is currently fashionable, in the fetal endocrine environment. (81)

However, not all the “fantasies” of an extremely future-oriented biogenetics need be “manipulative” ones. While vehemently protesting against the inherently manipulative (ultimately subject/object) bias of modern science, Sedgwick intentionally ignores the fact that such a bias can also be found in her epistemology of the closet. According to Sedgwick, “the closet” signifies “shame” and “heterosexual oppression”: those who stay too long in the closet will be psychologically distressed by self-loathing and the need to be freed. However, while coming out appears to be useful insofar as it increases one’s visibility, in fact it also places gay people in another series of power relations: who is and who is not out of the closet; who is and who is not straight-acting; who has and who has not been assimilated into the “mainstream”; and so on. Thus if the heteronormative ideology which Sedgwick identifies as characteristic of “technological institutions” relies on dichotomies, so does her theorization of the closet, with its inside/outside opposition.

Needless to say, the dynamics of being in/out of the closet also have had an influence on the “gay gene” debate. Since “coming out” is still a defining moment for gays and lesbians, those who voice support for “gay gene” theory often hope that by declaring their “immutability” (their natural gayness), they will be safer, more impervious to a sense of shame if and when they come out. If we recall the
moment in history when the debate first began, we will better understand why “gay
gene” became a buzzword in the gay community. In the early 1990s the relentless
onslaught of AIDS re-ignited antigay tension, and the gay communities had to
respond to it with solid evidence to support their legitimacy. The “gay gene” is,
therefore, not so much a discovery as a necessity of talisman that can make gay
people feel safer and less guilty when they come out of the closet.

In response to the question as to whether it is ethical for parents to be
permitted to detect their children’s sexual orientation by means of a genetic test,
Richard Isay, an openly gay psychoanalyst at Cornell Medical College, states:

If some of these [pre- or proto-homosexual] children could be
identified early enough, it might be possible to counsel parents and
family so that rejection, injury to self-esteem, and negative self-
images would be minimized or avoided altogether. . . . If the child is
made to feel that same-sex object choice is a normal aspect of his
development, he will grow up loving himself and others in spite of
being “different” and in spite of the bigotry that surrounds him. (131-
32)

Isay’s argument in a way endorses a closet within the closet—the genetic one.
Knowing that the whole society is hostile to gay people, he is in effect suggesting
that we should let children come out of the closet long before they reach puberty.
Homosexuality might be biological rather than a choice, but should not “coming
out” be a matter of the individual’s choice? Don’t parents of gay children have to
protect their sons and daughters as best they can, no matter the age at which their
children’s sexual orientations are detected? If the parents can’t minimize the harm
done to them as teenagers or adults, how can they do so when the children are one
year old or even younger?

Isay tries to tie the “gay gene” debate to the politics of “coming out.” He
advocates not only gay gene tests but also parental administration of such tests.
However, the gay people who can benefit from such a design are those who have
enough intelligence and education to access the gay gene knowledge, are suffi-
ciently financially secure to afford an early gay gene test and counseling, and are
sufficiently socially entrenched not to face antigay violence on a daily basis. Their
children, surrounded by so much security when they come out (presumably at an
early age), are a privileged class, positive representatives of homosexuality. Isay’s
hidden assumption here is perhaps that there are different types of coming out
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depending on one’s socio-economic class or level. Indeed, for most gay people the issue of “coming out” may be less a matter of personal psychological struggle than of economic, professional, political, and moral circumstances. Despite the yearning for freedom and validation, coming out must always be a balancing act between the expectations of heterosexual and homosexual “norms.” Gay people like Isay who welcome gay gene research might consider coming out of the “genetic closet”—if such a trope may be forgiven—to be much easier than coming out of more predominantly social, economic, and cultural closets. The whole rhetoric of coming out, for the future generation, would be shifted from a personal declaration (“I’m gay”) to the simple gesture of presenting a doctor’s signed document.

Or perhaps, on the other hand, coming out of the genetic closet would not be so much easier after all. In describing what “coming out” refers to, David Van Leer distinguishes between two different goals: “Coming out to oneself is a psychological activity, and its perils and rewards are largely internal. Coming out to others, too, may be psychologically taxing; but it is chiefly a social activity, whose characteristics are defined by the limits of cultural decorum” (124-25). It is only on the surface that the research of scientists like LeVay and Hamer, pointing as it does toward the clear possibility of a “gay gene,” would make “coming out” a friendlier, less distressful step toward affirming one’s gay identity. The 1986 Bowers v. Hardwick case, in which the Supreme Court held that the constitutional right to privacy did not protect gays from prosecution for sexual intimacy, reminds us of the complex psychological and political realities that “outness” entails.

According to his biographer John Jeffries, Justice Lewis Powell and his gay clerk Cabell Chinnis had exchanged opinions during the trial. Powell, having no idea that his trusted clerk was gay, admitted to him that it was a hard decision to make; Chinnis at this point agonized over whether to come out to his boss but decided against it. After the story became known, Chinnis was despised in many gay circles: very possibly, it was thought, social changes that gays had been longing for would have come about if Chinnis had come out to Powell. In fact, it will remain forever unknown whether Chinnis could have changed Powell’s mind or at least influenced his impression of homosexuality by confessing the truth to him.

Yet attacking Chinnis was much easier than attacking the Court, and the Chinnis story reflects an internalization of gay homophobia: instead of criticizing the antigay institution that forced Chinnis to hide his gay identity, gay people directed their anger, disappointment, and fear at Chinnis himself. By the same token, “outing the gay gene” has become a means for some gay people to channel their
internalized homophobia. Instead of confronting the heterosexual system they use “outing” to gain the illusion of empowerment, especially when they regard this action as a public campaign rather than a manifestation of personal growth. The queer politics of “coming out” often neglects the fact that most gay people, after all, do not live “in or out of the closet; they hover tentatively somewhere in between” (Sullivan 80).

As we may see in the above discussion of arguments concerned with the (biological and/or cultural) origin or ramified meanings of homosexuality, the primary threshold that gay/lesbians must somehow cross is still that of the closet. Campaigning for legal protection and seeking scientific endorsement are both maneuvers that can make gay people feel more comfortable, more secure, safer to be “out.” Yet safety and security may finally not be the only important thing. The premise that queer/gay lives remain shaped by that which they fail to reproduce—which is, of course, not limited to biological reproduction, but the socially “acceptable” behaviors altogether—should perhaps be turned around. Is it not rather the case that queer/gay lives can reshape what gets reproduced by the heterosexuals, and that the value of those lives resides in the very failure to reproduce the norms?

**An Ironic Future?**

Such a review of the arguments leads us to suspect that the real war is not waged between homosexual legitimacy and heterosexual prejudice, or scientific intervention and social-cultural construction. Rather, it is a struggle between marginality and normalcy within gay/queer identity politics itself. Yet paradoxically both sides in this debate seem ultimately to appeal to the same thing, the status of “normalcy” (or “normality”). (“The normal is the normal” vs. “The radical fringe is really what is normal, that is, essentially queer.”) In both cases, it is perhaps the problem of a misguided need for a “gay universal.” Have gay/lesbian movements thus been losing the momentum of their resistance since the 1990s?

Progressive and non-conformist as they seem, scholars like Yoshino and Sedgwick dismissed biogenetic research not because it is irrelevant, but because the heteronormative rules and mores which they associate with it are, in their opinion, restrictive. Sedgwick’s epistemology of the closet ironically reinforces the ubiquity of heterosexual forces by emphasizing how gay people’s lives have been shaped by the closet, instead of elaborating on what else can define gay lives. Likewise, although Yoshino claims his “authentic identity” is not confined by any norms, in reality he alternates between acts of passing, covering, and queering, all of which
are performances intended for heterosexual perception and judgment. His shifting positions confirm that equal rights will not protect every gay person, but only those who know how to establish themselves socially, economically, and racially in the present heterosexual-dominated society.

Further ironies emerge when we compare the supporting and opposing arguments regarding the relevance of biogenetics for homosexuals. On the one hand, someone may ignore the possible existence of gay genes because he/she believes his/her own position cannot be equated with that of everybody else, and in this way confined, simply because they all share the same biological condition. On the other hand, someone else may promote the desirability of biogenetic evidence, wishing to demonstrate his/her affirmative attitude of being gay and looking forward to the final, definitive act of coming out. Yet the true intentions behind those different arguments are actually the same: to maintain a certain distance from the general (straight and gay) perceptions of what to be gay means.

Only at first glance does it appear that the “gay gene” debate itself has divided the gay/lesbian movements. When one takes a closer look, it becomes clear that, on the contrary, the biogenetic debate actually documents the merging goals and shared experiences of gay/lesbian movements after the 1990s. Frustration, uncertainty, exhaustion, anxiety . . . these are understandable and legitimate emotions after three decades of struggle, and they are echoed in the “gay gene” debate. This might explain why, throughout the range of “positions,” there are mainly overlapping areas rather than glaring gaps or differences. Whether dismissing or supporting the “gay gene” theory, those opinions all aim at a future in which gay people can be perceived as being just as normal as the straight people, protected by civil rights as a “legal minority,” and defined by a biological mapping of genes as “natural.”

Homonormativity is thus inevitably a puzzling, paradoxical, perhaps ironic concept for gays. It may not be the best choice of a word to contrast with heteronormativity. Presumably a byproduct of heterosexual oppression, a certain sense of regulation and coercion that surfaces in current identity politics may testify to the fact that the victimization of gay people now takes a different form, that gay people who believe in normative values have in a way submitted, surrendered to heteronormative domination. Will they start condemning “deviant” sexual practices and

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7 According to Antke Engle, “There must be a difference since homonormativity is limited in its reach and does not regulate the hegemonic social field, while the straight world claims to impose its rules onto any sexual way of life. . . . So does it make sense to use the term ‘normativity’ if dominant power relations define the field in question as marginal?” 20 August 2006 <http://www.genderstudies.unibas.ch/pdf/QueerCulturalStudiesWorkshopAbstractsBios/pdf>. 
Kuo
Coming Out to the Future

... desires some day? One may also find it ironic that, while gay communities announce that the Post-Gay generation has now begun at this beginning of a new millennium, how to emerge from the closet safely and “naturally” still remains a difficulty. No matter how sexually and emotionally open he/she is about his/her sexuality, the gay person may have a gay gene “hiding” somewhere in his/her biological body. This metaphor best portrays what gays and lesbians truly feel about being who they are, before any solid evidence regarding gene-culture interaction actually appears.

According to Haraway, “Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true. . . . It is also a rhetorical strategy and a political method” (Reader 7). Nature and culture, normalcy and marginality, immutability and transformation, these ironic pairs will remain the central puzzles that need to be “solved” by gay/lesbian movements. Perhaps the ironies here are really the forces that hold together diverse positions in gay/queer identity politics, lest they become assimilated by or into the heterosexual rules or norms. More importantly, these ironic and puzzling pairs remind us that gay identities will remain marginal and vulnerable as long as the heteronormative hierarchical society stays the same. All “movements” must for one thing withstand the instability of historical transformations, including those taking place in the scientific field. The more controversial and radical we perceive the biogenetics of the future (beyond the gay gene) to be, the better gays can measure the strength of their resistance to heterosexual domination, and/or the increasing normative values in gay cultures.

In the face of a rapidly growing biotechnological sphere and the accumulated social and cultural theories on knowledge/power, gender/sex and so forth, the modes of inquiry into the “gay gene” reflect, question, and sometimes transform our perceptions of “us” and “others,” “resistance” and “assimilation.” Any attempts to solve the problem of gay identities should be cautious not to make any definition of gayness final and absolute, thus “normative”; it is not so much a question of how “accurate” and “truthful” the potential answers would be, but rather of what kind of future we could imagine from the combination of non-conformist and off-normative stances.
Final Thoughts

Biogenetic science may never provide the whole story regarding the cause(s) of homosexuality; however, its procedures and premises (even when they are flawed) can remind both scientists and socio-cultural constructionists of their own limitations in attempting to understand gender and sexuality. And in the first place, in order to better enable biogenetic science to advance, clarify, and renew our knowledge of human sexualities, we must question why it is the origin of homosexuality rather than of heterosexuality that seems problematic.

In addition to the heteronormative domination in/of our society, we need to be aware of the rising homosexual anxiety about the “normalcy” of homosexuality. A medicalized (biogenetically approved), dichotomized (gay vs. straight), even moralized (orientation rather than choice) sexual body does not necessarily guarantee a more secure and established status. When gay communities defy the dominant heterosexual culture, they also need to look at the inner power structure of homosexual culture, which itself may repress the desires and needs of “other” forms of homosexuality.

The hypothetical but very possible “gay gene” ought not to be perceived as a threat or problem. Rather, as a focal point and platform of gay/queer political discussions and debates, it can only help us to further comprehend what has for so long kept homosexuality misunderstood and misrepresented. Science will not determine who we are, but it can keep raising new questions, which will not allow the identity issue to slip into a false complacency. To bring the biogenetic discourse into the pool of gay/queer political discourses, and even give it a prominent place can only aid our ongoing effort to clarify not only the unpredictability and instability, but also the potential radicalism and creativity, of both homonormative and heteronormative discourses.

Works Cited


About the Author

John Sheng Kuo (郭強生) is Associate Professor at National Dong Hwa University, where he currently serves as Chair of Department of English and Director of Graduate Institute of English Literature and Creative Writing. He received his Ph.D. in Theatre and Dramatic Criticism from New York University, and taught Chinese Popular Culture and Modern Chinese Film and Fiction at Columbia University from 1998 to 2000. Also known as a columnist, playwright, and critic, he has written extensively on cultural and literary subjects. To date, he has published nearly twenty books of fiction and non-fiction. His recent publications on cultural and literary criticism are: Reading West, Thinking East: From Literary Discourses to Cultural Practices (閱讀文化流行閱讀 yuedu wenhua liuxing yuedu), Shifting Values: Culture, Literature, Criticism (在文學徬徨的年代 zai wenxue panghuang de niandai), and Response and Responsibility (文學公民 wenxue gongmin). An award-winning playwright, he received productions of his work in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China. His directing credits include his own plays Shall We Love? (非關男女 feiguan nannu) and The Desired (慾可慾非常慾 yukeyu feichangyu), and Tennessee Williams’ A Streetcar Named Desire, based on his new Chinese translation. The article published in Concentric is an installment of an ongoing research project on a new investigation of the closet epistemology from cultural, literary, and scientific perspectives.

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