

Queer Media Images

*LGBT Perspectives*

Edited by Jane Campbell  
and Theresa Carilli

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We dedicate this book to the brave and dangerous act  
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TEN

## "Born This Way"

*Biology and Sexuality in Lady Gaga's Pro-LGBT Media*

Shannon Weber

"[S]uddenly it becomes poisonous and something else because there are some people in this world that believe being gay is a choice. It's not a choice[,] we're born this way." —Lady Gaga, defending the queer themes in the music video for "Telephone," March 2010

In contemporary discussions about same-sex desire in the United States, it is common for pro-LGBT<sup>1</sup> individuals and groups to promote the idea that sexuality should be accepted at least in part because it is something that cannot be "helped" or "changed." Mirroring this idea is the trend in popular media of locating gayness within a specific narrative that centers on and privileges biological determinism. In this framework, sexuality is portrayed as lifelong, unchangeable, often involving varying degrees of regret (the "I would be straight if I could!" defense), and determined at birth or in early childhood. The assumption here is that to be pro-gay is to embrace biological determinism, whereas to connect sexuality with choice, agency, change, and/or social constructionism is linked with anti-gay Christian Right rhetoric (Weber 2012).

I borrow Lisa Duggan's term "homonormativity" to argue that such a popular framework for articulating same-sex desire ultimately becomes what I call "biological homonormativity." Biological homonormativity is a variation of a regulatory "politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency" (Duggan 2003, 179). In this case, the heterosexist assumption is that no

one would choose to be gay if she or he could help it and that gayness is second in preference to heterosexuality. For the sake of political unity against the Christian Right, identity becomes neatly biological, which leaves out the voices of people who experience their same-sex desire as something *other* than lifelong, unchosen, and primarily or solely biological.

I argue that popular musical performer and iconoclastic queer heroine Lady Gaga deploys biological homonormativity both for exciting as well as deleterious ends. On the one hand, her music, public aesthetic, and political messages provide a powerful affirmation in favor of the rights of LGBTQ people to exist, express themselves, and be treated equally. Her public advocacy in favor of marriage equality, the repeal of Don't Ask Don't Tell, the importance of ending teen bullying and suicide, and the essential beauty and diversity of queer and trans youth is something certainly unmatched by the "progressive" president of the United States, Barack Obama. Since her quick rise to fame in 2008, Gaga has proven to be a force to reckon with in her direct critique of the Christian Right's homophobia and in her embrace of same-sex desire, conveyed through political rallies as well as what some would consider to be deceptively danceable pop songs.

On the other hand, in her enthusiasm for promoting LGBT-friendly messages, Gaga reasserts the hegemony of biology in understanding the identities and experiences of LGBTQ people. Her much-needed popular media rebuttal of the Christian Right unfortunately flattens out the nuances of sexuality, thus perpetuating the current "culture war" framing of gayness I have outlined. It is these tensions I explore, neither to wholly valorize nor merely reject Gaga, but to critically engage with Gaga's messages and what they tell us about the ongoing American political debate surrounding LGBT rights.

#### GAGA FOR THE GAY COMMUNITY (AND VICE VERSA)

Gaga, who affectionately refers to her proudly marginal and alienated youth fans as "little monsters," has widely publicized the fact that it was the early support of the gay community that aided her rise to fame. In an interview with *MTV.com*, Gaga explains, "The turning point for me was the gay community. I've got so many gay fans and they're so loyal to me and they really lifted me up. . . . Being invited to play [the San Francisco Pride rally], that was a real turning point for me as an artist" (Vena 2009). This early support influenced Gaga, who identifies as bisexual, to make public advocacy for LGBT people a cornerstone of her musical and media persona. During the 2009 LGBT National Equality March in Washington, DC, which Gaga called the "single most important moment of [her] career," she took to the podium and publicly called out President Obama

during her speech, saying, "Obama, I know that you're listening." She then shouted into the microphone, to cheers and applause, "Are you listening?" Gaga continued, "We will continue to push you and your administration to bring your words of promise to a reality. We need change now. We demand actions *now*." In addition, she chastised House Representative Barney Frank for his prior lack of support for the march, ultimately exiting with the words "Bless God, and bless the gays!"

Similarly, in response to a teenage fan in Tennessee who had been sent home from school for wearing a "I Heart Lady Gay Gay" shirt in April 2010, Gaga reached out on the popular social networking site Twitter to tweet "You're perfect the way God made you" (Kaufman 2010), again invoking God while also making use of an ontological explanation for gayness. Later that year in September, after Gaga took four gay members of the military to the MTV Video Music Awards as her dates and tweeted to Democratic House Majority Leader Harry Reid to repeal Don't Ask Don't Tell, Reid wrote back with a favorable message. Gaga thanked him "from all of us, like u, who believe in equality and the dream of this country. We were #BORNTHISWAY" (ladygaga 2010), using a Twitter hashtag<sup>2</sup> to invoke both a biological explanation for queer identities as well as a reference to her new album, which, tellingly, is titled *Born This Way*.

#### BORN THIS WAY

In November 2010, Lady Gaga revealed the name of her newest album, *Born This Way*, upon accepting an award for Video of the Year at the MTV Video Music Awards. The following February, Gaga premiered the title track "Born This Way" at the Fifty-third Grammy Awards, in which she used heightened biological metaphors to publicize the song on the red carpet. Gaga arrived on the red carpet inside an egg-like capsule she referred to as a "vessel," which she claimed she "incubated" inside for seventy-two hours prior to the Grammys, as a way to meditate on the messages of "Born This Way" (Ward 2011). She then burst out of the egg onstage to sing the song that Elton John has termed "the anthem that's going to obliterate 'I Will Survive' in queer popularity for the twenty-first century" (Savage 2011).

The imagery of the egg is a quite literal and direct illustration of the position that gayness is an inherent biological trait, echoing controversial studies such as that conducted by biologist Simon LeVay on the hypothalamuses of heterosexual and gay men (1991). Ruth Hubbard and Elijah Wald (1999) argue that LeVay and a few other prominent pro-gay scientists employed problematic and at times distorted methods in collecting and analyzing data in the hopes of justifying the existence of gayness, despite the complex multitude of factors that may contribute to one's

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sexual identity. Indeed, LeVay himself pointed out the several limitations of his 1991 study in his later book *Queer Science* (LeVay 1996), but this did not stop his work from being taken up in public discourse to argue for a straightforward understanding of gayness as biological. Gaga's use of the egg as well as the lyrics of "Born This Way" follow the same paradigmatic alignment of pro-LGBT positions with belief in the biological origins of sexuality. Gaga's "birth" from the egg onstage during her first performance of the song, as well as her "Mother Monster" birthing imagery in the "Born This Way" music video, further solidify this connection.

Granted, Gaga's firm positioning of LGBT people, along with people of color and individuals with disabilities, within the realm of biology is a strong and powerful statement given the context of the contemporary American political landscape. "Born This Way" takes aim at the hegemony of the Christian Right's anti-gay discourse, indicating that God created LGBT people and does not consider marginalized sexual or gender identities to be an abomination. Gaga also alludes to "the religion of the insecure," an obvious jab at homophobic religious practices, and affirms that she must "be [her]self, respect [her] youth."

The potency of Gaga's critique is confirmed in the response to the song found on the blog of the notorious Christian Right organization Focus on the Family. After asserting that he "[is] not inclined toward celebrity psycho-analysis [sic]," Focus on the Family writer Jim Daly (2011) nevertheless attacks Gaga's personal character, declaring that her celebrity persona is itself not "born this way" and that "the message found within the lyrics of *Born This Way* is in stark contrast to the message of the Gospel." In an even harsher and perhaps panicked critique of "Born This Way," Kelly Boggs (2011) of *Baptist Press* calls Gaga "a Pied Piper leading her fawning fans down a primrose path of deception concerning aberrant sexuality." The power of the homophobia behind these sentiments cannot be taken lightly, especially given the continued operation of "ex-gay" conversion camps such as Exodus International,<sup>3</sup> which provide an apt example of what Eve Sedgwick calls "gay-genocidal" agendas (Sedgwick 1990, 40). In fact, Boggs mentions that "[t]here are also countless numbers of people who once were homosexual but who no longer are so" and ultimately provides further information at the end of his article for how to contact the Southern Baptist Convention's ex-gay ministry.

In this climate of cultural warfare, where any mainstream stance in favor of LGBT people often becomes of necessity linked to biology in defending LGBTQ rights from the "sinful chosen lifestyle" rhetoric of the Christian Right, Gaga's message should rightfully be commended. Her lyrics and persona, while not embraced by all LGBTQ people, have been taken up by many queer and trans youth who find inspiration in her words and deeds, sometimes even life-saving inspiration. One young man, Benji, wrote a post in a discussion forum on Gaga's official website

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titled "Lady Gaga Saved My Life" (HausDJ 2011). Identifying himself as one of the queer homeless youth portrayed in the documentary film *Queer Streets*, Benji discusses how he was homeless on the streets of New York City, addicted to meth and HIV positive, and staying at Sylvia's Place, an "emergency over-night shelter for self-identified gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth from 16 to 23 years of age" named after Stonewall Riots veteran Sylvia Rivera ("Sylvia's Place" 2011). He writes,

[I]t wasn't that long ago that I was on the street leading a life that was going nowhere and quite literally, I had nowhere to go . . . but whenever I hear Lady Gaga I was not in this world but another! A world without prejudice or hate! And I do know I am not without flaw, and Mother Monster [Gaga] made me take a step back and look at myself for once and truly gave me "the fame" I so desperately needed! . . . When I heard [the album] *The Fame* for the first time, I escaped the horror of my head and the shady dealings of my past and I fel[t] it! . . . I seen her front row the other night in Atlantic City, NJ at Boardwalk Hall and never in my life did I ever think I would be so close to her for a whole show! My only goal left now in life is to meet her and get my family out of the trailer park. Quite literally . . . I would put an LOL but it's the truth. That's all. Love, Benji[.] (HausDJ 2011)

Such candor is testament to the very real impact that Gaga has on the everyday lives of some at-risk and marginalized youth.

Given the immense value of Gaga's pro-LGBT advocacy, one might question what value there is in an academic critique of Gaga's use of biological determinism. I am in agreement that too often in this era of postmodernism and queer theory, academics participate in the deconstruction and demonization of valuable social and political phenomena without contributing meaningful alternatives or fully legitimating the intense significance for marginalized populations of that which is under deconstruction. That is not my aim here. Rather, I wish to examine what, and who, is elided in biological determinist advocacy of LGBTQ people. In critically engaging with the pro-gay representation of sexuality in the media, it is important to consider the underlying homophobia and transphobia that produce the reactionary, biologically driven defense of LGBT people.

#### THE "BAD ROMANCE" OF BIOLOGY AND SEXUALITY

While biology is used in certain contexts to advance the causes of some marginalized groups, it has also been used against them; for example, the eugenics movement promoting white supremacy and the elimination of children of color, or the attempt to genetically screen for and selectively abort fetuses with disabilities (Hume 1996; Hubbard 2006). This fraught historical relationship between scientific authority and the marginalized

must be at the forefront of any discussion regarding the use of biology in advancing the rights of LGBT people. As Nancy Ordovery argues, the queer community has historically used biological determinist arguments in what she terms "the science-as-savior prism" and that "[o]f all the groups targeted by biological determinism, queers seem to be the only ones who have looked to eugenics to deliver us from marginalization" (Ordovery 2003, 60). That being said, it also is important to highlight the ways in which Gaga's use of biological determinism both leaves out some LGBTQ people's experiences as well and fails to fully grapple with the underlying heterosexism present in the idea that LGBT people are only acceptable if they were born that way.

The idea that gay people are gay because they were born that way is well-documented and, indeed, is experienced by many gay people, especially gay men, as a valid way of describing their identities. Many gay men report the traditional narrative of having been gay since they can remember, of feeling "different" from other little boys, and even of attempting to change their feelings to no avail. The testimonies of gay men subjected to failed ex-gay conversion therapy speak to this shared experience (Toscano 2008; Perry 2010; Rix 2010). However, as Lisa Diamond (2008) points out, this dominant narrative premised in male experience leaves out the voices of some women who have experienced their identities as more sexually fluid, including those women who have experienced a shift in sexuality later in life. For such women, they may not necessarily identify as "born this way," but as Diamond writes, they have often "been written off as atypical and inauthentic, not only by researchers, but also by many subsets of the gay/lesbian/bisexual community" (257). In this context, lyrics such as Gaga's further render certain queer people's experiences invisible even while trying to promote queer visibility.

Vera Whisman (1996) also explores the standpoints of queer people who do not necessarily experience their sexual identities as originating in biology. Whisman interviews a woman who says, "I'm not going to spend a lot of time forgiving myself or forgiving anybody else because I started out straight, damn it. Okay? I say to people, 'You're going to have to take me as I am. I am converted, if you wish, okay? I used to be straight, now I'm gay. I'm sorry if it would make you happy that I was born this way, but I wasn't'" (62; emphasis mine). Additionally, individuals who may experience shifts in sexuality depending on environmental factors are left out of the biological narrative, such as students at single-sex high schools and colleges, individuals in juvenile detention centers and prisons, or, in E. Patrick Johnson's (2008) example, members of the military. Transgender people, too, may fall outside the biological model; for example, when a trans man has not necessarily felt inherently "like a man" his whole life (Spade 2000), or when trans men experience a change

in sexual attraction as they go through the transition process (Devor 1997; Dozier 2005).

Claiming legitimacy for LGBT people based on being "born this way" fails to grapple with the homophobia/transphobia, heterosexism/cissexism, and heteronormativity inherent in such a proposition. Heterosexuality and cisgender identities (as opposed to gay and transgender ones) remain the unspoken standard, and any identities and experiences challenging that standard become excusable when they are presented as something that cannot be changed, something that *happens to* or *has always already happened to* an individual rather than something that one could experience, desire, pursue, explore, or cultivate. The individual remains passive rather than an agent of his or her own sexual desire, emotions, and thought processes, and the idea that no one would *want to* be LGBT if she or he could help it is reiterated, even if implicitly or unwittingly. No reasons are given for what is good, enriching, or even preferable about same-sex desire or pursuing a gender identity other than the one assigned to a person. While Gaga is entirely correct in singing that LGBT people are in the right, this should not be so mainly because of a biological origin.

There are undoubtedly concrete advantages to deploying biological determinism in the fight for LGBT rights in the United States. One is the ability of an individual to explain to her family that her same-sex desire is not "just a phase"—even though some people's sexuality does in fact shift after coming out, for example from lesbian to bisexual or vice versa—and that her sexuality is simply a manifestation of how she was born. The use of religious discourse to argue in favor of God's acceptance, as Gaga does in "Born This Way," remains particularly important for individuals whose families subscribe to certain religious ideologies that tell them that same-sex desire is a sin. The ability to believe in an inclusive God may also be important for queer individuals who themselves are religious. Still, when speaking to one's family, if being gay or transgender is what makes a person legitimately *happy*, regardless of how it came to be, that circumstance in itself is significant. After all, when an individual converts to a different religion that his family might not approve of, the arguments in favor of acceptance are usually about how fulfilled the person is in his new path, not that he was genetically predisposed to be Jewish or Muslim or Wiccan and would follow the religion of his parents if only he could help it.

Additionally, the use of biological determinism has been used as a legal strategy in the attempt to argue that gay and lesbian people deserve to be classified as a "suspect class," akin to women and people of color, in order to apply strict scrutiny, thus making potential discrimination harder to justify under law. The use of biological determinism in arguing for strict scrutiny can be seen as key since one prong of suspect classification is immutability, or the enduring, non-changing nature of the identity at

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hand. However, to be seen as immutable does not necessarily imply that one's identity is biological; as the Iowa Supreme court ruled in *Varnum v. Brien*, the unanimous 2009 ruling legalizing same-sex marriage in the state,

[C]ourts need not definitively resolve the nature-versus-nurture debate currently raging over the origin of sexual orientation in order to decide plaintiffs' equal protection claims . . . we agree with those courts that have held the immutability "prong of the suspectness inquiry surely is satisfied when . . . the identifying trait is 'so central to a person's identity that it would be abhorrent for government to penalize a person for refusing to change [it].'" (*Varnum* 2009, 43-44)

In other words, as in my argument about discussing one's identity with family, it does not matter *why* someone is gay, but rather that it is an important, central, and meaningful aspect of someone's life that should not be expected to change simply because of another's disapproval. Finally, there are other legal pathways of approaching discrimination against gays and lesbians, such as arguing that treating same-sex couples differently based on the gender of the individuals involved constitutes gender discrimination. Although this legal strategy is not often argued, the use of it in the future may provide a fruitful way forward that is not reliant on biological determinism.

#### CONCLUSION: MOVING FORWARD IN PRO-LGBT PERSONAL, LEGAL, AND MEDIA ADVOCACY

Lady Gaga undoubtedly remains a dedicated and inspirational advocate for LGBT equality as well as for many disempowered and marginalized youth in general. She speaks to the experiences of many LGBT people and works as an in-your-face counteractive force to challenge the hegemony of the Christian Right. The importance of such an all-star figure in the continued battle for the positive recognition and celebration of LGBT lives cannot be overstated, especially during a time in which we hear that even the most devoted and determined of Gaga's "little monsters" are susceptible to suicide, as was the case for fourteen-year-old Jamey Rodemeyer in September 2011 after severe bullying that lasted for years ("Lady Gaga Wants" 2011).

According to *The Huffington Post*, Rodemeyer's mother, Tracy Rodemeyer, planned to bury her son in a "Born This Way" t-shirt. Gaga responded to the child's suicide with anguish, tweeting, "Bullying must become illegal. It is a hate crime," and then announcing that she was planning to meet with Obama to "#MakeALawForJamey." Just a few days later, she performed a rendition of her popular song "Hair" as a tribute to Jamey at the iHeartRadio Music Festival in Las Vegas, including photos and videos of him on stage and asking the audience to put

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their hands in the air to honor him (Mazur 2011). The most recent manifestation of Gaga's commitment to youth bullying and suicide prevention has been the launch, with her mother, Cynthia Germanotta, of the Born This Way Foundation. The Foundation's mission is "to foster a more accepting society, where differences are embraced and individuality is celebrated. . . . [E]veryone has the right to feel safe, to be empowered and to make a difference in the world. Together, we will move towards acceptance, bravery and love" ("Our Mission" 2011).

While Gaga has acted to help fill a tremendous gap in addressing the life-or-death realities of bullied, harassed, and marginalized youth, I would like to suggest that there may be alternative frameworks in media and popular culture advocacy that do not rely on invoking biology in order to advocate for accepting difference. Songs such as Jill Sobule's 1999 "I Kissed A Girl" speak to this potential, as do the lyrics and music video from Katy Perry's 2010 song "Firework." Gay pop singer and *American Idol* star Adam Lambert's 2011 song "Aftermath" approaches a framework that avoids biology, advising queer people to learn to accept themselves. The lyrics are not explicitly biological, and the song focuses more on self-love and overcoming adversity, similar to Gaga's message but lacking the "born this way" language.

Overall, it is important to acknowledge and appreciate the contributions of LGBT-friendly media icons despite their limitations. However, it is also important to continually imagine even better and more-inclusive media representations. The higher the standard is set for LGBTQ people to be portrayed in celebratory, non-pitiable ways in the media, the more LGBTQ people will be valued on our own terms rather than in spite of our non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender status.

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## NOTES

1. Throughout this paper, I use "LGBT" when referring to the enumerated identities of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, especially because many mainstream advocacy groups (and gay people themselves) do not embrace the reclaimed term "queer." I use "LGBTQ" when referring to the possibilities for sexual and gender diversity that may extend beyond LGBT.
2. A hashtag refers to the use of the character # followed by a word or phrase which on Twitter creates a searchable database in which all tweets containing the same hashtag may be easily found and ranked in popularity. Twitter keeps track of the most popular "trending" topics on any given day and lists them on their main webpage.
3. Despite the fact that Exodus International President Alan Chambers publicly announced in July 2012 that ex-gay "reparative therapy" does not work to change one's sexual orientation, including his own same-sex desire, and that it is in fact harmful to gay and lesbian people, this news has hardly come without controversy for many churches affiliated with the organization who remain committed to the pursuit of heterosexual conversion. See Eckholm (2012).