

# **UCLA**

## **CSW Update Newsletter**

### **Title**

Q&A With Nathan Ha

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**Nathan Ha received his Ph.D. in the history of science from Princeton University. He is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the UCLA Institute for Society and Genetics, and is a member of CSW's Life (Un)Ltd working group. While at UCLA, he is offering courses on the history of the sexual sciences and the genetics of human origins.**



# Q&A WITH NATHAN HA

***Post-doc at the Institute for Society and Genetics researches the history of the biomedical sciences, especially the history of twentieth-century genetics***

*How did you get interested in the history of gender and science? Can you tell us about your dissertation project and how it developed?*

*When I was an undergraduate at Rice University, I took an interdisciplinary course on genetics that brought together the perspectives of biologists, anthropologists, and historians. It was one of my favorite classes and inspired me to write a paper that analyzed how the genetics of sexual orientation was represented in print and online media. I was fascinated by this topic and wanted to learn more about how genetics had become such a powerful field, one that people relied upon to locate the ultimate source of their*

*sexual identities. I talked to my undergraduate mentors about my interests in gender and science, and since I had double-majored in history and biology, they suggested that I apply to graduate programs in the history of science. It turned out to be good advice!*

*To be honest though, I didn't know much about the history of science before I applied to graduate school. And today, people ask me all the time what historians of science do. Jokingly, we say to ourselves that we are historians who like to study obsolete knowledge and practices. How, in other words, have we come to know what we know? Personally, I've long been fascinated by how science (and history) offers us compelling narra-*

*tives about our existence. And over the years, I've become more aware that there are many stories that we can tell about ourselves, which are often closely linked to our reasons for telling them.*

*Anyways, I started graduate school with the intention of completing a research project on the history of the genetics of sexual orientation but as I proceeded, I discovered that both genetics and sexual orientation have been moving targets. To understand how we got to a place where looking for genes for sexual orientation made sense, I had to start at the beginning of genetics itself, at a moment when scientists first discovered chromosomes and began to link them to both heredity and to sex. This moment occurred at the begin-*

*ning of the twentieth century and also coincided with the discovery of hormones.*

*My project then evolved into an exploration of how male and female sex difference became underpinned by the new idiom of genetics. It took a while to convince people that men and women are different from one another because of their chromosomes. And it took even longer for scientists and physicians to put together the linear account of sexual development – where genes act first to produce gonads that then produce hormones responsible for developing internal and external sex organs and structures. This account of development became very influential; it inspired a lot of scientific research as well as medical interventions intended to change, modify, or correct individual sex, gender, or sexuality. Most importantly, it came to dramatically affect how*

*people understood their own sex. My project examines this historical process of how genetic sex took shape within scientific, medical, and popular cultures over the course of the twentieth century.*

*What drew you to ISG and UCLA? What have you been working on since you have been here? Can you tell us about the upcoming event on “Hurdling over Sex? Sports, Science, and Diversity”?*

*I was excited about coming to the UCLA Institute for Society and Genetics because it's a great place to do interdisciplinary research. The Institute brings together experts in the humanities, social sciences, life sciences, law, and medicine. Everyone shares an interest in advancing our understanding of genetics and its social*

*implications. Being at the ISG has given me the opportunity to collaborate with and have stimulating conversations with people who have novel perspectives that come from their own works-in-progress. It's been a very rewarding experience. Since I've come to UCLA, I've been expanding upon my project in order to see how sex determination research and medicine have been developing from the late twentieth century to the present. Eric Vilain, the director of the Institute, is one of the leading researchers in this field, and I've become a participant-observer in his lab and clinics. I've interviewed physician-scientists about their work and have witnessed how new genetic technologies like exome sequencing are changing the practice of medicine. Geneticists at UCLA are pioneering the development of these technologies, and UCLA is also one of four institutions that is part of a national network, funded by the National Institutes of Health, dedicated to finding ways to improve medical care for patients with disorders of sexual development.*

*On May 10, I'm moderating an event called Hurdling Over Sex?: Sports, Science, and Diversity that is being sponsored by the ISG. The event will address the issue of eligibility testing for elite, female athletes. In 2011, the International*

*Olympic Committee adopted new guidelines based upon levels of testosterone that athletes had to fall under in order to compete in women's events. This policy has been controversial, so Dr. Vilain and I have co-organized a conference that brings together scholars with expertise in kinesiology, history, sociology, endocrinology, and genetics in order to publicly discuss and debate its merits and shortcomings. The workshop will address reasons for sexual segregation in sports, the history of previous efforts to scrutinize the sex of female athletes, issues of privacy and process, and the role that biomedicine can or should play in these efforts.*

*I am also very excited that Dr. Maria José Martínez-Patiño from Spain will be a featured speaker at the conference. In the 1980s, Dr. Martínez-Patiño was a hurdler who personally suffered injustice caused by the genetic testing policy that the IOC implemented in 1968. She successfully challenged this policy, which was lifted in 2000. Her perspectives as an athlete, scholar, and advocate will be extremely salient, and I am looking forward to a vibrant discussion.*

*How has been involved in Life (Un)Ltd changed your work? What is the value to the university (or to individual scholars) of such cross-disciplinary projects?*

*My involvement with Life (Un)Ltd has been one of the highlights of my time at UCLA. When I learned that Rachel Lee was putting together a working group intended to foster dialogue between scholars of postcolonialism, medicine, biotechnology and feminist studies, I signed up. The working group has provided me with even more opportunities to engage in interdisciplinary discussions about the diverse ways in which new biotechnologies are expanding our notions of reproduction, what it means to be human – indeed even what it means to be a living organism. The various impacts of these biotechnologies have been and will continue to manifest themselves not only in medical clinics and laboratories, but also in works of fiction and science fiction, philosophical treatises, and in the visual and performing arts. Biomedical knowledge and technologies, in other words, are resolutely material and also constitute the stuff of our dreams. As someone who spends a lot of time alone reading highly technical scientific texts, the working group has*

*provided me with a forum to share my research and an outlet to explore other creative approaches to interpreting sources and texts. Above all, it's been really fun and rewarding to think with this group on a regular basis!*

*What are you working on now?*

*I'm working on an article about the penile plethysmograph, a device invented by Kurt Freund, a Czechoslovakian psychiatrist, in the late 1950s. The plethysmograph was used to gauge a man's sexual arousal and preferences. Over the ensuing decades, researchers have used the device to study, identify, and treat homosexuals, pedophiles, and rapists in penal and psychiatric institutions. I'm examining the history of the plethysmograph as it traversed the clinic, the lab, the courtroom, and the prison. My hope is that this exploration will offer us useful perspectives on the construction and regulation of sexuality and masculinity in the latter decades of the twentieth-century.*