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Commentary

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In May 2007, I gave a talk at the Institute for Public Health Genetics (IPHG) at the University of Washington (UW), Seattle. My topic was the Genographic Project, specifically the colonial history and racial narratives that I see as shaping the work of the project.[1] I left IPHG encouraged by my conversations with UW researchers, including native researchers and program administrators who organize collaborative and ethically rigorous research. The individuals I met work in multiple native communities, especially those in the Pacific Northwest.

This panel transcript left me feeling similarly encouraged. I think a lot about less-than-ethical approaches to research on indigenous peoples. But I also believe that the best analyses and critiques not only point out shortcomings or contradictions but are generative of new ideas or solutions. Although I have focused on the colonial nature of certain types of genomics research on indigenous peoples (e.g., anthropological genetics research that privileges origin narratives, kinship values, and identity categories over Indigenous peoples themselves), my scholarship and teaching are naturally evolving to also foreground stories of collaboration, those in which natives are agents and not only recipients of informed consent documents and syringes. I also seek examples of native agency in research because in our knowledge society to govern and shape research and its structures can be a form of anticolonial practice.

In that spirit, I find some of the contributions of biological anthropologist Jerry Cybulski, native archaeologist Carrie Dan, anthropologist Sheila Greer, and indigenous activist Debra Harry especially productive in a conversation about potential solutions. For example, Cybulski of the Canadian Museum of Civilization describes collaborative research projects with First Nations involving both skeletal biology and mitochondrial DNA on ancient remains—projects carried out quite differently than, for example, the notorious Kennewick Man research. Native archaeologist Carrie Dan of the Kamloops Indian Band, British Columbia, notes that the band has always reinterred repatriated human remains. But more recently

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it has decided to go ahead with DNA testing and carbon dating to find out as much as possible about Secwepemc population history. Anthropologist Sheila Greer of the Champagne and Aishihik First Nations (CAFN) of Yukon Territory describes a mitochondrial DNA study of ancient human remains found melting out of a glacier in northwestern British Columbia. The study, undertaken to ascertain who among the potentially implicated tribes and First Nations should take care of the remains and attendant artifacts, is jointly managed by CAFN and the Province of British Columbia. Greer reminds her audience of the National Aboriginal Health Organization's (NAHO) OCAP (ownership, control, access, and possession) principles, which propose that "First Nations control data collections processes in their communities."[2] The principles advocate that First Nations govern not only sampling but also data management and research outcomes. The Genographic Project and others like it, she notes, should adhere to the OCAP principles.

Debra Harry of the Indigenous Peoples Council on Biocolonialism (IPCB) highlights a key issue at the heart of indigenous criticism of genomics research: what can go wrong when research is not meaningfully collaborative and when indigenous peoples are the objects of research without the opportunity to exercise governance authority. Informed consent procedures can be inadequate, and reconsent may not be pursued as biological samples move through the world of laboratory science, traded among researchers for studies that indigenous donors did not and very likely would not approve. She worries, and I fear rightly so, that we will see DNA studies used to deny indigenous land and resource claims and governance authorities that are otherwise supported by doctrines of peoplehood or, in some places, by law. For those indigenes with enforceable regulatory powers (e.g., federally recognized U.S. tribes), she advocates developing research codes. As for protecting Indigenous peoples globally in research, she hopes that the efforts of activists and such international bodies as the World Health Organization and the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues will pressure organizations such as Genographic Project to alter their research practices.

This transcript captures an important conversation about the problems and opportunities of certain types of research on or relating to indigenous peoples. It will be a useful teaching tool for multiple disciplines. It also prompts me to think beyond the Genographic Project to consider the colonial nature of some (most?) research on our fellow human beings, not to mention nonhuman organisms. Despite the efforts we increasingly make to reciprocate, build capacity, and collaborate, human subjects' research is precisely the extraction of natural-cultural resources for the benefit at some level of the researcher. The cases that I study (e.g., the Genographic Project, commercial "Native American DNA" testing, and academic anthropological genetics research in general) embed colonialism in that the domination of Native peoples and lands by European and American nations structures the very possibility of research. Colonial history structures the institutions that compel and fund research, the questions that seem to make sense, the words that are possible to use, and the interpretation of data.

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But the Genographic Project is by no means "*simply* an extension of 19th-century colonialist science," a perception Cybulski notes is common.[3] In project marketing, colonial-historical understandings of human history are complexly entangled with seemingly progressive notions of multiculturalism and racial unity. At first glance, the project can be (and is intended to be) read as progressive and collaborative as well as scientifically sound. But Genographic's multiculturalist narrative (e.g., "We are all African") reconfigures a racial tenet produced in an earlier century—that of the African as lower on the evolutionary chain of humanity—into a narrative in which the African is the source of all of us. Pay attention to Genographic's marketing texts; that seemingly antiracist way of telling the story rests on representations of contemporary African populations and individuals as ancient humans, as those peoples that contemporary humans evolved *from*. And "Africa" is represented as a place that modern humanity evolved the intelligence to leave. That is not to say that I quibble with the fact that the oldest human remains we have yet found were in that landmass that today we call "Africa," or that molecular sequences show certain biological relationships between populations in Africa and other parts of the world. But those bits of evidence do not necessarily translate into the notions that "we are all African under the skin"[4] or that a "leap forward in intelligence" resulted in humans being "clever enough to travel and leave Africa."[5] Nonhumans migrate, so "clever enough" must refer to leaving Africa.

The Genographic Project foregrounds a second longstanding colonial narrative in its quest to sample globally. Both it and the earlier Human Genome Diversity Project insist that indigenous peoples are "vanishing"[6] and therefore must be bled (they say "sampled") as quickly as possible to capture the knowledge in their DNA. This claim is a reconfiguration of a colonial narrative especially operative in the United States in the nineteenth century. The idea of the inevitably disappearing Indian was evidence of the rightness of Manifest Destiny, the doctrine that the United States had a divine authority to possess the continent. In the Genographic Project's case, the claim that indigenous peoples are disappearing—in concert with the "We are all related, we are all African" narrative—goes hand in hand with the assertion of the director of the Genographic Project, Spencer Wells, that "our DNA carries a story that is shared by everyone." However humanistic the project's stated intent, Wells's claim that the project and all of us have a right to the knowledge carried in indigenous DNA (and indigenous DNA is most valuable to this project) is eerily reminiscent of that nineteenth-century doctrine: when indigenous peoples were seen as vanishing, the United States claimed a right to their land. Today, the Genographic Project and all of us (not including indigenes, of course) have a right to the vanishing native's genetic knowledge, our common patrimony. This narrative inhibits real collaboration with indigenous peoples, for it does not see them/us as living, governing, striving peoples, but as cultural-biological relics on the brink of extinction.

The power and capacity to govern research is key. Collaborative research such as that highlighted by the panelists, and tribal or First Nation research regulation

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codes, such as those advocated by IPCB, are not panaceas for the ethical challenges of scientific (including social scientific) research. But such efforts are encouraging and show us that things can be, and sometimes are, much better than the classic colonial model. Deep collaboration (and indigenous-driven research) helps generate governance capacity. But as positive as those steps are, we need to see them as something to build on and not settle for. As I noted earlier, the very possibility of research on human subjects has been predicated upon power inequities between researcher and researched. The power to gaze upon, to speak for and about, is real power. Because our institutions, methods, language, and scientific cultures grew in tandem with hundreds of years of colonial practice, research always contains actual or potential power inequities. We will not be fully delivered from that. As we develop more just approaches to research, we should also continue to trouble the idea that research can fully escape its colonial pedigree. The Genographic Project is one example among many that shows us that we must be ever-vigilant.

ENDNOTES

1. TallBear, "Narratives of Race and Indigeneity."
2. First Nations Centre, *OCAP: Ownership, Control, Access and Possession*.
3. See Chacmool panel transcript, this issue.
4. The Rediff Interview with Dr. Spencer Wells. "We are all Africans under the skin." ⟨http://www.rediff.com/news/2002/nov/27inter.htm⟩ (2002) accessed 25 November 2008.
5. Collins, Simon. "Maori Alarm at Gene Project." *New Zealand Herald*, April 25, 2005. ⟨http://www.nzherald.co.nz/section/story.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=10122157⟩ accessed 25 November 2008.
6. The Genographic Project. *About the Project*. ⟨https://www3.nationalgeographic.com/genographic/about.html⟩ accessed 25 November 2008.

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