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Implications of the Genographic Project for Molecular Anthropologists

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Many molecular anthropologists no longer incorporate a field component into their research; rather, they rely on analyzing existing data sets and/or on collaborating with field researchers to obtain samples for analysis. This trend in molecular anthropology, combined with the aggressive agenda of the Genographic Project, has an important implication for the future of the discipline. If Native American communities are exposed to genetic ancestry research largely through the Genographic Project, they are less likely to see that there are multiple ways for Native American communities to interact with genetic researchers. Molecular anthropologists are in a position to offer an alternative approach to research by pursuing enduring and mutually beneficial collaborative projects with Native American communities.

Molecular anthropology is a discipline that seeks to use genetic information from contemporary and prehistoric individuals to understand the evolutionary history of our species and the peopling of the world. Ultimately, such data have wide-ranging implications, including potential biomedical applications. The populations of North America have one of the broadest arrays of cultural diversity in the world and provide an opportunity to study the relationship between population history and culture. From a scientific perspective, a wider breadth of sampling is needed in North America as our current inferences about Native American evolutionary history are based on relatively few samples from only a few geographic and cultural regions that have been reanalyzed over and over again. The organizers of the Genographic Project also recognize this need for sampling and have organized its research program to resolve this lack of diversity in samples.

The Genographic Project is a multinational effort to collect, in part, up to 10,000 samples from North American indigenous groups by the year 2010. To accomplish this goal, the project leaders are focusing their efforts on sample collection and have eschewed forming collaborative, long-term, and mutually beneficial re-

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lationships with communities, often depriving these communities of agency in the research process. This style of research is reminiscent of the long history of exploitation and marginalization of Native American communities by scientific researchers and has resulted in a palpable resentment toward scientists by indigenous community members. I have witnessed the cumulative results of this exploitation firsthand during many of my visits with Native American communities (and in my academic community). Older members of Native American communities have relayed stories to me of scientists coming to their community, taking blood samples, and leaving, never to return or to be heard from again. One community member asked me, given these experiences, why they should trust me. Many others have been vocally opposed to archaeologists telling them where they came from, government offices making them jump through hoops to repatriate their ancestors from museums, and outsiders in general telling them how they have to live their lives.

It was not until I began collaborating with Dr. Jerome Cybulski at the Canadian Museum of Civilization that I was able to move beyond the legacy of exploitation left by previous researchers and complete a genetic ancestry project in collaboration with First Nation communities. Dr. Cybulski has a 30-plus-year record of constructively collaborating with First Nation communities in Canada on archaeological and physical anthropological projects. By working on Dr. Cybulski's team, I've learned that it takes a long time, a great deal of effort, and patience to establish trust with a First Nation community. Open lines of communication, respect, and appreciation of the community members are necessary to maintain this trusting relationship. Thus far, our successful collaborative research has been based on continual open dialogue about project design. While this approach can take years to meet the interests and allay the fears of potential Native American participants, it offers the opportunity to collect novel genomic data from individuals in communities that have never been studied, ultimately offering benefits to these communities that could not otherwise be realized.

In addition, there is a strong interest among Native Americans in exercising their own preservation and interpretation of history through cultural resource management and revitalization programs. Collaborations between molecular anthropologists and indigenous communities provide a path to train community members in genetic techniques and analysis so they can eventually perform this type of research independent of outsiders to the community, focusing on research questions that they deem important.

Molecular anthropologists need to take more active, collaborative roles in working with Native American communities on genetic research projects if they want to advance beyond the type of research performed by many of their predecessors and the leaders of the Genographic Project. Ultimately, collaboration with and the training of Native Americans in genetic techniques and analyses, not commercial enterprises, will provide Native American communities with the means to independently use increasingly important DNA technology as they see fit.

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