

Counterpoint: Blood-Money

To us, the most significant aspect of the essay by Schroeder, Malhi, and Smith (in this issue) is that many of the positions it articulates were dismissible as “anti-science” ten or fifteen years ago.¹ We take this to indicate that there has been some evolution in the anthropological genetics community away from the defensive posturing that was so unfortunately characteristic of the Human Genome Diversity Project (HGDP) in the 1990s.²

The problems that remain, however, are grand in scope, and relate in the most fundamental ways to questions of identity. However, this is not merely on the Native side. There are questions of identity on the other side, too, which begin with “What is science?” and “Who speaks for it?”

Let us begin, then, with the data. A self-selected sample of Native Americans (those interested enough and willing to converse with geneticists) has been invoked in support of the authors’ opinions. Is this intended to be statistically representative of something? And what do the percentages of the sample mean? We think they mean very little. We could easily conduct a study with a sample more than twice as large and come to radically different conclusions, but we do not think they would be worth bothering over, for they would be scientifically meaningless.³ Yet this embodies much of the problem here: What seems to be science is all too commonly invoked as an authoritative or coercive social force, even when doing so is inappropriate.

Recall that Kennewick Man died as a Native American, only to be reincarnated 9,000 years later as a European. It

was specifically that scientifically racialized diagnosis that brought the Asatru Folk Assembly wackos into the picture. It was indeed the attempt to remove Kennewick Man’s skeletal material from Washington State and transport it to Washington, D.C., away from the people who appeared to have rights to him, that led to his removal from scientific hands.⁴ In other words, it was outdated, racialized, insensate science that provoked the Kennewick Man debacle.

Moreover, the lawsuit later brought by the anthropologists was about their perceived right to study him.⁵ But where is the existence of such a right recorded? And to the extent that scientists have ever thought that “the right to study whatever they want” is theirs, that notion is certainly abrogated when it comes into conflict with basic human rights. This is, of course, a direct result of the classic application of a “right to study” by the physical anthropologist Josef Mengele, who collected most of his best data at Auschwitz.⁶

The widespread assumption that there is a “right to study,” however, and the minimal acknowledgment (post-Nuremberg) that it at least should be subservient to human rights, raises the question of just how far today’s scientists believe it actually ought to extend. Should it extend to saying anything at all, false or true, in order to coax a subject into giving a genetic sample? If not, then how do we explain the false promises of medical benefits that were being promoted by the HGDP?⁷

The pending Havasupai lawsuit is a case in point. People gave their blood to scientists with the understanding that the act was to help cure diabetes. It was not supposed to be about schizophrenia nor about ancient population migrations.⁸ The lawsuit is calling into question the traditional practices of anthropological genetics, in which blood, once lured from the subject’s circulatory system, becomes the sole property of the

researcher, who is then free to use the blood as a commodity in exchange with other labs,⁹ piggyback other research questions upon it, and even become wealthy from it.¹⁰

Schroeder, Malhi, and Smith are quite correct to note that modern genetics takes place in the shadow of empowerment provided by the Native American Graves and Repatriation Act. However, there have also been profound changes on the science side as well.¹¹ Time was, of course, when nearly all professional scientific research was academic in nature. Its principal goal was knowledge. The advent of privatized science (especially in this context, genetics), has created a whole new set of issues for scientists and their subjects to grapple with. Is a corporate geneticist after the same knowledge that an academic scientist is after, or is the corporate geneticist out for knowledge only to the extent that it may be accompanied by profits? If the latter, or anything close to it, holds, then there are all kinds of historical precedents for Native peoples to hold corporate geneticists (and their syringes and Q-tips) at arm’s length.

In part, the HGDP broke down because it failed to acknowledge that science had transformed the blood and genetic material they were collecting from indigenous peoples into a commodity. The DNA had become an untapped natural resource that could be made into a profit producer through the investment of a little capital.¹² Biotech certainly appreciated it early on, potentially recapitulating some of the more embarrassing episodes in the history of the encounter of Native peoples and Western economies.

Finally, tribal membership is a political status, not a biological state. Nevertheless, there are, as the authors note, companies offering genetic tests to Native tribes to de-

termine tribal membership. (Once again, resource + capital = profit.) But is this science? If not, how do we differentiate it from science? With all the conflicted interests brought about by the transformation of genetics in the last few decades, what claims now made in its name can be considered trustworthy?

We agree with Schroeder, Malhi, and Smith that genetic research involving Native communities carries potential benefits for all parties. However, the basic terms of the contract under which such research has traditionally taken place must be and, indeed, are being renegotiated. The possibility that these issues can at last be openly discussed with a degree of coherence and civility would attest, in itself, to progress in this area.

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