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Disappearance, community, characterization, genre and scale

This book has attempted to think through narrative in the age of the genome by way of some of the genome's fictions, emphasizing the globalization of genomics while also attending to some of its anachronisms and failures in peripheral and marginalized contexts, across geographical and historical differences. These fictions encompass policy, science writing and biological theory as much as aesthetics, and genomics' historical attachments to both social policy and evolutionary theory mean that its proponents are also reliant on narratives of social good to make some of their claims to its universal applicability. Forms of scientific praxis adopt and adapt narrative forms to transmit their findings, but these forms are embedded in ideological infrastructures that, in turn, attach particular values to these findings – political, cultural and economic. I'll end by going through some of the big thematic questions that this book raises through the lens of genomic science – its epistemology, its history, its practices and its representations – and with some thoughts on what the postgenomic era yields for literary and cultural studies.

First, disappearance. Chapter 1 looked at the crisis of Anglo American hegemony and the end of the post-war welfare consensus in the 1970s through the lens of sociobiology and the selfish gene. I argued that Richard Dawkins's description of genes as selective agents operating at great distance, managing the 'survival machines' in which they are housed, while also competing with each other, was as much an argument against collective organization (group selection) as it was a theory about the role of genes in evolution. With the gene as the new unit of calculation in selective accounts of evolution, liberal narratives of character development tied to a public sphere begin to disappear, replaced by a consumer/innovator whose primary horizon is endless self-fashioning. This emerges in various ruptures of kinship, in which heteronormative forms of social reproduction exclude relations with racialized and queer characters. Paradoxically, it is the inclusion of otherness through a typologized eugenic

hierarchy in the name of a supposed multicultural liberalism that permits novel forms of neo-Darwinian violence.

By the 1990s, as Chapter 3 argued, individuals are broken down into fragments – sequences of code, body parts, hair, skin and nails – while the memoir's first-person struggles to grapple with the assault to a sense of self derived from remembering the past. In place of this, science memoirs which emphasize utopian genomic futures free from disease become technologies of partial amnesia. Memoirs serve as monuments to an ideal subject of genomic futures, while also facilitating the disappearance of this subject into disaggregated data bodies. This sees the subject disappear from the marketplace of self-fashioning to machinic enslavement, where data is stolen and co-opted as surplus value under new forms of algorithmic governmentality. This logic of disappearance, as a principle of capitalist accumulation and technology of control, is nothing new. Chapter 4 considered uses of genetic ancestry testing for tracing lost and broken genealogies across the historical void of the Middle Passage, from the United States to West Africa, and the attending ambivalence around genomics as a de facto good among Black American communities via a history of disappeared, violated, mutilated and stolen Black lives. For all that it makes visible, genomics also engenders new forms of disappearance and silence: the disappearance of non-coded effects and experiences, of data, of history and of alternative modes of reading embodied relations.

Second, community. The genomic model of health and identity privileges a model of heteronormative reproduction that assumes the legibility of family health and ancestral history, as well as often using categories of ethnicity that correspond to colonial topographies of the globe, and imperial ethnologies (European, Asian, etc.). While initiatives like the Human Genome Diversity Project aimed to address some of these problems – as well as the lack of ethnic diversity in the data collected through the Human Genome Project – methodologies often betray problematic starting positions, and produce exploitative practices of data collection. Reading narrative in the age of the genome makes it possible to chart a shift in the way that descriptions of community and relatedness have had to be reconceived in molecular biology following the results of the HGP. This is bound to the challenges of accessing relevant data: when information runs dry, or when there is not much of it to begin with, alternative modes of narrating belonging and history emerge. These descriptions often already had precedents in peripheral and marginalized histories and cosmologies; the examples I have looked at here are speculative and fictive forms of kinship in African American history, made necessary by the rupture of family units through enslavement,

forced displacement and the selling on of enslaved peoples from place to place. Information about genealogy is often insufficient or inaccessible. Extended kinship networks move across space and time, covering continent and diaspora, in ways that are not always certain or reliable, but which offer ways of holding the past where genomics fails.

Chapters 2 and 5 consider community through alternative accounts of biological change, where evolution does not happen at the level of individual, but – in Soviet biology – at a collective level and, in postgenomic narratives, as the result of complex interdependencies at the level of ecosystem, in which individuals move between habitats while also being sites of habitation for other forms of life. Neither of these accounts takes community as a unilateral or generic good. Instead, these narratives foreground infrastructures of violence, corporate and state responsibility, and industrial toxicity in their imaginings of proximity and interdependence. They make space for a more conditional and speculative interpretation of evolution, whereby the species called *Homo sapiens* – to follow Stephen Jay Gould – was only one evolutionary possibility out of a number of others, happening to emerge out of a plurality of other happenings, by chance.

Third, characterization. While narrative in the age of the genome registers the disappearance of the subject of liberal humanism into algorithms – and as such, presents a crisis for character development – I have also looked at examples where this disappearance is resisted or countered via emergent conceptions of character in the postgenomic era. For this, I offered the concept of transitional characterization, whereby characters shift past certainties of identification (of themselves, of others, of their surroundings), and considered how this makes new questions of political engagement and praxis possible in the postgenomic era. In Chapter 2, this is reflected through a shift from descriptions of exposure, in which the environment acts upon the individual, to proximity – whereby destructive forces are closer at hand than they seem, and often imperceptible. In Chapter 5, characters move from their declared function in the texts – ‘biologist’, ‘husband’, ‘Control’, ‘lighthouse keeper’ and the plethora of types of labour described by the interviewees of *Chernobyl Prayer* – through the strange peripheral topographies they find themselves in, illegible and secret, finding themselves and their practices transformed in the process.

Who is the protagonist in narratives of the genome? Chapter 3 suggests that for all the efforts of the HGP’s protagonists, it was never humanity – or at least the version of humanity premised by the project. If anything, the characters that linger longest in these texts are the ‘Old Ones’, to borrow again from Gould and the Burgess Shale: those characters exorcized by ideologies of genealogy

that privilege biological families – and families able to stay together. These are the ones that disappear out of data or into algorithms, the silences of the genomes where unexpressed potential waits, the uncanny landscapes that invent characters in the imaginations of their visitors, and lost ancestors whose voices surge into the present.

Fourth, genre. Many of the texts in this book fall under the heading of genre fiction: science fiction and fantasy, popular memoir, Black horror and oral history. This signifies two things: first, that genetic and genomic fictions have created a particular – and particularly lucrative – niche of cultural imaginaries. Second, the generic malleability afforded by genre fiction makes possible some of the narratological experiments in these texts. Not only are lots of these texts genre fiction, but they also move across genres in order to bend, twist, and tilt the metaphors of realism in their explorations of the strange possibilities of thinking life at the level of molecule, atom and gene. Genre implies borders, control, boundaries and constraints; moving across genre, using multiple strategies, becomes a way to scan the metaphorical infrastructure of narrative – its common place assumptions and semiotic economies – and of dismantling some of the analytic categories it might seem to take for granted.

Narrative in the age of the genome is a crisis of genre, because it is above all a crisis of the subject and the way this subject positions themselves in space, across time, and in relation to others and their surroundings; in short, it is a crisis of the meaning of freedom. It involves the ongoing conflict – by no means novel, and constitutive of narrative – between experiencing oneself in the world (subjectivity) and being identified by others (identity). In the various experiments some of the texts discussed here conduct with form, plot, character and place, genre becomes a site for overturning this conflict, not for the sake of utopian futures, but to rework side-lined mythologies of chance and contingency into workable and thinkable practices.

One final point about scale. Where is DNA? Visible via microscopes or in computerized representations, thinking life at the scale of the molecular privileges a rarefied and increasingly privatized sphere of biotechnological and biomedical analysis. DNA is now read and tracked at border crossings to determine entry, to prove or disprove family connections, to design precision medicine treatments, to solve crimes, to trace the aetiology of diseases, to map evolutionary history and to identify biological remains. This is world-building at the scale of micrology. Like Vincent trapped on the molecular highway in *Gattaca*, crossing the road in blind faith, existing in genomic narratives forces characters to risk all kinds of insecurity for the sake of reaching a conclusion that

looks something like a good life, or a satisfactory ending. Part of the enormous and continued cultural power of the genome is the way it casts out time like a vast bright net across the stories passed down and across about human worlds past, present and future, and all their countless differences. It promises to capture everything. Its failure to do so is not a failure of technology, science or data. The limits of genomics are in the narratives that its practices have not been able to read: the ways that time does not capture consequences in advance, but proliferates chance.