

Conversation with Krystal Tsosie (IndigiData) and Tao Leigh Goffe (Dark Laboratory)

Dark Laboratory

Dark Laboratory is an intellectual collective and humanities incubator at Cornell University that stands at the intersection between racial ecological justice and immersive storytelling. Their mission is to explore the history of Black and Indigenous dispossession through the use of powerful digital stories.

Dark Lab reforms how we see the production of knowledge by focusing on non-Western storytelling methods such as weaving, cooking, ceremonial dance, and song. By uplifting Black and Indigenous voices, Dark Lab emphasizes the importance of discussing the enslavement of African peoples and the dispossession of Native sovereignty. Furthermore, the collective engages in debates around the University and its relationship to stolen native lands and lives. These questions are tied to an exploration of infrastructural concerns about the impact of nature and ecology on the lives of these marginalized groups.

VIRTUAL PRESENCE

In October 2020, The Dark Lab launched their website with a virtual block party that introduced their audience to Black and Indigenous storytelling. They have continued to hold similar virtual events in the last year including a social justice virtual conference, presentations of dance, film, and music, conversations with Mellon scholars, and photographic narrative exhibitions.

OTHER INITIATIVES

Get Free - A Submarine Podcast is the Lab's home for conversations on Black and Indigenous life. The Lab has also hosted a Decolonial Glossary, an essay project designed to decolonize language and develop new vocabulary in solidarity with Black and Indigenous peoples. Lastly, Dark Lab sponsors Cornell courses, including "Black and Indigenous Metropolitan Ecologies," a seminar that dissects racial enclosure in urban spaces as an extension of the plantation.

IndigiData

IndigiData is a week-long data science workshop for undergraduate and graduate students that places Indigenous data sovereignty and data ethics at the center of the curriculum. Native communities have long been sites of data extraction for researchers. Yet many of the projects that are made possible through this Indigenous data—including commercially successful ventures like Ancestry.com and 23andMe—fail to give back to the tribal communities which made them possible. Data sovereignty centers on the rights of Indigenous peoples to collect, govern, and apply their own data in ways that keeps data local, and fosters new research focused on helping tribal communities. The course, taught by an all-Indigenous staff of data scientists, introduces students to informatics in the context of health, culture, and environment while stressing the importance of data to Indigenous peoples.

The inaugural workshop was held (virtually) in June of this year. The theme of the conference was the environmental microbiome: the communities of microorganisms living in and on people. One's microorganisms are deeply intertwined with the environment in which one lives, and samples collected from humans can act as proxies for the microbial communities of various environments. Western scientists are increasingly turning towards collecting microbiota from Indigenous peoples for such a purpose, thus being informed of microbiomes and the role they play is crucial for protecting data sovereignty.

IndigiData is part of the Native BioData Consortium, the first 501(c)(3) nonprofit research institute led by Indigenous scientists and tribal members in the United States. As a biorepository (or "biobank"), they ensure that advances in genetics and health research benefit all Indigenous people.

[Tao Leigh Goffe](#) is an assistant professor of literary theory and cultural history. She has a joint appointment between the Department of Africana Studies and Program in Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at Cornell University. She is also a writer and a DJ specializing in the narratives that emerge from histories of imperialism, migration, and globalization. At the intersections of the environmental humanities and science and technology studies, her interdisciplinary research and practice examines the unfolding relationship between technology, the senses, memory, and nature. DJ'ing is an important part of her pedagogy and research. Film production, sound editing, digital cartography, and oral history are also integral to her praxis. Her writing has been published in *Small Axe*, *Amerasia Journal*, and *Asian Diasporic Visual Cultures and the Americas*. She is the founder of Dark Laboratory, an engine for collaboration, design, and study of race, ecology, and creative technology.

[Krystal Tsosie](#) (Diné/Navajo) is an indigenous geneticist-bioethicist, co-founder of the Native BioData Consortium in Phoenix, Arizona, and a PhD candidate at Vanderbilt University. She has provided commentary on issues related to DNA, politics, and identity in her articles published in *The Atlantic* and others worldwide. Her work has also been featured in a number of articles on data sovereignty and indigeneity in *The New York Times*, *Forbes*, and *NPR*. She co-leads a genetics study investigating genetic determinants of pre-eclampsia in American Indian women, constituting one of the few community-based genetics studies including Tribal communities. As one of few Native American geneticists, she also continues work from her Masters in Applied Ethics from Arizona State University, which examines medical ethics in the context of indigenous beliefs and genetic rights. After devoting several years to developing a technique to target small drugs to cancer cells, her newest endeavor is to ameliorate the health disparities gap in genetics through community-based participatory research.