

Manifesto

The sin of self.

João Ramalho-Santos

We know who you are.
We know what you do.

In heated basements and garages where translucent tubes pump fluids and gases into converted aquaria. Media, flasks, enzymes, growth factors, hormones, antibiotics — you buy online, have them delivered, trade in makeshift markets. The equipment is discreetly cleaned out on Sundays, after waxing the car; the protocols you lazily download and follow like gospel until someone posts a better recipe. And, in the same dark corners where once homemade beer and short-wave radios were your grandest projects, clusters of cells fruitfully multiply under your proud gaze.

It started years ago, with Dolly the martyr sheep, another sacrificial lamb to human greed. Not bothering with particulars (do you ever?), you found the general principles seductive, bought the hype, began thinking about 'experiments'. Therapeutic cloning. Somatic-cell nuclear transfer. Pluripotency. The words rolled off your tongue like poems. Unfortunately, expensive equipment was needed, precise skills, an iron will. All the things you lack. Until the news came that someone had made it easy, incredibly easy.

Easy.

That was probably the only thing you understood. Induced pluripotency, stem cells grown out of modified adult tissue. Cells that could be propagated indefinitely, be made into any other cells. No need for embryos, oocytes or micromanipulation stations, just the forced expression of a few factors. Maybe you didn't fully grasp the science at first. (Who are you kidding? You still don't.) Vectors, transfection, transduction, transcription control, reprogramming. But, after the kits became available, anyone could use the technology. That's the true beauty of democracy in your eyes, isn't it? The ability to be as effortlessly smart as the smartest, while remaining utterly dumb.

So you tearfully sacrificed a piece of skin into a Petri dish, added in the factors with some culture media, made that fragment of you immortal. The modified cells grew, pluripotent and strong, and

you contemplated them as a deity gazing down on its ancient self. People with white lab coats and prophetic gazes had talked about all-encompassing cures, cell-based therapies, regenerative medicine. You can say that some such Grand Purpose was at the back of your mind. Perhaps distant relatives suffered from Parkinson's or diabetes or stroke, and you feared bad genes would fail you. But you lie. The fascination was the sin of self, the secrets of plasticity, the possibility of contemplating a miraculous endless rebirth, even if in a limited form. You differentiated your cells, not to cure, but to see if it could be done. And then you allowed your idle mind to set free its twisted imagination. Or, much more likely, you borrowed imagination from others, downloaded a few more protocols.

Easy.

In carefully controlled cultures you prime tiny haemangioblast islands (do you even know what haemangioblasts are?) until they bloom red into the culture. You brew litres of your own blood to share in rituals without metaphor or pain. "Drink, for this is my blood," you say in abandoned churches and vandalized cemeteries; failing to understand that comfortable literalism shatters any possible ancient meaning. You grow cardiomyocytes, wear them in medallions that synchronize their beat to iPods and Club

DJs. "Wear your heart on your sleeve," says the pirate online commercial, hinting that this is a just a wonderful new fad gadget, a novel pulsating plastic.

We know. We know more than you realize. Hushing in upscale restaurants, ordering off-off-menu with ever changing codes you pick up from message boards, snickering at the witty dish names, commenting that the differentiated muscle tissue marinated in lemongrass "tastes just like chicken", wondering "who it is" as you lay down platinum cards. Congratulations. You have found yet another way of selling yourselves.

"Know thy cell, know thyself," you hide beneath slick mottos. When neurons are differentiated from your own pluripotent stem cells you truly believe you will be able to see yourselves think, gazing into the dish in search of profound answers to all possible questions. As none are forthcoming you hurry your cultures to oracle interpreters that carefully fondle your artificially expatriated brain cells, measure current activities, calcium bursts, nitric oxide synthesis; use these cryptic signs to tell you what you crave to know. Anything at the service of your insecurities and platinum cards. At least electrophysiology PhDs have found

welcome new employment, patch-clamping confused aggregates of cells, cells trying desperately to create meaning from a context of your making, not their own.

You were always partial to slavery. First towards other human beings, then animals, now, fittingly, your own cells. You have shown no restraint, no shame. This is your last warning.

We know who you are.

We know what you do.

We will let others know. On your walls, in your blogs, in your favourite bars, in your congregations, in your children's schools. We will be as ruthless as you have been heartless.

We are coming. And we will not rest until all cells are set free.

People for the Ethical Treatment of All Life.

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