Second only to gardening, genealogy research has become America’s favorite pastime. The urge to tap into one’s roots entices even those Americans whose ancestry seems self-evident—namely Native Americans, the continent’s oldest inhabitants. Since the nineteenth century, when federal tribal policy gave tribes specific names, quar- tered them off, and provided them with a reservation, being Native American has generally meant being affiliated with a tribe. Now, doctoral student Kim TallBear argues, “What it is to be Native American is beginning to change in the American consciousness. It is becoming more and more about DNA markers—the American fetishization of genes and DNA markers is extending to Native American identity.”

Kim TallBear, 35, is a member of the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate tribe in South Dakota, and a researcher whose work combines the philosophy and history of science with cultural studies and molecular anthropology. She has a long resume of work in Indian Country and is currently residing in South Dakota while she finishes her PhD from the University of California Santa Cruz.
Several years ago, while she was working in tribal policy, a rash of events in the cultural politics of DNA caught her attention: the now-notorious attempt to identify the tribe and race of “Kennewick Man”; requests by scientists for genetic samples from indigenous peoples; and the rise in use of DNA tests to obtain race- or ethnicity-specific scholarships, government entitlements, and college admissions.

She also saw the effect of genetic testing within her own tribe, as DNA testing companies offered to “authenticate” existing tribal members as Native American. Struck by this racialization of the genome—which TallBear views as both perilous and inaccurate—she began speaking to tribal members about the concept of DNA. At one particular tribal enrollment conference, in which a DNA testing company was trying to sell its costly services, TallBear noticed that some tribal members attending the conference were blending together the concepts of blood and genes. This generalization of terms suggested to her that some tribal members perceive their heritage and identity in genetic terms.

Hoping that an academic background would help her to gather impetus and funding to broadcast her findings, TallBear went to UCSC. She is developing a course on race and medicine at her tribal college, and she publishes on the topic of DNA and identity for academic and popular audiences. One of her major goals in publishing is to dispel widespread myths about genetic testing. Most people are unaware of the fundamental technical problems that prevent DNA testing from identifying race, she says. Such tests tend to oversimplify human genetic variation, offer false positives and negatives, and mask probabilistic results as certainties.

Throughout her work, TallBear emphasizes that DNA tests symbolically reduce what it is to be Native American by funneling Native American identity into a single set of genetic markers. This fixation on the biology of Native Americans ignores their ancient, complex, and various tribal traditions. And although genetic science is imperfect, she says, “Scientific rhetoric and marketing has become so influential culturally, sometimes it doesn’t matter what science can or can’t do.”

—Adeline Goss

[San Francisco] When Andrew Sean Greer was 5 years old, he asked his mom why the sky was blue. “I’m sorry, honey,” she replied. “That’s not my field.” Greer, now 33, laughs when he tells this story but quickly points out what, with his mother’s encouragement, he learned from it: Sometimes finding the answer isn’t the only reason to ask a question. “One of the most difficult tasks a human can set for herself is to look directly at her life and come out with no answers, but more questions than she could ever possibly answer,” he says. “For scientists, and for artists, this is our daily task. It makes the world alive around us; every plant and rock is an endless well of thought and information that could be pondered for a lifetime.”

As the son of two scientists, Greer not only inherited a curiosity about the world and all its unknowns but also the tools to work through its myriad possibilities. His highly imaginative and critically lauded second novel, The Confessions of Max Tivoli, is something of an ode to this sensibility. “The whole novel is like a Gedanken experiment, like a series of ‘What ifs...’” says Greer. Indeed, the predominant one is, “What if a person aged backwards?” When the protagonist, Max Tivoli, is born, he looks like a 70-year-old man. Narrating his inauspicious beginnings, he recalls, “Babies have no noses—anybody will