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**Introduction**

Epigenetic marks such as DNA methylation are important for genome regulation (Bell & Felsenfeld 1992; Li et al., 1992; Hsieh 1994). DNA methylation has been well-studied in mammals and plants where it has been shown to play important roles in temporal and spatial regulation of gene expression (Okano et al.,1999, Zhang et al., 2006), reduction of transcriptional noise (Bird 1995), and genome stabilization (Wolffe & Matzke 1999).  However, the distribution and context of DNA methylation varies greatly among phylogenetic groups indicating that these functional roles may not be conserved (Colot & Rossignol 1999).

In contrast to the heavily methylated vertebrate genomes, invertebrate genomes exhibit a relatively low level of methylation that is primarily confined to gene bodies (Zemach et al., 2010). It is perhaps because of these differences that DNA methylation has remained largely understudied in invertebrates.  Recently, however, there has been a renewed interest in invertebrate DNA methylation patterns as it is now being recognized that they are exceptional models to study function and evolutionary roles of gene body methylation.  Furthermore, it’s been shown that DNA methylation mediates phenotypes in response to environmental cues in the invertebrate *Apis mellifera* (Kucharski et al., 2008, Lyko et al., 2010), indicating an important role integrating environmental signals. Thus, understanding both the distribution and function of DNA methylation in diverse invertebrate lineages will contribute significantly to our understanding of the evolution of genome regulation and environmental physiology.

The focus of the work presented here is to explore the role of DNA methylation in bivalve molluscs. The presence of DNA methylation has been confirmed in several bivalve species (Wang et al., 2008, Petrovic et al., 2009, Gavery & Roberts 2010). A majority of the research on DNA methylation in molluscs has focused on the Pacific oyster (*Crassostrea gigas*), an economically and ecologically important species. Previous studies in the Pacific oyster identified a relationship between gene function and methylation pattern. Specifically, it was shown that genes with housekeeping functions are more methylated than genes involved in inducible functions (i.e. genes involved in response to environment, embryonic development or tissue-specific functions) (Gavery & Roberts 2010, Roberts & Gavery 2012). More recently, Riviere et al. (2013) determined that DNA methylation plays a critical role in development as indicated by differential methylation patterns throughout embryogenesis. This was further supported by their observation that 5-aza-cytidine, a potent demethylating agent, significantly disrupts embryonic development (Riviere et al., 2013).

These recent studies on DNA methylation in oysters provides important foundational information on DNA methylation in bivalves.  However, previous studies were not able to provide fine scale resolution of DNA methylation patterns, nor examine the relationship with gene expression at the genome-wide level.  Here, we provide the first high resolution methylome of a mollusc and integrate RNA-seq data to get a better understanding of the role of DNA methylation in invertebrates.

**Methods**

*High-throughput Sequencing and Mapping of Bisulfite treated DNA (BS-Seq)*

The cohort of adult oysters used in this study was from Samish Bay, WA, USA. Briefly, genomic DNA was isolated using DNAzol (Molecular Research Center) from gill tissue of 8 oysters, pooled, and methylation enrichment performed using the MethylMiner Kit (Invitrogen) following the manufacturer’s instructions.  A DNA library was prepared using the Illumina Tru-Seq system with methylated adapters and bisulfite treatment was performed using the EpiTect Bisulfite Kit (Qiagen). Library preparation and sequencing was performed on the Illumina HiSeq 2000 platform at the University of Washington high throughput sequencing facility (Seattle, WA).  High-throughput reads (36bp single end) were mapped back to the oyster genome (Fang et al., 2012) using  BSMAP software version 2.73 (Xi & Li 2009). Methylation ratios (i.e. number of unconverted cytosines/the number of converted and unconverted cytosines at each locus) were extracted from BSMAP output (SAM) using a Python script (*methratio.py)* that is distributed with the BSMAP package. Only cytosines in a CpG context with sufficient sequencing depth (defined here as greater than or equal to 5x coverage) were retained for further analysis.

*DNA Methylation Landscape of Genomic Features*

In order to examine the relationship of DNA methylation and other genomic features, data from BSMAP (i.e. *methratio*) was converted to genomic feature tracks (i.e. generic feature format [GFF] files). Conversion was done using SQLShare (Howe et al., 2011), with the files and corresponding query language published (Gavery & Roberts 2013).

The distribution of methylated CpGs with respect to specific genomic features was determined using BEDtools (i.e. *intersectBED*) (Quinlan & Hall 2010). For this analysis, a CpG locus was considered methylated if at least half of the reads remained unconverted after bisulfite treatment. Genomic features that were examined include: exons and introns (Fang et al., 2012), promoters (defined as 1kb upstream of open reading frames), and transposable elements. Putative transposable elements were identified using RepeatMasker (Smit et al., 1996-2010), based on protein similarities to the Transposable Element Protein Database. At the time of analysis the database contained 5411 predicted proteins. (http://www.repeatmasker.org/RepeatProteinMask.html#database). For comparative purposes, total CpG across the entire *C. gigas* genome was also examined. Locations of all CpGs were identified using the EMBOSS tool *fuzznuc* (Rice et al., 2000), and the proportion of total CpG in each of the genomic features listed above was determined using *intersectBED*.  A Chi-squared test was performed to determine if the distribution of methylated CpG was different from what would be expected by a random distribution of the total CpG in the genome (p-value <0.05 was considered significant).

Average methylation ratios were determined for full length genes and also the cumulative exons and cumulative introns comprising a gene. Average methylation was determined by the number of methylated cytosines divided by the total number of CpG per region.  Correlations between the methylation status of exons and introns of individual genes were performed using Pearson’s correlation coefficient.

*DNA Methylation and Gene Expression*

Relationships between methylation and gene expression were evaluated using the RNA-seq dataset from Zhang et al. (2012) where gene expression was provided as RPKM (reads per kilobase per million reads) (supplemental table 14). Oyster genes (n=27,181) without CpG loci or with no expression values were not used.

Two analyses were performed using the DNA methylation data reported here and the RNA-seq dataset (Zhang et al., 2012 (supplemental table 14)).  First, the relationship between DNA methylation and gene expression in gill tissue was examined. Genes were grouped into deciles according to transcriptomic representation in gill tissue (RPKM) and the average methylation ratios for each decile were compared.  A one-way ANOVA followed by Tukey's test for multiple comparisons was performed using R (R Core Development Team 2012) and a significance level of p < 0.05 was accepted.

Second, principal component analysis (PCA) was performed in R (R Core Development Team 2012) to investigate relationships between DNA methylation, gene expression profiles and various gene attributes.  The following attributes were used in the PCA: average methylation ratio of the full length gene (as described above), gene length in base pairs (bp), number of exons, average transcriptomic representation (average RPKM across 7 adult tissues), coefficient of variation (%CV) of transcript abundance (RPKM) among tissues.  All variables were log transformed, with the exception of the methylation ratio which was arcsine transformed prior to analysis.  The significance of each principal component was calculated using Monte-Carlo randomization tests.  Principal components were considered significant at p ≤ 0.05.  Correlation loadings of 0.6 were considered significant.

**Results**

*DNA Methylation Mapping*

Bisulfite treated DNA sequence reads (139,728,554 total reads; 36bp) are available in the NCBI Short Read Archive under the accession number SRX32737. A total of 120,734,949 reads (86%) mapped to the *C. gigas* genome. Fifty-six percent of the 164,873,219 cytosines in the *C. gigas* genome, had at minimum of 1x coverage. Of the 9,978,551 CpG dinucleotides in the genome, 2.6 million (26%) had ≥ 5x coverage. The distribution of methylation ratios found at CpG dinucleotides ranged between 0.0 - 1.0, but a majority of the loci were either heavily methylated or unmethylated. Specifically, 55% (1,453,752) were methylated (i.e. ≥ 0.50) and another 28% were unmethylated (i.e. = 0.0) (Figure 1).  Genome feature track files (i.e. GFF) representing 1) all CpG dinucleotides and 2) methylated CpG dinucleotides (>50%) for this dataset were developed and are available (Gavery & Roberts 2013

*Methylation Landscape of Genomic Features*

Methylated CpG dinucleotides, defined as having a methylation ratio of 0.5 or greater, were located predominantly in intragenic regions (exons and introns), but were also present in putative promoters (defined as 1 kb upstream of TSS), transposable elements and unannotated intergenic regions.   The distribution of methylated CpGs across various genomic regions is significantly different than what would be expected if the methylation were distributed randomly throughout the CpG dinucleotides in the genome (X2 = 513,194.1, df = 4, p <0.0001). Specifically, DNA methylation appears to be overrepresented in intragenic regions (64% of methylated CpG in combined exons and introns) when compared to the proportion of all CpG in the genome (38%) (Figure 2). When methylation was examined on a per gene basis a strong positive correlation (R2 : 0.86) was observed between exonic and intronic methylation within a gene.

*Methylation and Gene Expression*

The relationship between the proportion of methylation in a gene and overall transcript abundance in gill tissue was characterized (Figure 3).  In general, transcription abundance increases with increasing DNA methylation until the 60th percentile after which it remains relatively stable.

The first two principal components (PC) of the PCA of gene attributes were significant and explained 76.4% of the variation among the genes. This variation was being driven by multiple factors, including DNA methylation (Figure 4 and Table 1). The only variable that did not contribute significantly to the first two principal components was mean transcript abundance (correlation loading 0.2). The first PC, which explained 50.2% of the variation was loaded heavily by number of CpG dinucleotides, the length of the mRNA and the number of exons. The second PC, which explained 26.1% of the variation was loaded heavily by the %CV of gene expression among tissues and the methylation ratio. DNA methylation is negatively correlated with transcript variance between tissues (%CV) and relatively uncorrelated with attributes such as gene length.

**Discussion**

Here we have used methylation enriched high-throughput bisulfite sequencing in conjunction with genomic feature annotations and transcriptomic data in an attempt to gain a better understanding of the role of DNA methylation in oysters. This work not only provides new information on DNA methylation in invertebrates but also provides a framework for characterizing DNA methylation in other taxa.

The reduced representation approach was selected to obtain a higher coverage of methylated regions.  In addition, since methylation was likely to occur in gene bodies (Zemach 2010), and because transcriptomic data was the primary genomic resource for *C. gigas* at the time of sequencing (the genome was released soon after), it was expected that the methylation enrichment would significantly limit the proportion of unmappable reads. Quantitative methylation data were obtained for both methylated CpG as well as unmethylated CpG that were either interspersed with or flanking these more heavily methylated regions. Therefore, methylation enriched bisulfite-sequencing was effective in generating a comprehensive invertebrate methylome.

One of our primary findings was the overall level of genome methylation in the oyster. Here we found that 15% of CpG dinucleotides (2% of total cytosines) are methylated in gill tissue. This degree of methylation is much lower than the global methylation patterns seen in mammals where 70-80% of CpGs are methylated (Bird & Taggart 1980), but still higher than what has been reported in other invertebrates.  For instance, only 0.8% of the CpGs are methylated in the brain of *A. mellifera* (Foret et al., 2010) and between  0 – 8% of CpGs are methylated in the nematode, *Trichinella spiralis*, depending on the life stage (Gao et al., 2012).  Although methylation in *C. gigas* is relatively high for an invertebrate, it is not outside the range of what has been reported in other species by liquid chromatography-mass spectrometry analysis. For example, similar to the oyster, 2% of total cytosines are methylated in the mollusc *Biomphalaria glabrata* (Fneich et al.,2013). It should be noted that methylation in oysters does likely vary in both a temporal and possibly tissue specific manner, as clearly indicated by Riviere et al. (2013) by characterizing differences in total methylation during development.  In addition, because the sample represents a pool of multiple individuals, it can not be determined whether the variation in methylation at a particular locus represents hemimethylation or differential methylation between individuals.  In general, the bimodal pattern observed (Figure 1) indicates that a CpG locus is either heavily methylated or unmethylated, but future work sequencing individual oysters would provide valuable information regarding individual epigenetic variation in oysters.

This work also provided the first direct evidence in oysters that DNA methylation is prominent in gene bodies (see Figure 2). This finding is consistent with what has been described in other invertebrates (e.g. Suzuki et al., 2007, Zemach et al., 2010, Lyko et al., 2010) and there is increasing evidence that gene body methylation is the ancestral pattern (Lechner et al., 2013). The function of gene body methylation remains unclear, but studies indicate possible active roles in preventing spurious transcription (Bird et al.,1995, Huh et al.,2013) and regulating alternative splicing (Manukea et al., 2010, Shukla et al., 2011, Foret et al., 2012), as well as a more passive role for methylation as a byproduct of an open chromatin state (Jjingo et al., 2012).

Exons are the preferential target for gene body methylation for most species (Feng et al., 2012), and methylation was enriched in exons in the oyster. However, there is also a relatively large amount of intronic methylation in oysters when compared to other invertebrate species. For example,  DNA methylation occurs almost exclusively in exons in the honey bee *A. mellifera* (Lyko et al., 2010).  Genome-wide methylation studies in other invertebrate species also report very low levels of intronic methylation relative to other genomic regions (e.g. Gao et al, 2012, Bonasio et al., 2012). Similarly, in plants, methylation is preferably targeted to exons; however it has been reported that in globally methylated mammalian genomes gene body methylation is not biased toward exons (Feng et al., 2012), although exon/intron boundaries can be marked by differences in DNA methylation (Sati et al., 2012).  It appears that bivalves may be unique among the invertebrates examined in terms of the degree of methylation in introns.  Intronic methylation has been implicated to be involved in gene regulation through the expression of alternative isoforms of genes (e.g. Manukea et al., 2010, Foret et al., 2012).  Variation in methylation patterns between taxa may indicate that additional model invertebrates are needed to study the function of these epigenetic marks.

There is a positive, linear relationship between gene body methylation and gene expression in some invertebrates, but more frequently the relationship follows a bell shaped curve with moderately expressed genes showing the highest amount of methylation (Zemach et al., 2010).  The pattern observed in *C. gigas* is generally consistent with the latter pattern, except that instead of a bell shaped curve, methylation generally plateaus for both the moderately and highly expressed genes.

Although our data shows a positive correlation between gene body methylation and gene expression in adult gill tissue, another study in oysters has shown an exception to this. Specifically, Riverie et al (2013) reported an inverse relationship observed between DNA methylation and expression of certain *homeobox (hox)* genes during embryonic development in *C. gigas*.  The authors hypothesized that the apparent suppression of *hox* expression by DNA methylation may be due to repression by DNA methylation proximal to the transcription start site in these genes. Although the results of these two studies may appear contradictory, it is possible that depending on the context of the methylation (i.e. whether gene body or promoter methylation) it may play either a repressive or expressive role.  This is referred to as the DNA methylation paradox (Jones 1999) and is observed in a wide range of taxa.

Using PCA we were able to show that the amount of methylation in a gene is related to the variance in expression between tissues.  Genes that show the least variation in expression between tissues have higher DNA methylation levels than those exhibiting a tissue-specific expression profile (i.e. high %CV between tissues). This observation provides corroboration for previous reports based on *in silico* analyses in oysters showing that housekeeping genes have the highest amount of methylation in *C. gigas* (Gavery & Roberts 2010). Housekeeping genes perform functions required by all cell types, therefore it’s expected that their expression patterns would show low variation across tissues.  The results of this study are consistent with that expectation that genes with low expression variation across tissues show a high degree of methylation relative to genes with a more tissue-specific expression pattern. Again, this study supports previous findings (Gavery & Roberts 2010, Roberts & Gavery 2012) that heavily methylated genes are enriched in housekeeping functions, which are essential for cellular function.  One theory is that the lack of methylation in these genes with more tissue-specific expression is that it can contribute to phenotypic plasticity by allowing more transcriptional opportunities through process such as allowing access to alternative TSS, facilitate exon skipping or other alternative splicing mechanisms and allow for increased sequencing variation (Roberts & Gavery 2012).

**Conclusions**

Through the current effort, quantitative methylation data were obtained for over 2.5 million CpG dinucleotides throughout the genome of *Crassostrea gigas*. These data represent the first high resolution methylome in any mollusc and the analytical approaches provide a framework for DNA methylation characterization in other species.  In addition, this dataset developed here will be beneficial for phylogenetic analysis of DNA methylation in invertebrates, which will be more robust with the addition of a lophotrochozoan species. The results of this study highlight similarities in epigenetic profiles of invertebrates such as a predominance of gene body methylation and a positive relationship between intragenic methylation and gene expression. In addition, they highlight interesting differences between invertebrate epigenomes including a higher level of intronic methylation in bivalves than what has been reported, for example, in insects. Although the functional role of DNA methylation in bivalves remains elusive, two scenarios could explain our findings. One possibility is DNA methylation in gene bodies is a byproduct of transcription resulting from an open chromatin state, as proposed by Jjingo et al (2013). Thus the methylation patterns are influenced by transcriptional activity. The second scenario is DNA methylation is involved in regulating the gene activity in bivalves. If in fact DNA methylation does influence transcription, the regulatory role is likely very complex. For instance, DNA methylation could have both a have direct regulatory effect on certain genes as proposed by Riverie et al. (2013), as well as facilitating expanded transcriptional opportunities in other cases. Future studies will certainly be challenging given the dynamic nature of DNA methylation, but will hopefully help better delineate if DNA methylation plays a functional role in regulating genome activity in bivalves and what that role might be.

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