Repression of germline genes by PRC1.6 and SETDB1 in the early embryo precedes DNA methylation-mediated silencing

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Article

Keywords: embryology, genetics, silencing

Posted Date: April 14th, 2021

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-400263/v1>

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Version of Record: A version of this preprint was published at Nature Communications on December 1st, 2021. See the published version at <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-021-27345-x>.

Abstract

Silencing of a subset of germline genes is dependent upon DNA methylation (DNAm) post-implantation. However, these genes are generally hypomethylated in the ICM, implicating alternative silencing pathways before implantation. Indeed, in embryonic stem cells (ESCs), an overlapping set of genes, including germline “genome-defence” (GGD) genes, are upregulated following deletion of the H3K9 methyltransferase SETDB1 or subunits of the non-canonical PRC1 complex PRC1.6. Here, we show that in pre-implantation embryos and naïve ESCs (nESCs), hypomethylated promoters of germline genes bound by the PRC1.6 DNA-binding subunits MGA/MAX/E2F6 are enriched for RING1B-dependent H2AK119ub1 and H3K9me3. Accordingly, silencing of these genes in nESCs shows a greater dependence on PRC1.6 than DNAm. In contrast, GGD genes are hypermethylated in epiblast-like cells and their silencing is dependent upon SETDB1, PRC1.6/RING1B and DNAm, with H3K9me3 and DNAm establishment dependent upon MGA binding. Thus, GGD genes are initially repressed by PRC1.6, with DNAm subsequently engaged in post-implantation embryos.

Introduction

DNA methylation (DNAm) plays an essential role in transcriptional regulation in development and disease¹. This epigenetic mark is highly dynamic during embryonic development, with a genome-wide wave of demethylation occurring after fertilization, mediated at least in part by dioxygenases ten-eleven translocation (TET) protein family². Subsequently, a wave of global de novo DNAm occurs during post-implantation epiblast formation, mediated by DNMT3A and DNMT3B^{3,4}. While DNAm is generally maintained at high levels in somatic lineages⁵, another wave of demethylation occurs early in germ cell development in both males and females⁶. During this period, many genes, including those essential for meiosis and gametogenesis, are upregulated. Strict temporal regulation of such germline genes is clearly critical for normal development, as their ectopic expression in somatic cells can contribute to tumorigenesis^{7,8}. Furthermore, premature activation of germline genes in early germ cells, and in turn precocious induction of meiosis/gametogenesis pathways, leads to reduced germ cell numbers and infertility^{9–11}. The requirement for faithful regulation of germline genes likely explains the engagement of several distinct chromatin marks in their repression, including DNAm¹², H3K9me3¹³, and H2AK119ub1¹⁴.

In contrast to the vast majority of CpG island (CGI) promoters, a subset of germline genes harbor CGI promoters that are de novo methylated between embryonic day (E) 4.5 and E6.5, yielding a high level of DNAm in the epiblast and early embryo^{3,4}. While the CGI promoter regions of these genes are demethylated in PGCs coincident with the wave of genome-wide DNA demethylation, they remain hypermethylated in somatic tissues^{15–17}. Indeed, 137 germline genes that acquire dense promoter DNAm in wildtype (WT) embryos by E6.5 are de-repressed in *Dnmt3a/3b*-double knock-out (DKO) embryos at E8.5¹². This list of DNAm-sensitive (DMS) germline genes includes many that encode proteins involved in the repression of transposable elements (TEs), such as piRNA biogenesis factors. A

number of these germline “genome-defence” (GGD) genes, including *Dazl*, *Ddx4*, *Mael*, *Mov10l1*, *Piwi12*, *Slc25a31*, *Taf7l* and *Tex19.1*, were also previously reported to be regulated by promoter DNAm in E9.5 murine embryonic fibroblasts (MEFs)¹⁸. Similarly, Hill et al. identified an overlapping set of “germline reprogramming-responsive” genes that are upregulated in developing PGCs coincident with their demethylation¹⁹. Notably, a subset of these genes harbor E2F consensus (TCCCGC) motifs in their promoter regions and are bound by E2F6 in somatic cells^{20,21}. While it has been speculated that DNMT3B recruitment through E2F6 transcriptional repressor mediates germline gene silencing in mouse somatic tissues²², DNMT3A and DNMT3B act in a redundant manner to methylate the CGI promoters of such genes in mouse peri-implantation embryos⁴.

While DNAm in the promoter region of a subset of germline genes, including GGD genes, clearly plays a role in their repression post-implantation, many of the same genes are marked by H3K9me3. As these genes show loss of H3K9me3 and are upregulated in primed ESCs (pESCs) deficient in the lysine methyltransferase (KMTase) SETDB1, this histone post-translational modification (PTM) is also clearly involved in their silencing¹³. Indeed, H3K9me3 is recognized and bound by HP1 proteins and triple KO (TKO) of *Cbx1*, *Cbx3* and *Cbx5* genes, which encode the three mammalian HP1 isoforms HP1 β , HP1 γ and HP1 α , also leads to de-repression of germline genes in pESCs²³. While SETDB1-mediated silencing of TEs is dependent upon its canonical binding partner TRIM28/KAP1 and DNA-binding proteins of the KRAB-ZFP superfamily^{24–28}, evidence for a non-canonical SETDB1 recruitment pathway dependent upon the DNA-binding factor MAX was recently reported in pESCs²⁹. MAX binds to E-box sites (CACGTG) when heterodimerized with its partner MGA³⁰, via an interaction between their basic helix-loop-helix leucine-zipper (bHLHZ) domains. Binding of this heterodimer represses the transcription of genes harboring the E-box motif, including many germline genes^{31,32}. Consistent with the importance of the bHLHZ domain, MGA/MAX-mediated silencing of germline genes is alleviated in male germ cells at least in part by the expression prior to the onset of meiosis of a truncated form of MGA that lacks this domain³³. Notably, the promoters of many germline genes harbor both E-box and E2F consensus motifs^{32,34}, indicating that the H3K9me3 and DNAm silencing pathways may converge at these genes. However, binding of MGA/MAX is inhibited by DNAm^{35–37}, suggesting that MGA/MAX-mediated silencing may occur prior to the wave of global de novo DNAm that occurs at implantation.

In addition to their reported roles in promoting H3K9me3 and DNAm, E2F6, MAX and MGA are core subunits of the non-canonical PRC1 repressor complex PRC1.6^{31,38–40}, which is essential for embryonic viability^{20,31,34,41–46}. PRC1.6 is abundant in pESCs⁴⁷ and recruited to germline genes, dependent upon MGA and/or E2F6^{14,20,31,32,45,48–52}. Deletion of *Mga*, *Max* or *E2f6* leads to derepression of an overlapping set of germline genes in pESCs or somatic cells^{20,49,51}, with loss of MGA in particular leading to dramatic upregulation^{31,32}. Deletion of PRC1.6 subunits *L3mbt12* or *Rybp* in ESCs also leads to upregulation of an overlapping set of germline genes^{45,50}. Furthermore, deletion of the genes encoding PRC1.6 catalytic subunits RING1A/B, which ubiquitylate H2A at lysine 119 (H2AK119ub1)¹⁴, or PCGF6, which promotes RING1A/B catalytic activity^{31,52}, leads to upregulation of many PRC1.6 bound germline genes, including

GGD genes. However, as pESCs are a population of mixed cellular differentiation states^{53–55}, it is difficult to determine the temporal order in which these silencing marks act or the role of interactions between them in mediating gene silencing. Of note, several of these germline genes are robustly de-repressed in adult liver or brain in *Pcgf6* KO mice³⁴, indicating that PRC1.6 is required for silencing of such genes even in tissues in which their promoter regions are hypermethylated.

These observations indicate that repression of germline genes during mouse embryonic development is mediated at least in part by three epigenetic marks: DNAm_e, deposited by DNMT3A/3B; H3K9me₃, deposited by SETDB1; and H2AK119ub₁, deposited by PRC1.6 subunits RING1A/B. However, a number of questions concerning the specific developmental stages in which these silencing complexes are engaged and the interplay between them remain to be addressed. Furthermore, although the PRC2 complex, including JARID2, EED and the H3K27 KMTase EZH1/2, is recruited to PRC1-targeted genes, the role H3K27me₃ plays in the silencing of germline genes has not been studied in detail^{56,57}.

Here, we characterize the dynamics of DNAm_e, H3K9me₃, H3K27me₃ and H2AK119ub₁ in the early embryo, as well as in vitro using the naïve ESCs (nESCs; cultured in 2i; inhibitors PD0325901 and CHIR99021) to epiblast-like cell (EpiLC) to PGC-like cell (PGCLC) culture system. Consistent with the observations that MGA/MAX both recruit PRC1.6 and associate with H3K9me₃^{58,59}, we find that H2AK119ub₁ and H3K9me₃ mark the promoter regions of GGD genes during pre-implantation stages, prior to their de novo DNAm_e. Furthermore, KO of core/catalytic subunits of each of the previously implicated repressive complexes in nESCs and EpiLCs reveals that PRC1.6 subunits MGA and PCGF6 are required for SETDB1-mediated H3K9me₃ at bound GGD genes. Finally, consistent with their dynamics in vivo, we demonstrate that H2AK119ub₁ and H3K9me₃ are generally more important for silencing of GGD genes than DNAm_e in nESCs, while DNAm_e plays a more pronounced role in EpiLCs. Taken together, these observations suggest that PRC1.6 and SETDB1 are essential for silencing of GGD genes during pre-implantation embryonic development, prior to the establishment of DNAm_e, while DNAm_e is engaged in silencing only after implantation.

Results

Roles of DNAm_e, H3K9me₃ and H2AK119ub₁ in repression of germline genes in pESCs. Three distinct epigenetic marks, including DNAm_e, H3K9me₃ and H2AK119ub₁, deposited by de novo DNMT3A/3B, SETDB1 and PRC1.6, respectively, have been previously implicated in silencing of germline genes in pESCs and/or somatic cells in mice (Fig. 1A). To determine whether the 137 DMS germline genes upregulated in E8.5 *Dnmt3a/3b* DKO embryos¹² (Supplementary Data 1) are hypermethylated as well as bound by SETDB1 and PRC1.6 in pESCs, we reanalyzed a series of published whole-genome bisulphite sequencing (WGBS) and ChIP-seq datasets (Supplementary Data 2). As expected, the CGI promoter regions of most DMS germline genes, including all GGD genes¹⁸, are methylated in E8.5 embryos as well as pESCs (Fig. 1B-C and Supplementary Fig. 1A-B). However, not all of the 137 DMS germline genes are enriched for MGA/MAX and/or E2F6 (Fig. 1B- C, Supplementary Fig. 1C), consistent with the fact that 82

and 97 of these genes include E-box or E2F motifs, respectively, in their promoter regions, with only 61 including both motifs (Supplementary Fig. 1D and Supplementary Data 1). Manual curation of the function of the 40 genes in ESCs enriched for both MGA (RPKM > 2) and E2F6 (RPKM > 1) and showing > 30% DNAm in the promoter region revealed 18 associated with meiosis and 16 associated with genome-defence/piRNA biogenesis (Supplementary Data 3), including all GGD genes. Intriguingly, the DNAm level of these MGA and E2F6 bound genes is generally lower than that of the DMS germline genes that are not bound by these transcription factors (TFs), a trend also observed in E8.5 embryos (Fig. 1B and Supplementary Fig. 1B).

Many of the DMS germline and all GGD genes are also enriched for H3K9me3, SETDB1 and HP1 β (Fig. 1C-D and Supplementary Fig. 1E), as well as H2AK119ub1 and PRC1.6 complex subunits PCGF6 and RING1B (Fig. 1C, Fig. 1E and Supplementary Fig. 1F). These regions are also enriched for H3K27me3 and the PRC2 complex subunit EED (Supplementary Fig. 1G), likely reflecting H2AK119ub1-dependent recruitment of PRC2^{14,60}. TRIM28, on the other hand, showed only low levels of enrichment at DMS germline gene promoters, including those with high H3K9me3 (Fig. 1C and Supplementary Fig. 1E), consistent with a non-canonical mechanism of SETDB1 recruitment to these loci. Indeed, co-enrichment of H2AK119ub1 and H3K9me3 is relatively rare at genic promoters (Supplementary Fig. 1H). Thus, PRC1.6 bound genes, including GGD genes, are marked by an unusual combination of repressive histone PTMs and intermediate levels of DNAm in pESCs.

To determine whether these repressive complexes play a role in silencing of DMS germline (and in particular GGD) genes in pESCs, we next reanalyzed a series of published RNA-seq data (Supplementary Data 2), where key subunits of each of the complexes described above were depleted. Strikingly, DMS GGD genes as well as other methylated germline genes bound by MGA and/or enriched for H3K9me3 or H2AK119ub1 were de-repressed upon KO or knock-down (KD) not only of *Mga*, *Max* and *Dnmt3a/3b*, but also of *Setdb1*, *Cbx1/3/5* and *Pcgf6* (Fig. 2A-D and Supplementary Fig. 2A-C). These observations are consistent with previous studies showing that a subset of the DMS germline genes, including GGD genes, are de-repressed in pESCs following KO of *L3mbtl2*, another core PRC1.6 subunit^{40,45,61}. To determine whether H2AK119ub1 is required for silencing, we generated a *Ring1b* conditional (c)KO line. GGD genes in particular were upregulated following *Ring1b* deletion in pESCs (Fig. 2E), to levels similar to those observed in *Pcgf6* cKO pESCs (Fig. 2D and Supplementary Fig. 2C). In contrast, only modest upregulation of GGD genes was observed in *Trim28* cKO ESCs (Supplementary Fig. 2B), consistent with the absence of KAP1 binding at these genes (Fig. 1C and Supplementary Fig. 1D). Similarly, no upregulation of DMS germline genes was observed in *Eed* cKO ESCs (Supplementary Fig. 2C), indicating that H3K27me3, while enriched at PRC1.6 bound promoters, is not required for silencing of these genes. These results suggest that in pESCs, repression of a subset of DMS germline genes is dependent not only upon DNAm, but also on MGA/MAX, SETDB1 and the canonical PRC1.6 complex. However, as pESCs are a mixed population of cells at distinct differentiation states^{53–55}, it is not possible to deduce either the temporal order in which these silencing complexes act during development, or their inter-dependencies in mediating such silencing.

H2AK119ub1, H3K9me3 and H3K27me3 are sequentially deposited prior to *de novo* DNAm at DMS germline genes To investigate the dynamics of these histone PTMs as well as DNAm at DMS germline genes during early embryonic/PGC development, we analyzed previously published genome-wide datasets from 2-cell, morula, inner cell mass (ICM), epiblast, and E9.5 PGCs and carried out H3K9me3 ULI-ChIP-seq⁶² for E9.5 PGCs (Fig. 3A). In the promoter regions of many DMS germline gene loci, H2AK119ub1, H3K9me3 and H3K27me3 are already present in the ICM or earlier stages (Fig. 3B, Supplementary Fig. 3A), with H2AK119ub1 deposited at DMS germline and GGD genes as early as the 2-cell stage, followed by H3K9me3 in morula and ICM and H3K27me3 in ICM and E6.5 epiblast^{63,64} (Supplementary Fig. 3A-B). In contrast, DNAm is not deposited at these loci until the epiblast stage, as expected (Fig. 3B). As observed in pESCs, MGA and E2F6 bound genes show a lower level of DNAm in E6.5 epiblast than most other DMS germline genes (Supplementary Fig. 3C). While H2AK119ub1, H3K9me3 and H3K27me3 persist at DMS germline genes following implantation, H3K9me3 and H3K27me3 progressively decrease at these genes in PGCs, coincident with their DNA demethylation and upregulation in E13.5 PGCs (Fig. 3B-C). Thus, H2AK119ub1 and H3K9me3 are deposited prior to *de novo* DNAm at many DMS germline gene promoters, including all GGD genes, implicating DNA methylation-independent repression of these loci during pre-implantation development.

To further characterize the roles of these chromatin marks, we employed the PGCLC culture system⁶⁵, in which nESCs, EpiLCs, day (d)4–6 PGCLCs and d4 plus 7 days of culture (d4c7) PGCLCs represent the *in vitro* counterparts of E3.5 ICM, E6.5 epiblast, E9.5–11.5 PGCs and E13.5 PGCs, respectively (Fig. 3A). As expected, while DNAm levels in nESCs are relatively low in the promoter regions of DMS germline genes, H2AK119ub1, H3K9me3 and H3K27me3 are clearly enriched at a subset of these genes, including GGD genes (Fig. 3B and Supplementary Fig. 3A-B). Consistent with PRC1.6 binding at their promoter regions, the enrichment of H2AK119ub1 in nESCs and EpiLCs is positively correlated with the enrichment levels of MGA and E2F6, as measured in pESCs and nESCs, respectively (Supplementary Fig. 3C).

Following EpiLC induction, these loci are *de novo* methylated and retain each of these histone PTMs, with enrichment modestly increased relative to nESCs. Mirroring the E6.5 epiblast, DNAm levels in EpiLCs are still lower at MGA and E2F6 bound genes (including GGD genes) relative to most other genes, including DMS germline genes that are not bound by these TFs (Supplementary Fig. 3D). These observations indicate that PRC1.6 bound promoters are refractory to the wave of *de novo* DNAm that occurs during epiblast formation. H2AK119ub1, H3K9me3 and H3K27me3 are subsequently reduced in d4-6 PGCLCs, while DNAm persists (Fig. 3B and Supplementary Fig. 3A-B). Despite the increase in repressive marks in EpiLCs, expression of the majority of the GGD genes transiently increases in EpiLC relative to nESCs, perhaps due to the simultaneous upregulation of positive regulatory factors that bind to their CGI promoters (Fig. 3C). Regardless, these genes are then downregulated in d4 PGCLCs, before their upregulation again in d4c7 PGCLCs, as expected. Based on these observations, we subsequently employed the nESC/EpiLC/PGCLC system to model the relative importance of and crosstalk between each repressive pathway during pre- and post-implantation development.

DNAme plays a more important role in silencing of DMS germline genes in EpiLCs than nESCs. Analysis of previously generated WGBS data from DNMT deficient E6.5 epiblast cells⁶⁶ revealed a dramatic reduction in DNAme at DMS germline genes in both *Dnmt1* KO and *Dnmt3a/3b* DKO embryos (Fig. 4A-B), confirming the importance of de novo DNAme at this stage. As observed in the ICM to epiblast transition, EpiLCs also show much higher levels of DNAme in the promoter regions of DMS germline genes than the nESCs from which they are derived^{67,68}. However, nESCs show a modestly higher level of DNAme in these regions than E3.5 ICM (Fig. 4A-B). Notably, pESCs express DNMT3A as well as TET1, which mediates oxidation of 5-methylcytosine (5mC) to 5-hydroxymethylcytosine (5hmC) in an active DNA demethylation pathway⁶⁹. As bisulphite sequencing cannot discriminate between 5mC and 5hmC, we surmised that the low level of DNAme observed in DMS germline genes in nESCs may reflect the presence of both 5mC and 5hmC. Analysis of previously published 5hmCIP-seq data⁷⁰ revealed that relative to all other genes in nESCs, the promoters of DMS germline genes, including GGD genes, are enriched for 5hmC (Supplementary Fig. 4A-B). Surprisingly, the levels of 5hmC enrichment are similar between nESCs and EpiLCs, and analysis of previously published ChIPseq data also reveals similar levels of TET1 enrichment between these cell types^{70,71}. Taken together with the fact that WGBS indicates significantly higher levels of DNAme in EpiLCs, these data suggest that the ratio of 5hmC to 5mC is higher in nESCs. Closer inspection of these loci reveals that 5hmC and TET1 peaks overlap with each other and with MGA/MAX and E2F6 in the promoter region, corresponding to regions of reduced DNAme relative to flanking CpGs (Supplementary Fig. 4C). Thus, the low levels of DNAme observed in the promoter regions of GGD genes in nESCs represents a combination of 5mC and 5hmC, likely reflecting reiterative de novo DNAme followed by oxidation of this mark under these culture conditions.

To directly address the role of DNAme in silencing of DMS germline genes in nESCs, we employed a line harboring floxed alleles of *Dnmt1*, *Dnmt3a* and *Dnmt3b*⁷². Following the addition of 4-hydroxytamoxifen (4OHT) for four days, RNA-seq was conducted on control or *Dnmt1/3a/3b* conditional triple (cT)KO nESCs, or EpiLCs (isolated after two days of differentiation) (Fig. 4C). As expected, given the low levels of DNAme in nESCs, only 14/137 DMS germline genes showed > 30% promoter DNAme in control nESCs and were upregulated in *Dnmt* cTKO nESCs (Fig. 4D). The observed upregulation of the GGD genes *Dazl* and *Piwil2*, as well as the control gene *Hoxb1* (Fig. 4D-E), is likely an indirect effect, as each of these genes show very low levels of DNAme in nESCs. In contrast, 74/137 DMS germline genes showed > 30% promoter DNAme in control EpiLCs and were upregulated in *Dnmt* cTKO EpiLCs (Fig. 4D). These include GGD genes *Slc25a31*, *Taf7l* and *Tex19.1*, which were only modestly upregulated in DNAme deficient nESCs (Fig. 4E). Intriguingly, the remaining GGD genes *Ddx4*, *Mael* and *Mov10l1*, which ranged in promoter DNAme levels from 5.5–21.3% and 19.5–67.3% in WT nESCs and EpiLCs, respectively, remained repressed following *Dnmt* cTKO in both cultures. Thus, consistent with the wave of global de novo DNAme that takes place with EpiLC induction, DNAme play a more important role in silencing of DMS germline genes in EpiLCs than nESCs, including several GGD genes. However, a subset of GGD genes is silenced independent of DNAme even in EpiLCs.

PRC1.6 plays a more important role than DNAm in silencing of GGD genes in nESCs. To investigate the potential roles of H3K9me3 and H2AK119ub1 in the regulation of DMS germline genes, we carried out ChIP-seq on a line that expresses a truncation mutant of MGA from the native locus that lacks the bHLHZ domain⁷³, as well as *Setdb1*- and *Pcgf6* cKO nESCs and EpiLCs. As conditional KO of *Setdb1* in nESCs leads to a dramatic reduction in viability by day three in culture⁷⁴, cKO lines were harvested following two days of 4OHT treatment (Supplementary Fig. 5A). Strikingly, H3K9me3 levels were reduced at DMS germline and GGD genes in both nESCs and EpiLCs of all three mutant lines (Fig. 5A), with the effect more pronounced for *Mga*-ΔHLH and *Pcgf6* cKO in EpiLCs. Thus, both the bHLHZ DNA-binding domain of MGA and the PCGF6 core subunit of PRC1.6 are required for SETDB1 recruitment and/or activity at these loci. While H2AK119ub1 at DMS germline and GGD genes was also significantly reduced in *Pcgf6* cKO nESCs and EpiLCs, as expected, this mark was unaffected in the *Mga*-ΔHLH and *Setdb1* cKO lines (Fig. 5B). This suggests that neither MGA bHLHZ-dependent E-box-binding nor SETDB1 are required for persistence of H2AK119ub1 at these loci.

RNA-seq analyses of these KO nESCs and EpiLCs revealed varying levels of de-repression of DMS germline genes (Fig. 5C and Supplementary Data 4). *Mga*-ΔHLH showed the most consistent upregulation of GGD genes in nESCs and EpiLCs (Fig. 5D). *Dnmt* cTKO in nESCs resulted in only modest upregulation of most GGD genes when compared to *Mga*-ΔHLH and *Pcgf6* cKO nESCs. For several of these genes, DNAm is apparently dispensable for silencing in EpiLCs as well, whereas PRC1.6 is required for transcriptional repression in both nESCs and EpiLCs. However, for 3 of the GGD genes, namely *Slc25a31*, *Taf7l* and *Tex19.1*, a more robust upregulation is clearly evident in *Dnmt* cTKO EpiLCs than nESCs. Consistent with this trend, DESeq2-based TCC (Tag Count Comparison) analysis⁷⁵ of *Dnmt* cTKO EpiLCs yielded 70 upregulated DMS germline genes, versus only 28 in *Dnmt* cTKO nESCs (Supplementary Data 4). The increased level of DNAm in the CGI promoter regions of these genes (Fig. 4E) is likely responsible for the greater impact of *Dnmt* cTKO in EpiLCs. Furthermore, the engagement of DNAm-mediated repression may explain the reduced impact of *Pcgf6* deletion on expression of all of the GGD genes in EpiLCs relative to nESCs (Fig. 5D).

As *Pcgf6* deletion disrupted both H2AK119ub1 and H3K9me3 deposition, we next wished to determine the relative importance of these histone PTMs in transcriptional repression. We carried out RNA-seq on *Setdb1* cKO, *Ring1b* cKO as well as *Setdb1/Ring1b* (*Set/Ring*) cDKO nESCs and EpiLCs, as above (Supplementary Fig. 5A). DESeq2-based TCC analysis yielded a similar number of upregulated DMS germline genes in *Ring1b* cKO versus *Pcgf6* cKO nESCs or EpiLCs (Supplementary Fig. 5B and Supplementary Data 4). However, DMS germline and GGD genes showed a greater level of de-repression in *Setdb1/Ring1b* cDKO than individual *Ring1b* or *Setdb1* cKO nESCs and EpiLCs (Fig. 5C-D and Supplementary Fig. 5C-D), with the fold-increase in expression for many GGD genes in *Setdb1/Ring1b* cDKO nESCs similar to that observed in *Pcgf6* cKO nESCs (Fig. 5D and Supplementary Fig. 5D). These results suggest that RING1B and SETDB1 act in a combinatorial manner to repress PRC1.6 bound genes and are consistent with the observation that loss of PCGF6 disrupts both H2AK119ub1 and H3K9me3 deposition. However, unlike the *Pcgf6* cKO, *Setdb1/Ring1b* cDKO EpiLCs show a level of de-repression

that does not decrease relative to nESCs, indicating that SETDB1 is still essential for robust silencing of these genes even in the presence of a higher level of DNAm in their promoter regions.

Intriguingly, the fold-change in expression of most GGD genes in *Mga*-ΔHLH EpiLCs far exceeds that observed in EpiLCs generated from the other KO lines (Fig. 5D and Supplementary Fig. 5D), indicating that MGA/MAX may act at the nexus of PRC1.6, SETDB1 and de novo DNAm. To determine whether MGA is indeed required for de novo DNAm, we isolated genomic DNA from *Mga*-ΔHLH EpiLCs and conducted bisulphite sequencing on the CGI promoter regions of *Mael* and *Mov10l1*. Relative to control EpiLCs, DNAm levels decreased significantly at both genes, as observed in *Dnmt* cTKO EpiLCs (Fig. 5E, Supplementary Fig. 6A-B). Since these genes are not de-repressed in *Dnmt* cTKO EpiLCs (Fig. 4E, Fig. 5D), these observations indicate that even when present, DNAm is not necessarily required for silencing of GGD genes in EpiLCs. Only a moderate decrease or no change in DNAm was observed in these regions in *Pcgf6*-, *Setdb1*- or *Ring1b* cKO EpiLCs (Fig. 5D and Supplementary Fig. 6A-B), indicating that H3K9me3 and H2AK119ub1 may play redundant roles in potentiating *de novo* DNAm of these loci. To directly address whether PRC1.6 is indeed required for de novo DNAm of DMS germline gene promoter regions *in vivo*, we reanalyzed published WGBS data from *Ring1b* or *L3mbtl2* KO E6.5 epiblast⁶⁶. A subset of these DMS germline genes showed a modest decrease in DNAm in both KOs relative to controls, though not to the extent observed in *Dnmt3a/3b* DKO E6.5 epiblast (Fig. 5F). This includes the promoter regions of all GGD genes, with the exception of *Dazl*, which retains high levels of DNAm in both mutants (Fig. 5G). Taken together, these observations suggest that MGA/MAX binding potentiates *de novo* DNAm at DMS germline genes during epiblast formation, likely via establishment of a repressed chromatin state.

Discussion

By integrating numerous previously published datasets from pre-implantation stages, we show that H2AK119ub1, H3K9me3 and H3K27me3 sequentially accumulate in the promoter regions of DMS germline genes bound by MGA/MAX and E2F6 in ESCs, followed by de novo DNAm in the epiblast (Fig. 6). The deposition of these histone PTMs prior to the establishment of DNAm is consistent with roles for PRC1.6 and SETDB1 prior to and independent of DNAm-mediated silencing. To study the relative importance of these repressive marks, we utilized the nESC-EpiLC-PGCLC *in vitro* differentiation system. As expected given their hypomethylated state, most DMS germline genes were not de-repressed in *Dnmt* cTKO nESCs. On the other hand, many of these genes were upregulated in nESCs expressing an MGA mutant incapable of binding to E-box sites, or following deletion of *Pcgf6* or *Ring1b*, confirming the critical role that MGA/PRC1.6 plays in silencing of bound germline genes even in the presence of low levels of DNAm (Fig. 6). Of note however, E-box-mediated binding of MGA/MAX at a subset of germline genes is dispensable for the persistence of H2AK119ub1, implying that E2F6 binding may be sufficient for recruitment of PRC1.6 and in turn H2AK119ub1 deposition at these loci⁴⁸.

Consistent with the global increase in DNAm in epiblast, most of these germline genes showed a dramatic increase in DNAm in WT EpiLCs, and a subset were de-repressed in *Dnmt* cTKO EpiLCs. This

includes several GGD genes that are also upregulated in both nESCs and EpiLC following deletion of PRC1.6 subunits, indicating that both DNAm and H2AK119ub1 may be simultaneously engaged in silencing of germline genes in some developmental contexts, such as in epiblast cells. As germline genes are also upregulated in adult liver and brain in *Pcgf6* KO mice³⁴, DNAm-dependent silencing clearly does not always supersede PRC1.6-mediated silencing following gastrulation. Additional studies will be required to determine the relative importance of these epigenetic marks in silencing of germline genes in somatic tissues.

We show that de novo DNAm of the CGI promoters of several germline genes in EpiLCs is dependent on the MGA bHLHZ domain (Fig. 6). This observation is consistent with our recent report showing that a few dozen germline genes, including *Ddx4* and *Dazl*, show reduced DNAm following *Max* KD in pESCs²⁹. Thus, the establishment of DNAm at the peri-implantation stage may depend upon MGA/MAX binding to the E-box motif and subsequent recruitment of PRC1.6 and SETDB1. Indeed, the promoter regions of most GGD genes also show reduced DNAm in *Ring1b* or *L3mbtl2* KO E6.5 epiblast⁶⁶, albeit to a lesser extent than observed in *Mga*-ΔHLH EpiLCs. However, as DNAm of the E-box motif inhibits MGA/MAX binding^{35–37}, active DNA demethylation may be essential for MGA/MAX recruitment in tissues expressing relatively high levels of the de novo DNMTs.

As the promoter regions of many germline genes that lack E-box or E2F motifs are efficiently de novo methylated, the presence of H2AK119ub1 and H3K9me3 is clearly not a prerequisite for the establishment of DNAm. Indeed, we find that the subset of DMS germline genes bound by MGA/MAX and E2F6 actually show delayed DNAm both in vitro and in vivo relative to the DMS germline genes not enriched for PRC1.6. While H2AK119ub1 and/or H3K9me3 may play a direct role in recruitment of the de novo DNMTs, inhibition of H3K4me3 may also play a critical role in potentiating their de novo DNAm. Alternative repressive pathways that inhibit H3K4 methylation likely potentiate de novo DNAm of the DMS germline genes not targeted by PRC1.6. As H3K36 di- and tri-methylation also promotes de novo DNAm^{76–78}, this histone PTM may also play a role at germline genes, but this remains to be determined.

Recent reports reveal that H2AK119ub1 is deposited in 2-cell stage embryos as early as E1.5, with enrichment of H3K27me3 only clearly evident at most Polycomb targets, in E3.5 ICM^{63,64}. The germline genes studied here show similar kinetics of accumulation of these marks, indicating that PRC1.6, like other non-canonical PRC1 complexes, is likely bound to its target regions very early in embryonic development. Deposition of these and other repressive marks at this stage may compensate for the permissive chromatin state associated with the global DNA demethylation that follows fertilization⁶. Embryonic acquisition of H2AK119ub1 is also observed in zebrafish embryos just before ZGA⁷⁹, indicating that early deposition of this mark may be conserved across species. While PRC1.6 and H2AK119ub1 play a critical role in silencing of MGA/MAX bound germline genes in pESCs, deletion of *Eed* had no effect. As this PRC2 subunit is essential for H3K27me3 deposition, H2AK119ub1 is clearly the more important Polycomb mark for silencing of these loci. This observation is consistent with a recent

study showing that deletion of *Eed* in pESCs abolishes H3K27me3 deposition but fails to recapitulate the transcriptional defects observed in the absence of RING1A/B¹⁴.

Although the roles of MGA/MAX and/or E2F6 in the recruitment of PRC1.6 or SETDB1 during early embryogenesis has not been established, mice lacking the gene encoding PRC1.6 subunits or *Setdb1* exhibit early embryonic lethality^{31,41,43,45,46,80}, which may be due to the precocious expression of specific genes, including DMS germline genes. Of note, Polycomb-dependent repression of germline genes is also observed in species that do not utilize CpG methylation. For example, mutations in *l(3)mbt*, a homolog of *L3mbtl2*, result in ectopic expression of germline genes in larval brain in *D. melanogaster*⁸¹. Similarly, LIN-61/L3MBTL2 plays a role in silencing of germline genes in somatic cells in *C. elegans*⁸². Notably, MET-2, the SETDB1 homolog in *C. elegans*, is also required for repression of germline genes in somatic tissues, via deposition of H3K9me2 (rather than H3K9me3) at their promoters⁸³. Thus, PcG proteins and H3K9 methylation may play an ancestral role in silencing of germline genes in metazoans, with DNAm engaged in the process in mammals only after implantation.

Here, we show that PCGF6 is required for H3K9me3 deposition at DMS germline genes in nESCs and EpiLCs. Consistent with this observation, mass spectrometry analyses revealed that PCGF6 interacts with SETDB1 in pESCs⁸⁴ and with H3K9me3 in several mouse tissues⁵⁸. However, as deletion of *Pcgf6* in ESCs also compromises MAX as well as RING1B chromatin loading⁴⁰, PCGF6 may play an indirect role in SETDB1 recruitment, via stabilization of the PRC1.6 complex at its target sites. Destabilization of PRC1.6 following deletion of PCGF6 likely explains why the fold-change in expression of MGA/MAX bound germline genes in *Pcgf6* KO EpiLCs is similar to that observed following *Setdb1/Ring1b* DKO, as deletion of *Ring1b* does not have the same destabilizing effect⁴⁰. Consistent with a direct role for MGA/MAX-mediated SETDB1 recruitment, MAX was recently shown to interact with SETDB1 via co-immunoprecipitation, and *Ddx4* and *Dazl* promoters showed reduced H3K9me3 in *Max* KD pESCs²⁹. However, a recent study suggests that SETDB1 may indirectly interact with PRC1.6, via its known binding partner ATF7IP⁸⁵. ATF7IP contains a C-terminal fibronectin type-III (FNIII) domain, which was shown to interact with MGA in pESCs via mass spectrometry. This mechanism of SETDB1 recruitment would explain why TRIM28 is dispensable for SETDB1-mediated silencing of DMS germline genes, while ATF7IP is required for their silencing⁸⁵. Regardless, our analyses reveal that MGA/MAX bound GGD genes are generally upregulated in *Setdb1* KO nESC and EpiLCs to a lesser extent than observed in the PRC1.6 subunit mutants, indicating that H3K9me3 plays an important but ancillary role in their silencing.

In summary, we show that H2AK119ub1 and H3K9me3 mark the hypomethylated CGI promoter regions of PRC1.6-bound DMS germline genes during pre-implantation stages, with de novo DNAm occurring at these regions only after implantation. Consistent with their kinetics in vivo, PRC1.6 and to a lesser extent SETDB1 play important roles in silencing of these genes in nESCs and EpiLCs, suggesting that H2AK119ub1 and H3K9me3 regulate DMS germline genes during pre-implantation embryonic development, prior to the establishment of DNAm. The atypical combination of these histone PTMs, which generally mark distinct genomic regions, and DNAm, likely serves to prevent precocious

expression of germline genes during early embryonic development, in the early germline and in somatic tissues, where expression of these genes would otherwise be deleterious.

Methods

Mice. The *Oct4::EGFP* transgenic mice⁸⁶ were maintained in a C57BL/6 genetic background. Mouse experiments were approved by the Animal Care Committee at the University of British Columbia (UBC) under certificate numbers A16-0230, A16-0269, A20-0229 and A20-0230, with the guidelines from the national Canadian Council on Animal Care (CCAC).

Isolation of PGCs. Embryos were obtained from the mating of wildtype C57BL/6 mice with C57BL/6 mice carrying an *Oct4::EGFP* transgene at appropriate embryonic days (noon of the day when a copulation plug was identified was designated as embryonic day 0.5 [E0.5]). E9.5 embryos were collected and dissected in DMEM supplemented with 10% fetal bovine serum (FBS). The hindgut endoderm regions that contained primordial germ cells (PGCs) were dissected from the embryos. Tissue fragments containing PGCs were incubated at 37°C for 5–8 minutes in 0.25% trypsin/0.5 mM EDTA/PBS with serial pipetting to obtain single-cell suspensions. After quenching the reaction with fetal bovine serum (FBS), cells were washed once with FACS buffer (0.1% BSA/PBS), counterstained with Propidium Iodide (PI) and passed through a 35 µm cell strainer (Falcon). FACS was carried out on a BD Influx. Following removal of doublet/triplet cells, OCT4::EGFP+ (PI-) cells were sorted into a 1.5 ml low-retention tube containing 500 µl of FACS buffer. Following centrifugation, the supernatant was removed, and the cells were snap-frozen in liquid nitrogen and kept at -80°C until use.

Mouse ESC lines. ESC lines were generated from respective blastocyst embryos as described previously⁸⁷. A published *Ring1b* conditional allele⁸⁸ was used to establish *Ring1b* cKO ESCs. This *Ring1b* conditional allele and a published *Setdb1* conditional allele²⁵ were used to establish *Setdb1/Ring1b* cDKO ESCs. EBRTcH3 ESCs (WT)⁸⁹ and their derivative *Mga*-ΔHLH ESCs⁷³, *Setdb1* cKO ESCs²⁵, *Pcgf6* cKO ESCs³¹ and *Dnmt1/3a/3b* cTKO ESCs⁷² were described previously. Male ESCs were used in this study. All cKO ESC lines express the Cre-oestrogen receptor fusion protein Cre-ERT2 or MER-Cre-MER, and the addition of 4-OHT eliminates each targeted gene.

Cell culture. EpiLC-PGCLC induction was performed essentially as described previously⁶⁵ with minor modifications. Briefly, pESCs were adapted to 2i (PD0325901, CHIR99021) + LIF feeder-free culture conditions to transit to nESCs. The EpiLCs were induced by plating nESCs in a well coated with human plasma fibronectin (Millipore) in N2B27 medium containing Activin A (R&D), bFGF (Gibco) and KnockOut Serum Replacement (KSR; Gibco). For cKO cells, 4-hydroxytamoxifen (4OHT; Sigma, dissolved in ethanol) at a final concentration of 100 nM was added to culture medium to induce Cre recombinase activity. RT-qPCR was performed to demonstrate depletion of mRNAs of the targeted genes in each cKO cell line upon treatment with 4-OHT as described below. The PGCLCs were induced under floating aggregation culture conditions by plating EpiLCs in a well of a low-cell-binding U-bottom 96-well plate (Nunc) in GMEM-based serum-free medium in the presence of the cytokines BMP4 (R&D), LIF (ESGRO; Chemicon),

SCF (R&D) and EGF (R&D). Cell aggregates including d4 PGCLCs were dissociated with TrypLE (10 minutes, 37°C) and incubated with anti-SSEA1 antibody (BioLegend) and anti-CD61 antibody (BioLegend) conjugated with Phycoerythrin (PE) and Alexa Fluor 647, respectively. Cells were washed with FACS buffer and passed through a 35 µm cell strainer. FACS was carried out on a BD Influx. Following removal of doublet/triplet cells, double positive PGCLCs were sorted into a 1.5 ml low-retention tube containing 500 µl of FACS buffer. Following centrifugation, the supernatant was removed, and the cells were snap-frozen in liquid nitrogen and kept at -80°C until use. *Ring1b* cKO pESCs were also cultured in DMEM (Kohjin-bio) with 20% fetal bovine serum (Sigma), MEM nonessential amino acids, L-glutamine, 2-mercaptoethanol, and LIF on mitomycin C-treated (Sigma) primary MEF feeder layers. For cKO, 4OHT was added to the medium to a final concentration of 800 nM.

RT-qPCR analysis. After extraction and purification, total RNA was reverse transcribed by Superscript IV (Thermo Fisher Scientific), and cDNA was used for quantitative PCR with the PowerUP SYBR Green PCR Master Mix (Applied Biosystems). PCR signal was detected by QuantStudio 3 (Applied Biosystems). The sequences of the PCR primers used in this study are listed in Supplementary Data 5.

Strand-specific total RNA-sequencing and transcriptome analysis. Total RNA was extracted from ten thousand nESCs or EpiLCs using the RNeasy Micro kit (Qiagen) with on-column DNase treatment. rRNA was depleted using the NEBNext rRNA Depletion Kit (NEB) and cDNA was synthesized using the NEBNext UltraII RNA First Strand Synthesis Module (NEB) and NEBNext UltraII Directional RNA Second Strand Synthesis Module (NEB). Following purification of double-stranded DNA by AMPure XP beads, libraries were constructed as described previously⁶², with minor modifications. Briefly, end repair and A-tailing were performed using NEBNext UltraII End Repair/dA-Tailing Module (NEB) and ligation was carried out using NEBNext Ultra II Ligation Module (NEB) with an in-house adaptor which is compatible with Illumina sequencers. The sequences of the adaptor oligo are listed in Supplementary Data 5. After purifying adaptor-ligated products by AMPure XP beads (Beckman Coulter), libraries were amplified with unique indexing primers for 12 cycles. Following purification of the amplified libraries by AMPure XP beads, libraries were pooled and run on a 2% E-Gel EX Gel (ThermoFisher Scientific). Fragments from 200–600 bp were excised and purified by Zymoclean Gel DNA Recovery Kit (Zymo Research). The concentration of pooled libraries was determined by qPCR using NEBNext Library Quant Kit for Illumina (NEB), adjusted to 4 nM and then sequenced on the NextSeq 500 platform with 76 paired-end high-output mode according to the manufacturer's instructions. Sequenced reads were then aligned to the mouse genome (mm10) and transcripts aligned using STAR⁹⁰ with `-sjdbGTFfile` and `-twopassMode Basic` options and then read counts and RPKM (reads per kilobase mapped reads) values for each of the genes were calculated using the RSEM program with default parameter⁹¹. For analyses of differential expression genes (DEGs) between WT and KO, we used TCC (Tag Count Comparison)-GUI, a robust DEG normalization program (<https://github.com/swsoyee/TCC-GUI>)⁷⁵ with default parameters (Number of Iteration = 3, FDR Cut-off = 0.1, Elimination of Potential DEGs = 0.05) using DESeq2 estimation⁹². Gene ontology analyses were performed with ShinyGO, a graphical gene-set enrichment tool (<http://bioinformatics.sdstate.edu/go/>)⁹³. For *Ring1b* cKO vs WT pESCs, total RNA was prepared from cultured cells using the Allprep DNA/RNA

mini kit (Qiagen) following vendor's instructions. Each RNA-seq library was prepared from 1 µg of total RNA, using the NEBNext Ultra Directional RNA Library Prep Kit for Illumina (NEB), following the supplier's instructions. Libraries were quantified with the KAPA Library Quantification Kit (Illumina). Samples were multiplexed and adjusted to 2 nM concentration, followed by Illumina HiSeq2000 sequencing. Reads were generated by 50 bp single end sequencing.

Ultra-low-input native chromatin immunoprecipitation (ULI-N-ChIP)-sequencing. The ULI-N-ChIP-seq protocol⁶² was used to generate ChIP-seq libraries, with minor modifications. Briefly, chromatin was fragmented with 3.33 units of Micrococcal Nuclease (NEB), diluted in native ChIP buffer (20 mM Tris-HCl pH 8.0; 2 mM EDTA; 150 mM NaCl; 0.1% Triton X-100) containing 1 mM PMSF and EDTA-free protease inhibitor cocktail (Roche) and sonicated three times with 5-second cycles with low power (Diagenode Bioruptor). Chromatin fragments were then split into two aliquots (~ 1000 cells/ChIP) and incubated with each of the histone methylation antibodies at 4°C overnight. Antibodies used for ChIP experiments were H3K9me3 (39161, Active Motif) and H2AK119ub1 (8240, Cell Signaling). Following purification of ChIPed DNA by AMPure XP beads, libraries were constructed, pooled and sequenced as described above. ChIP-seq reads were aligned to the mouse genome (mm10) using bwa⁹⁴. PCR duplicates were removed by Picard-tools (<http://broadinstitute.github.io/picard>) and reads with low mapping quality (MAPQ < 5) were excluded by Samtools (<http://www.htslib.org/>). Processed reads were then used for calculating RPKM values by VisR⁹⁵.

Bisulphite sequencing. Using the EZ DNA Methylation-Direct Kit (Zymo Research), bisulphite reactions were performed directly on ten thousand EpiLCs without DNA extraction. The sequences of the PCR primers designed with MethPrimer (<http://www.urogene.org/methprimer/index1.html>)⁹⁶. The sequences of the PCR primers are listed in Supplementary Data 5. The target regions were amplified by PCR with the EpiTaq HS DNA Polymerase (Takara) using the following conditions: after the first denaturation (3 minutes at 95°C), 40 cycles of 30 seconds at 94°C, 30 seconds at 60°C, 60 seconds at 72°C followed by 10 minutes at 72°C. The PCR products were cloned by TA cloning in the pGEM T-Easy vector (Promega) and 8–16 clones were sequenced. Sequence data were analyzed with the QUantification tool for Methylation Analysis (QUMA; <http://quma.cdb.riken.jp/top/index.html>)⁹⁷.

Analysis of publicly available data. All publicly available data listed in Supplementary Data 2 were reprocessed for consistency of data analyses. The sra format file downloaded from the Sequence Read Archive (SRA) was converted into fastq file format using sratoolkit (<https://github.com/ncbi/sra-tools>). Read quality was then assessed by FastQC and the reads were processed according to the experimental application, as described above.

Visualization. bedGraphToBigWig (UCSC) was used to convert bedgraph data to bigwig format for visualization. Graphs were generated by VisR⁹⁵ or Microsoft Excel. Genome browser screenshots were generated using IGV⁹⁸ and Venn diagrams were generated using DeepVenn (<https://www.deepvenn.com>).

Statistics. Two-tailed t-tests of two samples assuming unequal variances were performed when comparing levels of H3K9me3, H2AK119ub1 or DNAm at DMS germline genes, including GGD genes or their expression levels between KO and WT. Mann-Whitney U-tests were performed between KO and WT when comparing DNAm levels at the CGI promoters of GGD genes. Violin plots show the median (line inside the Violin), where 50% of the data are distributed.

Declarations

Data availability

The statistics of datasets generated in this study are summarized in Supplementary Data 6. ChIP-seq and RNA-seq data have been deposited in the Gene Expression Omnibus database under accession number GSE#####.

Acknowledgements

We thank J. Brind'Amour, S. Janssen, J. Richard Albert and K. Jensen for helpful discussions and technical assistance; L. Lefebvre (UBC) for critical reading of the manuscript; and T. Stach, R. Vander Werff, Y. Chung and Y. Zhao (BRC-seq, UBC) for deep sequencing and J. Wong and A. Johnson (ubcFLOW, UBC) for cell sorting. M.C.L. was supported by CIHR grants PJT-153049 and PJT-166170. K.M. was a recipient of an Uehara Memorial Foundation postdoctoral fellowship, a Nakatani Foundation technology exchange grant, a MEXT Fund for the Promotion of Joint International Research 17KK0185, a Mother & Child Health Foundation grant R01-1 and a Sumitomo Foundation grant 200304.

Author contributions

K.M. and M.C.L. conceived the experiments and wrote the paper with the help of K.S. and A.B. J.S. and H.K. generated the *Dnmt* cTKO, *Pcgf6*, *Ring1b* cKO and *Setdb1/Ring1b* cDKO ESC lines and performed RNA-seq in *Ring1b* cKO pESCs. K.U., A.S. and A.O. generated the *Mga*-ΔHLH ESC line. K.M. performed all other experiments and analyses.

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Figures

Figure 1

Repressive complexes and associated epigenetic marks acting on DMS germline genes in pESCs. (A) Three repressive complexes (I-III) which act on a subset of germline genes have been identified previously in primed (serum-grown) ESCs (pESCs) and/or somatic cells. The promoter regions of these genes are bound by heterodimers of the transcription factors MGA and MAX, which are recruited to E-Box sites as well as E2F6, which binds to E2F sites. Complex I: The de novo DNA methyltransferase DNMT3B is recruited to germline genes via MGA/MAX and/or E2F6. Complex II: The lysine (K)MTase SETDB1, which deposits H3K9me3, is recruited to germline genes dependent upon MAX. SETDB1 is known to interact with the co-repressor TRIM28. HP1 proteins are recruited to H3K9me3 marked regions. Complex III: The non-canonical PRC1 complex PRC1.6, including PCGF6, L3MBTL2, RYBP, HP1b/g and RING1A/B subunits, is recruited to germline genes by MGA/MAX and E2F6. RING1A/B deposit H2AK119ub1, which in turn is recognized by the PRC2 complex, promoting H3K27me3 deposition. (B) Scatterplot showing the relationship between the enrichment (RPKM) of MGA or E2F6 (dot size) and % DNAME (TSS -0.9/+0.4 kb). (C) Screenshots of ChIP-seq and WGBS tracks showing RPM values of the indicated subunits of each of the complexes described in (A) as well as histone PTMs and % DNAME at the TSSs (+/-3 kb) of genes in pESCs. E-Box motifs and E2F motifs are shown as arrowheads. Annotated CpG islands (CGIs) are also shown. (D-E) Scatterplots showing the relationship between (D) MGA and H3K9me3, or (E) MGA

and H2AK119ub1 (RPKM), around the TSSs (+/-2 kb) of all annotated genes in pESCs. In panels B, D and E, all genes are labelled in (grey) while the 137 DMS germline genes upregulated in Dnmt3a/3b DKO embryonic day 8.5 embryos¹² and subset categorized as germline “genome-defence” (GGD) genes (also upregulated in DNAm deficient MEFs¹⁸) are labelled in blue and red, respectively. Control genes *Hoxb1* (a canonical PRC1/2 target), *Pou5f1* (an actively transcribed gene), and *Peg3* (a TRIM28 target) are labelled in black. See Supplementary Data 2 for details of published datasets analyzed.

Figure 2

Depletion of key repressive complex subunits impacts expression of DMS germline genes in pESCs. (A-C) Scatterplots showing the fold-change (FC) of gene expression in knock-out (KO) or knock-down (KD) versus WT/control (Ctrl) pESCs (y-axis) for: (A) *Mga* KD versus MGA enrichment (RPKM, TSS +/-2 kb), (B) *Dnmt3a/3b* Double KO (*Dnmt3* DKO) versus % DNAm (TSS -0.9/+0.4 kb), (C) *Setdb1* conditional KO (cKO) versus H3K9me3 enrichment (TSS +/-2 kb). For A-C, ChIP-seq data are presented as RPKM values. (D) Bar graph showing the FC of gene expression in repressor complex subunit KO/KD pESCs relative to WT/Ctrl at GGD and control genes. (E) Scatterplot showing the FC of gene expression in *Ring1b* cKO versus H2AK119ub1 enrichment (RPKM, TSS +/-2 kb). The total number of genes in each category (in parentheses), as well as the number of genes showing a >2-fold increase in expression and MGA enrichment (RPKM >2), DNAm level >30%, H3K9me3 enrichment (RPKM >0.8) and H2AK119ub1 enrichment (RPKM >0.8), respectively, is shown at the top of each plot. All, DMS germline and GGD genes are color-coded as in panel A.

Figure 3

H2AK119ub1 and H3K9me3 precede DNAm at DMS germline genes during embryonic development and EpiLC induction. (A) Application of an *in vitro* differentiation system to model pre-implantation (ICM), post-implantation (epiblast) and primordial germ cell (PGC) development. Naïve (n)ESCs (cultured in 2i), EpiLCs, day (d)4-6 and d4 plus 7 days of culture (d4c7) PGCLCs correspond to embryonic day (E)3.5 inner cell mass (ICM), E6.5 epiblast (Epi), E9.5-11.5 and E13.5 PGCs, respectively. (B) Violin plots showing *in vivo* and *in vitro* dynamics of H2AK119ub1, H3K9me3 and H3K27me3 enrichment (TSS $\pm$ 2 kb) as well as DNAm levels (TSS -0.9/+0.4 kb) at 137 DMS germline (blue filled), 8 GGD (red data points) and all other gene loci (open). ND= no data. CUT&RUN and ChIP-seq data are presented as RPKM values. (C) Violin plots showing gene expression ($\log_2(\text{RPKM}+1)$) *in vivo* and *in vitro*, labelled as shown in panel B. See Supplementary Data 2 for details of published datasets analyzed.

Figure 4

DNAm plays a more important role in silencing of DMS germline genes in EpiLCs than nESCs. (A) Violin plots showing the distribution of DNAm levels in the promoter regions (TSS -0.9/+0.4 kb) of the 137 DMS germline (blue filled), 8 GGD (red data points) and all other gene loci (open) in E3.5 ICM and WT, Dnmt1-, Dnmt3a-, Dnmt3b- or Dnmt3a/3b double KO (DKO) E6.5 epiblast cells. Data for nESCs and EpiLCs are also shown. (B) Genome browser tracks showing % DNAm in the promoter regions (TSS +/-3 kb) of GGD gene loci at the developmental time points shown in panel A. For each WGBS track, regions highlighted in grey reflect the absence of DNAm data. (C) A schematic representation of the induction of Dnmt1/3a/3b conditional triple KO (cTKO) in nESCs and derived EpiLCs. To induce Dnmt cTKO, 4 -

hydroxytamoxifen (4OHT) was added at the indicated time points and cells were harvested for RNA-seq analysis at the time points indicated. (D) Scatterplots showing the fold-change (FC) of gene expression in cTKO nESCs (n=2) and EpiLC (n=2) versus % DNAm in the promoter region (TSS -0.9/+0.4 kb). All, DMS germline and GGD genes are color-coded as shown and the number of genes in each category showing % DNAm >30 and a concomitant >2-fold increase in expression is included at the top right of each plot. (E) Bar graph showing the FC of expression of GGD genes (red) and control genes (black) in nESCs and EpiLCs in Dnmt cTKO relative to WT cells. Error bars show SE of biological replicates. % DNAm in ESC(2i) and EpiLC in the promoter regions (TSS -0.9/+0.4 kb) of each gene are also shown.

Figure 5

Role of MGA, SETDB1 and PCGF6 in silencing and DNAm of DMS germline genes in nESCs and EpiLCs. (A-C) Violin plots showing the enrichment (RPKM) of H3K9me3 (TSS +/-1 kb) and H2AK119ub1 (TSS +/-2 kb) at 137 DMS germline (filled), 8 GGD (red data points) and all other gene loci (open) (A-B), as well as their expression levels ($\log_2(\text{RPKM}+1)$) (n=2) (C) in control (WT) nESCs and EpiLCs versus mutants (Mut) of the indicated repressor complex subunits. Two-sided paired-samples t-tests were performed for each mutant/cKO and WT pair of all DMS germline gene values. To induce *Setdb1* cKO or *Pcgf6* cKO, 4OHT was added for 48 hours during ESC(2i) culture or EpiLC induction (cKOd2). (D) Line graphs showing the FC ($\log_2$) in expression of GGD genes in nESCs and EpiLCs for each of the mutant/cKO lines indicated. Grey area represents FC <2. Error bars show SE of biological replicates. (E) Bar graphs showing the levels of DNAm in the promoter regions of *Mael* and *Mov10l1* in *Mga-ΔHLH*, *Dnmt* cTKO or *Pcgf6* cKO versus WT EpiLCs (see Supplementary Fig. 6). Mann-Whitney U-tests were performed between mutant and WT. (F) Violin plots showing DNAm profiles of the promoter regions (TSS +/-0.3 kb) of DMS germline, GGD and all other genes (labelled as in panel A) in WT, *Ring1b*- or *L3mbtl2* KO E6.5 epiblast cells. Two-sided paired-sample t-tests were performed for each KO and WT pair of all DMS germline gene values. (G) Graph showing the levels of DNAm in the promoter regions (TSS +/-0.3 kb) of GGD genes in WT versus *Ring1b*- or *L3mbtl2* KO E6.5 epiblast cells.

Figure 6

The order and crosstalk among repressive mechanisms acting at GGD genes during embryogenesis. PRC1.6/H2AK119ub1, SETDB1/H3K9me3 and PRC2/H3K27me3 (not shown) sequentially mark the CGI promoter regions of MGA and E2F6 bound GGD genes before implantation, with DNMT3A/3B-dependent de novo DNAm occurring at these regions only after implantation (~E6.5). In vitro modeling of this transition recapitulates de novo DNAm of these promoter regions following induction of EpiLCs from nESCs. SETDB1-mediated H3K9me3 in nESCs and subsequent de novo DNAm in EpiLCs at these loci are dependent on the bHLHZ DNA binding domain of MGA. PCGF6, a subunit of PRC1.6 is required for efficient deposition of H3K9me3 as well as H2AK119ub1 in nESCs and EpiLCs, but its deletion has a modest impact on de novo DNAm in EpiLCs relative to Mga- Δ HLLH. Germline genes are de-repressed to a greater extent in Pcgf6 cKO nESCs than EpiLCs. Double KO of Setdb1 and Ring1b in nESCs (not shown) also leads to robust de-repression of these genes.

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