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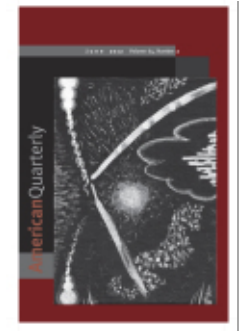
## **American Studies and the Politics of Life**

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## American Studies and the Politics of Life

*Priscilla Wald*

In February 1951 an African American woman named Henrietta Lacks sought treatment at the gynecology clinic of the Johns Hopkins University Hospital. She did not know that the symptoms that had brought her there signaled an exceptionally aggressive cervical cancer or that the mutating cells that were killing her would enable one of the most significant developments in twentieth-century medical science.<sup>1</sup> Lacks had surgery, and, consistent with contemporary practice, her cells were sent to researchers in the hospital. She had not signed a consent form, but at the time such forms were not conventional; her cells were fair game for the researchers. As it happened, the unusual robustness of these cells enabled them to survive and reproduce in a petri dish. It was the breakthrough for which the medical researchers George and Margaret Gey had been waiting. This immortal cell line, which they labeled HeLa for the “donor” from whom the cells had come, allowed for unprecedented experimentation. HeLa cells were instrumental in the development of the polio vaccine; they allowed scientists to study the effects of space travel and radiation exposure, and they have been used in medical research for diseases such as HIV. Anyone working in a biology lab for the past half century is likely to have worked with, or at least encountered, some incarnation of HeLa cells, yet in 1951 they were the material of an unprecedented biological entity produced in a laboratory.

Henrietta Lacks and her cells have been the subjects of speculation and fascination since the identity of the donor became widespread public knowledge in the mid-1970s. The story has been told in a variety of contexts and with multiple spins—most recently by the journalist Rebecca Skloot in her best-selling book, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*.<sup>2</sup> I begin with this story because it is a Baltimore story, an American story, and a global story. It is also a biotechnological story, which is to say that it entails the development of laboratory techniques and associated business interests that involved the production, use, and marketing of living organisms.

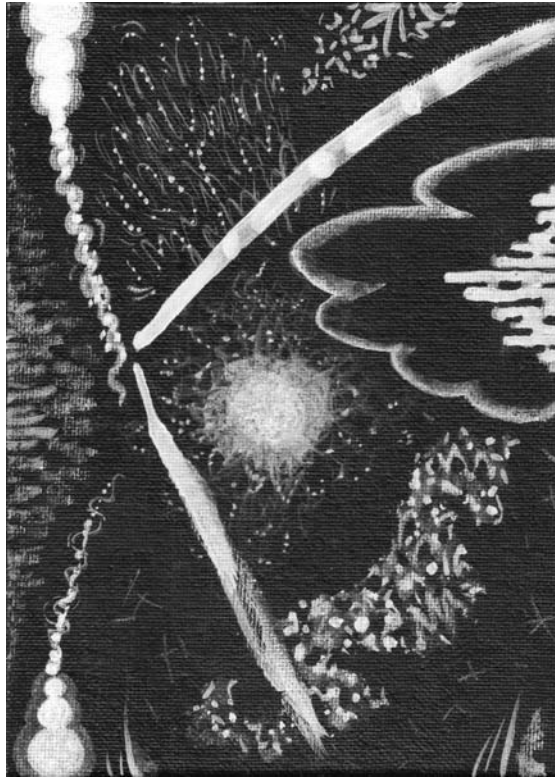
The new life form that the Geys brought into existence in their tissue culture laboratory, a converted janitors’ quarters in the hospital, summoned the

possibilities and dangers of human beings tampering with the essence of life forms that had long intrigued the literary imagination, from Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* to Nathaniel Hawthorne's "Rappacini's Daughter" and beyond. It raised the specter of the slippery definitions of life and the human and the long history of abuses that relied on and amplified that slipperiness. The HeLa cell line generated thorny ethical, social, and political dilemmas. The stories about Lacks and her cells illustrate the inextricability of medical scientific research from social existence as well as cultural production, economics, law, religious beliefs and practices, geopolitics, and pretty much any other aspect of human experience we can think of. That inextricability has been the assumption of the field of American studies at least since the inception of the American Studies Association, incorporated in 1951, the year of Lacks's death and the creation of the HeLa cell line.

Tonight I will tell the story of the creation of the cell line again. This time I will tell it as an American studies story for the insight offered by that perspective into how the many public stories of Lacks and the HeLa cells perpetuated the very confusion they sought to address. But American studies has stories of its own creation, too, and I am equally interested in this talk in using the HeLa cells as the starting point for a retelling of the story of American studies. In what follows, I want to explore how some of the key questions raised by the HeLa stories, especially concerning the question of the human, have been formative for American studies as well. I will begin with the challenges to the idea of the human that issued from both biotechnological innovation and the radical geopolitical metamorphoses of the post–World War II period. Theories of social justice that emerged from those challenges informed approaches to the study of American culture and led eventually to curricular reform. Drawing on a range of political theorists, I offer my account as a supplement to the institutional histories that track our field from the politics of the Cold War and area studies. I do not dispute those histories, but I do think they have obscured other trends that I want us to claim. The legacy of those trends is evident in what I see as an increasing turn in American studies from the familiar grounding terms of the citizen and the nation to the human and networks.

## Imagine

Henrietta Lacks died on a segregated ward at the Johns Hopkins University Hospital. Neither she nor her family knew of the major development in medical science her cells had enabled. The recent stories penned by journalists and



**Figure 1. Imagine.**

Brian Lucas, *Definitions*. Courtesy of Brian Lucas.

cultural critics have rightly focused on the questionable ethics of medical researchers who collected blood and tissue samples from family members without sufficiently explaining the nature of their research. These stories note as well that the family neither profited from the research nor could afford many of the treatments that the cells made possible. They evince a strong sense of medical iniquity, with an emphasis on the racism manifested in the medical establishment's treatment of Lacks and her family and in the public discussions that emerged after her identification as the donor of the cells.

It has been, however, difficult to identify and name the specific malfeasance. The uniqueness of her cells is not what makes her being on a segregated ward shameful, nor what should entitle her family to state-of-the-art health care. The properties of their cells should not entitle individuals to what should be basic expectations. Henrietta Lacks should not have been on the ward because

such a segregated space should never have existed, and her family should receive state-of-the-art health care because such care should be a basic entitlement. The special quality of her cells has brought Lacks and her family into public view and shone a light once more on the institutional legacy of racism, but that does not explain what makes the creation of the cell line so troubling.

The unresolved questions in the Lacks case involve definitions: what is a cell line, and what is its relation to the human donor?<sup>23</sup> The creation of an immortal human cell line (cells that can survive and reproduce outside the human body) was an important advance for scientific medicine. But it raised legal and ethical questions for which there were not yet answers. Three decades after the creation of the HeLa cell line, the courts tried to resolve that question in a landmark legal case involving the Mo cell line, named for John Moore, a white man whose cells, like Lacks's, were discovered to have unusual properties and were therefore converted into a cell line. Unlike HeLa, the Mo cell line was patented, and the researcher and the hospital profited from it. Moore had not been informed about the worth of his cells and had not consented to their use, and he sued the hospital and the researchers. The case turned on the question of the ownership of the cells, and, despite going through several courts, that question remains fundamentally unresolved. Efforts to resolve it have manifested profound anxieties surrounding the definitions of life and of the human that rapid advances in biotechnology have amplified.

Biotechnology became big business in the late 1970s and 1980s, after the development of recombinant DNA methods, which refers to the ability to combine and mass-produce genetic material from multiple sources. This was the stuff of science fiction: human beings creating genetically altered life forms in laboratories. Fascination mingled with fear about how these new life forms would change the biological ecosystems and social networks into which they were entering. The ethical, social, and legal implications of these innovations were debated in the press and from the pulpits, in the classrooms and the courtrooms. The biotech revolution, which permeated social existence in the United States, called attention to the ways in which organic life, including human life, could be transformed, manipulated, and commodified. Those debates coincided with geopolitical transformations that radically changed the map of the world and the relationships and interactions that it depicted. Questions about the fundamental nature of the human emerged from these innovations and transformations and formed the backdrop for theoretical formulations concerning the politics of life that have significantly shaped contemporary work in American studies. I refer here to the analyses associated both with the conception of "biopolitics" and with race theory and ethnic studies; I want to

suggest that these analyses have roots in common questions and have begun to come together in productive ways in American studies. These common roots constitute the legacy I am claiming for the field.

The politics of life invokes Michel Foucault and subsequent theorists who have engaged with “biopolitics” and “biopower,” the terms he coined to name the exercise of state power through the “administration of bodies and calculated management of life.”<sup>4</sup> The enormous impact of Foucault’s work has significantly removed this concept from its historical contexts, which has resulted in its dilution. The work of a range of political theorists writing from the late 1950s through the 1970s manifests a profound engagement with the definition, manipulation, and regulation of life. It is in the intersections among them that I find those common roots and a highly nuanced understanding of the politics of life.

In the wake of World War II, rapid technological advances in such areas as cybernetics, robotics, neuropsychology, and genetics all challenged conventional biological definitions of “the human,” while political theorists as diverse as Hannah Arendt and Frantz Fanon observed how readily human beings could be deprived of their status as human along with their allegedly natural rights. Both returned to eighteenth-century ideas about natural rights to make sense of what they saw as the failure of human rights. Grounding rights in nature rather than historical precedent represented, for Arendt, an abnegation of human agency and responsibility. The category of “displaced persons” in the years after World War I dramatized the contingency of natural (or human) rights and dignity on the nation-state. There was nothing “natural” about rights, and the terrible lesson embodied by displaced persons was that “the world found nothing sacred in the abstract nakedness of being human.”<sup>5</sup> The systematic and dehumanizing violence of the Nazi camps followed logically from that recognition.

For Fanon, that violence was not anomalous. History was populated by the similarly dehumanized, with precedents in colonialism, racial slavery, and native genocide. His 1961 *The Wretched of the Earth* registers his conviction that the rewriting of history was a central project of decolonization. Returning to the Enlightenment, he chronicled the history of colonial violence, arguing that its most profound and enduring form was the systematic dehumanization through deracination: the expurgation of traditions and rituals, of practices and habits, and of language and other cultural productions. The accounts, practices, and policies of the colonizer turned communities into populations: “hordes of vital statistics, . . . hysterical masses, . . . distended bodies which are like nothing on earth.”<sup>6</sup> Rich social forms and cultural expressions are invisible

to the colonial gaze, and rising death rates go unremarked. Colonization was a form of “bloodless genocide” (315).

Decolonization would necessarily need to be violent in turn, entailing the systematic destruction of the colonizers’ ontological categories and habits of mind and the creation of new ones fashioned partly out of precolonial traditions and partly forged anew. Calling “decolonization . . . quite simply the replacing of a certain ‘species’ of men by another ‘species’ of men,” Fanon tacitly historicized biology (35). Setting off the term *species*, he marked both the radical and structural nature of the change for which he was calling and the power to name and define as an act of creation. This Adamic power displayed the inextricability of culture and biology as central to politics: the challenge to biological classification and redefinition of organic life was therefore a political act necessary to decolonization.

Building on these insights, and haunted by the specters of human beings deprived of their humanity, theorists in the late 1960s and 1970s fashioned a more expansive understanding of the nature of violence and therefore of the means necessary to address it. The black power movement in particular offered a theoretical framework that found its way into revolutionary social and educational innovations. Stokely Carmichael invoked Fanon as his “patron saint” when he introduced the concept of institutionalized racism in speeches in the late 1960s. Carmichael distinguished between “individual racism” and “institutional racism” to explain how racism structured the relationships, interactions, and institutions of social, political, and economic life in the United States: “the overall operations of established and respected forces in the society.”<sup>7</sup> While individual racism was markedly visible, institutional racism was at least as pernicious and no “less destructive of human life” because it was more difficult to name in a culture structured so as to obscure it (151). As Fanon and others had observed, violence did not need to be explicit to be experienced as such by those who found “do not enter” written in invisible ink on every door or by those who lived daily with the disproportionate threat of state-sanctioned violence (as was evident in the demographics of prison populations, to take one example) and with the disproportionate lack of access to the goods and services of their economies.

The distinction between individual and institutional racism was crucial because it showed why antiracism would not be effective without deep structural change: “When unidentified white terrorists bomb a black church and kill five black children,” Carmichael explained, “that is an act of individual racism, widely deplored by most segments of the world. But when in that same city, Birmingham, Alabama, not five but 500 black babies die each year because

of lack of proper food, shelter and medical facilities; and thousands more are destroyed and maimed physically, emotionally and intellectually because of conditions of poverty and discrimination in the black community, that is a function of institutionalized racism” (151–52).

Carmichael’s contemporary, the Norwegian sociologist and peace activist Johan Galtung, used the term “structural violence” to describe the broad effects of the inequitable distribution of resources—and, more subtly, the inequitable power to distribute resources—worldwide. Like Carmichael, he saw those inequities as endemic to institutions and cultural practices. The term evinces the widespread nature of the conceptual changes, as theorists of decolonization shifted political thought from an East-West to a North-South axis. Preventable outcomes of large-scale disasters mark structural violence; if, for example, “people are starving when this is objectively avoidable, then violence is committed, regardless of whether there is a clear subject-action-object relation, as during a siege yesterday or no such clear relation, as in the way world economic relations are organized today.”<sup>8</sup> Structural violence challenges the concept of a natural disaster: disproportionate effects of, for instance, hurricanes or pandemics on different populations—by income level, race, gender, or another marker—manifest underlying inequities. The mundane can display the effects of structural violence as readily as the catastrophic, since it finds expression, for Galtung as for Carmichael, in any gap between the potential and actual achievements of human beings, from education levels to life expectancy at birth. Structural violence was equally evident in the hot wars of the decolonizing nations that served as the actual battlegrounds of the Cold War and in the measurements that sought to quantify “achievement”; in the demographics of death rates after a tsunami and in the distribution of the products and benefits of biotechnology and access to health care.

Institutional racism and structural violence share the assumption that the distribution of power through which the state regulates life is a form of violence. These concepts dovetail with Foucault’s contemporaneous coinage of “biopower,” but they focus on the differential effects of that power across stratified populations. These analyses illustrate how unequal practices and institutions in the past became structural—how, that is, they created stratifications among populations. They are concerned as well with the language through which those stratifications appear to be “natural” and unchangeable. In calling the structures *violent* or *racist*, the theorists drew attention to the acts of agency that perpetuate the injustices and to the responsibility of the agents to change them. The injustices are not the inevitable result of a regrettable past, but continuing abuses perpetrated against entire populations. That



is the premise of the call for reparative measures in the present to redress the continuing violence of the past. History needed to be rewritten not only to register past injustices but also because history—the story of the past—justifies the institutions and structures of the present.

In their various ways, these and other theorists addressed the biological and geopolitical entanglements that formed a troubling politics of life. These analyses are already implicit, as I will show, in the methods and approaches of American studies. Tonight I urge that we recognize and build on this legacy, that American studies is and ought to be a meeting ground in which a range of overlapping, and sometimes contradictory, theories come together productively to sharpen our insights into the politics of life.

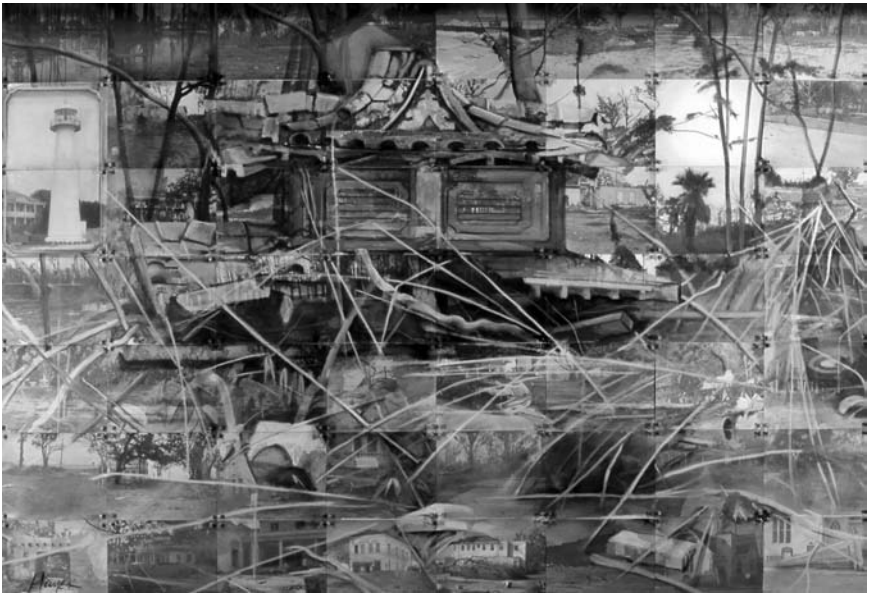
## Repair

A profound belief that critique would lead to redress was central to the analyses of institutional racism and structural violence. Injustices made visible could be altered. No one could avert a “natural disaster,” for example, but identifying the social factors that produced their disproportionate results could, and should, lead to productive change. Practices and institutions could be transformed. The map of the world made that apparent and offered the possibility for radical metamorphosis. In 1969 the political scientist Harold Isaacs, who would go on to found the Association for Third World Studies, stressed the magnitude of these changes and their significance for new imaginings. Inflecting a warning with a sense of creative possibility, he describes the emergence of a new world order in which “some 70 new states carved out of the old empires since 1945 [and] made up of nonwhite peoples newly out from under the political, economic and psychological domination of white rulers” had left people “stumbling blindly around trying to discern the new images, the new shapes and perspectives these changes have brought, to adjust to the painful rearrangement of identities and relationships which the new circumstances compel.”<sup>9</sup> Although this “rearrangement” is “painful,” his terms—new images, shapes, perceptions—emphasize alternative ways of imagining the world, hence new possibilities in the arts and sciences, as well as in politics. The description offers a suggestive lens through which to view the ostensibly apolitical move toward abstraction in arts and letters in many locations during the Cold War. But nowhere were the changes more evident than in education. Building on the revolutionary program of Fanon and his teacher, Aimé Césaire, Carmichael explained the importance of culture and education to any revolution. Angela Davis highlighted the need to liberate minds in order to liberate society,<sup>10</sup> and



**Figure 2. Repair.**

Randy Hayes, *Pass Christian/ Kyoto* (detail). Courtesy of Randy Hayes.



**Figure 3. Repair.**

Randy Hayes, *Japanese-style house, Pass Christian, Mississippi, after Hurricane Katrina*. Courtesy of Randy Hayes.

Eldridge Cleaver celebrated what he saw as a revolution in consciousness that was evident on college and even high school campuses across the United States and elsewhere. If, as he observed, these changes had finally “prompted the oppressed to re-evaluate their self-image in terms of the changing conditions,” it had also “prompted the white people of the world . . . to disabuse themselves of the Master Race psychology, developed over centuries of Imperial Hegemony.” It was “the white youth” especially who were “experiencing the great psychic pain of waking into consciousness to find their heroes turned by events into villains.”<sup>11</sup> This new consciousness fueled the earliest calls for ethnic studies that challenged the disciplinary canons and paved the way for new methods and approaches to the study of the relationship of cultural expression to social hierarchies and political structures—to the material impact of how as well as what we study.

Programs in African American studies, Chican@/Latin@ studies, American Indian studies, Asian American studies, and women’s studies grew out of widely differing political and institutional histories and therefore developed different analytic frames and methods, but they shared a significant objective: to look through new lenses at the world, at the stories that it told about itself, and at the very production of knowledge and circulation of information. The emergence of ethnic studies brought the insights of activists more fully into the academy; it resulted in productive introspection about the nature of scholarship and pedagogy in educational institutions at all levels and in a broadening of objects of study and perspectives, of methods and approaches. The impact of these changes rippled through all forms of media and cultural production as well.

Of course the institutional changes were hard-won. In her 1997 ASA presidential address, “Disturbing the Peace,” Mary Helen Washington recalled what it was like to implement the curricular changes and to negotiate the political and pedagogical possibilities involved in inaugurating the first black studies program at the University of Detroit in 1970.<sup>12</sup> She recalls both the hard work and the excitement of inventing new ways of thinking about scholarship and classrooms that began with the premise that academic work was—and ought to be—politically engaged. Although Washington notes the discrepancy between what was happening in American studies and in black studies, the former could not but be affected by these changes. Gene Wise documents the radical turn in American studies in the late sixties and early seventies typified in Robert Merideth’s well-known assertion that “the primary purpose of the radical as teacher is to subvert corrupt culture as it is internalized in his students” and by the founding, in the early 1970s, of the Radical Caucus of the ASA, which sponsored summer institutes and helped change the format of the annual

meeting to include workshops.<sup>13</sup> Washington points to the absence of African American scholars at the founding meeting of the Radical Caucus, but also to the many scholars who worked to address that absence, and the field today registers their work.

Looking back from the vantage point of 1997, Washington asked, in her subtitle, “What Happens to American Studies If You Put African American Studies at the Center?” Her answer was new ways of formulating questions, new priorities for research, new methods of analysis, and new forms of creative chaos. Presented as a call to action for the field, her address also measured how far it had come. In the readings of the works that she offered to exemplify the new directions the field might take, she stressed the imaginative stories and challenges of repairing and transforming that African American studies, along with the other fields in ethnic and women’s studies, placed at the center of inquiry for American studies scholars. Celebrating the demographic changes she noted in the ASA, she expressed her hope that they would lead to a generative messiness and, increasingly, institutional change.

The ASA and American studies have both continued to change. The cross-disciplinary commitments of the field facilitate those changes because of the multiple perspectives, methods, and approaches that we bring to the topics that we study collectively, as on the multidisciplinary panels of the annual meeting or in the pages of *American Quarterly*, *American Studies*, and other journals in the field. As a field, we show evidence of restlessness and dissatisfaction with any status quo. In the spatial turn, which is especially evident in conference themes over the past decade and a half, we have registered a particular discomfort with the nation form as an organizing principle, recognizing that goods, people, ideas, and, for that matter, germs and genes flow variously across borders. Attending to these spaces has sharpened analyses of how ideologies designed to naturalize the borders of the nation can obscure the significance of these flows.

Although evident in other fields in which the nation has been a formative analytic category, that discomfort has been central to our discussions for several decades. The fascination with networks registers material changes, such as the breakneck pace of technologies and growth of global economic entities since the mid-twentieth century. The media and popular culture intrigue us with terror networks and disease networks, with economic and environmental interdependence. We are wired beyond what only science fiction could have imagined fifty years ago. And we are at present witnessing and in many cases participating in the global contagions of the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street.

The conceptual shift that has accompanied these changes makes hitherto obscured connections newly visible in the past as well as the present. They have changed our stories of the past along with our expectations for the future. Networks focus on the dynamic nature of social interactions and roles, of centers and peripheries, and of manifestations and locations of power. They are neither intrinsically liberatory nor innately pernicious, although contemporary depictions often attribute such characteristics to the network per se. They do not offer endless possibility. But the concept offers new analytic foci: networks depict the dynamism of social relations and agency—the variety of ways in which humans and nonhumans act in and on the world. Such depictions may help us think in new ways about how change works. And in so doing they could provide an alternative conceptual field imaginary: “America” as the name of a node, an ever-changing site of intersecting lines.

Networks are also a central theme of the narratives celebrating biotechnological innovation, which stress interdependence and the ever-changing nature of the biological world. But the language of biological change can, as we know, have a naturalizing effect on the understanding of social processes, as is evident in the recent and far-reaching trends both in mainstream culture and in the academy toward biological explanations of the evolution of human institutions and behaviors. Biotechnology weds nature to culture, biology to human practices and social relationships, and without the analytic, historical, and narrative contexts that our field can offer, we risk confusing biological and social change. New and reparative imaginings, both as a result of the innovations of biotechnology and as a result of what those innovations make visible, are possible only if we understand them through those contexts. Change is the constant, in life forms and the stories through which we know them. How to interpret and influence those changes is central to the educational agenda that our multidisciplinary field has taken on as a responsibility at present.

## **Transform**

The HeLa cells circulated widely. So did stories of their creation and of their donor. I return to these stories to see how they evolved and how we might now retell them. What insights might an American studies lens offer into the nature of the violation that has proved so elusive, and, conversely, what insights might emerge about new directions in American studies in the process? George Gey worked to safeguard Lacks’s privacy, but in 1966 Stanley Gartler, a geneticist working with cell lines, discovered that the unusually robust HeLa cells had contaminated other cell lines. Genetic differences offered a way to distinguish



**Figure 4. Transform.**

Amy McGovern, Graffiti Alley 11. Courtesy of Amy McGovern.



**Figure 5. Transform.**

Matthew Jacobson, Occupy Baltimore. Courtesy of Matthew Jacobson.

among cell lines, so he queried Gey about the donor's identity and racial background. His contention got considerable attention among scientists when he publicly announced his findings at a 1967 conference, because the contamination of cell lines potentially invalidated the results of scores of experiments, involving years of research and billions of dollars. A 1971 article in the *Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology*, with the gynecologist who had treated Lacks as the lead author, identified her in print, and when the geneticist Walter Nelson-Rees began to publish lists of contaminated cell lines, beginning with a 1974 *Science* article, the mainstream media increasingly picked up the controversy, making HeLa's donor widespread public knowledge by the mid-1970s.<sup>14</sup>

The identification of the donor of the cell line resulted in an anthropomorphizing of the cells that made apparent the anxious efforts to comprehend this new life form as well as the cultural biases that structured those efforts. HeLa cells were "surreptitiously . . . taking over cultures and laboratories here and abroad," capable, because of their virulence, of "tak[ing] over the world" if "allowed to grow uninhibited."<sup>15</sup> How, wondered one journalist, "did this HeLa cell become a monster amidst the Pyrex?"<sup>16</sup> Implicitly answering his own question, he notes, "In life, the HeLa source had been black and female. Even as a single layer of cells in a tissue culture laboratory, she remains so" (50) and explains that "a chart listing the genetic markers of the whole Lacks family—will be used worldwide in something of a laboratory manhunt to track down renegade HeLa cultures" (51). The cell that had been so useful in scientific research is now "on the wanted list and the charge is interfering with the orderly progress of science" (51). Articles routinely proclaimed the "immortality" of the young mother from Baltimore. As one headline announced, "She's dead—but her cancer cells live on," and the article describes how "Mrs. Lacks' body grew wildly in Dr. Gey's culture test tubes."<sup>17</sup>

Henrietta Lacks adds human drama and poignancy to the story of the creation of the cell line, but each new telling of the story has reanimated the cells. A review of Michael Gold's 1986 *Conspiracy of Cells*, for example, describes how "a living legacy from a Baltimore woman who died of cancer" strangely "impeded" the "laudable aims in the early 1970s [of] détente with the Soviet Union and the conquest of cancer."<sup>18</sup> And a 1997 documentary about Lacks and the creation of the HeLa cell line elicited a flurry of journalistic commentary that showed how a racialized, gendered, and sexualized characterization of the cell line dovetailed with the prevailing Cold War terms of political demonization. "In the 1960s, the cells became the enemy within," as one reviewer observes, "contaminating every other cell [line] in America and effectively wasting four years and billions of dollars in research. In the 1970s,

Hela [*sic*] got into espionage, infiltrating the Soviet Union and destroying its cancer research too.”<sup>19</sup> Another recounts how a researcher discovered the contamination of cell lines he had purchased from the Soviet Union and notes that “Henrietta had got through the Iron Curtain by infecting other lines. . . . ultimately Henrietta has defeated the scientists who used her.”<sup>20</sup> And a third quips, “Scientists call them HeLa cells. Non-scientists call them She. . . . She was an invaluable lab animal. And she escaped. Extraordinarily virulent, invasive, and vigorous, the HeLa cells reached and ruined scientific experiments from America to Russia. (You would swear she had a sense of humour. Leonard Hayflick, testing his own baby’s tissue, found a black enzyme. Mrs. Hayflick protested her innocence. It was Henrietta.)”<sup>21</sup> These comments reproduce as they reflect on the continuing narrative in which the HeLa cells take human form as an insidious, conniving, promiscuous African American woman. Part human and part animal, the anthropomorphized cells also take the form of a spy with questionable Cold War allegiances—an American agent, perhaps, but not fully trustworthy because of “her” volatility. “She” defies control, as the traits of Lacks’s malignant cells fuse with her racial identity, which make her national allegiances suspect. “She” even has a sense of humor that constitutes a threat to the white American family.

From the outset, the African American press responded to the publicity by sanctifying Lacks and commemorating her “sacrifice” for science, a response that was quickly picked up and reproduced by a variety of institutions. She has been honored by Morehouse College, the Smithsonian Institution, and the National Foundation for Cancer Research and in a congressional resolution as well as in an annual ceremony in Turner’s Station, Maryland, where she lived. The Johns Hopkins Institute for Clinical and Translational Research has established an Annual Henrietta Lacks Memorial Lecture Series, and the Johns Hopkins Urban Health Institute has inaugurated a Henrietta Lacks Memorial Award. This response marks an important effort to correct the racist and sexist depiction of Lacks that emerged from descriptions that fused the person with the characteristics of her cells. However, in the process it also continues to reproduce that conflation. The focus on the human drama is significant for its reminder of the importance of the human dimension of research in medical science and biotechnology. It continues, however, to beg the question of how to think about a cell line, what it means to create a new life form, and how that act of creation perpetuated social inequities.

If those questions haunted the Lacks case, they came into full view when John Moore sued UCLA and the courts had to make legal sense of a cell line. The case turned on the question of “conversion,” or nonconsensual use of someone’s



property. While the Los Angeles court ruled that Moore's cells (his discarded spleen) did not constitute personal property, and therefore that there was no case, the California Court of Appeal overturned the ruling on the grounds that "the essence of a property interest—the ultimate right of control— . . . exists with regard to one's own human body," although the majority opinion conceded the need to approach the issue "with caution," since "the evolution of civilization from slavery to freedom, from regarding people as chattels to recognition of the individual dignity of each person, necessitates prudence in attributing the qualities of property to human tissue."<sup>22</sup>

"Bioslavery." The term resonated in the courtroom and the press; bioethicists and legal theorists invoked it to name the danger in the *Moore* case as well as for biotechnology generally. It marks the transformation of a constellation of issues and events into a cultural narrative. Between the creation of the HeLa cell line and the time the *Moore* case first came to court in the 1980s, the biotechnology industry rapidly accelerated, partly the result of the first successful molecular cloning—which is to say, the production of recombinant DNA—in a Stanford laboratory in the early 1970s. Stanford applied for a patent on recombinant DNA in the mid-1970s, and it was awarded in 1980, the same year the U.S. Supreme Court confirmed the legality of the first patent on a living organism, a bacterium engineered to break down oil.<sup>23</sup> By then, debates about the implications of the transgenic organisms emerging from the Stanford labs and about the patenting of living organisms generally were gaining attention and introducing the terms of a major new controversy to the public sphere.

The futurist Alvin Toffler captured the essence of these concerns—the cultural narrative that was taking shape—in a *Christian Science Monitor* article titled "What Is Human Now?" Toffler's concern about the vacuum in which "the businessmen, bureaucrats, judges, doctors, and scientists" were creating policies "for the biological revolution about to engulf us" was well founded.<sup>24</sup> Biotechnology, he explains, was making possible new entities for which there were no legal or social, as well as biological, precedents: a mother pregnant with her daughter's fertilized ova, hence bearing her own grandchildren; hamsters lingering in suspended animation; frozen sperm and other body parts. But the article quickly locates the problem in what was becoming a familiar expression of concern: the "slippery slope" from the fragile definition of the human to the threat of bioslavery. "It is now possible, in principle," Toffler worries, "to transfer human traits into animals and animal traits into humans. If we do this, or create new life forms with genes drawn from humans, we can, also in principle, reach a point at which the common (mainly implicit) definition of 'humanness' becomes blurred. What traits ultimately define a human?"

Where is the borderline of ‘humanness?’” (20). Injustices in Nazi Germany and South Africa illustrate his sense of the danger that can follow the blurring of that definition—“Murder can be redefined if the victim is regarded as ‘not human’”—but his prime example, significantly, is most resonant with U.S. history: “Slave labor is not slavery if the slaves are ‘not human,’” he warns. And “if we can sell parts of our cells . . . why not the entire body? And if body parts can be sold separately, why not the whole—for 21st-century bioslavery” (21).

“Bioslavery.” Did the danger in the *Moore* case lie in a patent that conferred ownership of his cells on UCLA, as the prosecution argued, or in thinking of the cells as owned in the first place, as the defense suggested? And what kind of ownership did patents actually confer? As Toffler shows, the anxiety evident in discussions of the case stemmed from the changing social relations that followed the unmooring of definitions. That anxiety found expression as the fear of slavery at least partly because the peculiar institution was the most dramatic instance of dehumanization and exploitation in conventional narratives of American history. This was indeed an American story: national memory flashing up in a moment of danger.

The specter of bioslavery haunted discussions of these new life forms, summoning precedents from a shameful past to create cautionary tales of a dystopic future. The repressed returned uncannily in this narrative in the form of monstrous entities: HeLa cells as sinister contaminants sabotaging experiments and seductive femmes fatales wreaking havoc in Cold War Soviet labs; Henrietta Lacks returning through her marauding cells to avenge herself on the perpetrators of her unholy transformation. Commodified personhood was talking back.

The future summoned in these cautionary tales circulated in the mainstream media and popular fiction and film and shaped legal, political, and bioethical debates. Dramatic and compelling, these accounts registered and perpetuated misperceptions about the new life forms and deflected attention from the injustices—the institutional racism and structural violence—manifested in the cell line stories. Bioslavery, as expressed in these discussions, turns a patent into a certificate of ownership, which is misleading.<sup>25</sup> In doing so, it turns a discussion about the economics of biotechnology in the present into speculation about a potential injustice in the future. Focus on the “slippery slope” from patenting living organisms to “owning” human beings obscures questions about present inequities in the distribution of power and resources, as exemplified in disparate accesses to health care. Fear of a dystopic science fictional future thereby displaces what should be a debate about a health care system in which the right to health extends differentially to the impoverished

and the imprisoned, to women, children, and nonwhites, and to an expanding number of categories that reflect the increasing gap between the 1% and the 99%. The history of racial slavery of course informs these inequities; it is a significant part of the long racialized history of capitalism. But the haunting image of an owned person that is invoked in these discussions preempts that analysis.

Human rights advocates in the dismaying years after World War II sought a stable term on which to articulate precepts and to found institutions that would ensure the sanctity of the human. The stories of Henrietta Lacks and her cells manifest the desire to ground the concept of the human in biology and the danger of that desire, which, as Arendt and Fanon pointed out, promotes the obfuscation of human agency in social practices and institutions. The cell line stories also illustrate the elusiveness of definitions. There will never be a stable definition of “the human”; the concept is grounded not in biology but in stories. Like organic life, stories change, but their evolution is considerably more rapid.

I have focused tonight on biotechnology because of the structuring power of its stories and their historical and continuing role in promoting biological explanations of human motivations, practices, and institutions. But American studies has stories, too. Powerful ones. Critical legacies committed to turning critiques into change. Every aspect of the Lacks and cell line cases underscores the importance of those transformative stories to the world in which we live. We need stories that see violence not in an act of scientific innovation but in the persistent inequities of nations and networks that enforce segregation through economics, through unequal educational opportunities, through discriminatory laws that lead to disparate sentencing and execution, through a medical system marked by differential access to health care, by race- and gender-based diagnoses and treatments of disease, by radically different mortality rates, disease rates, and life expectancies that correlate with race and income level. We need stories that situate the danger of scientific innovation in the *business* of scientific medicine, which treats bodies as commodities *now*, not in some abstract, science fictional future. And we need stories that recognize any act that contributes to these inequities as an act of violence, and that includes the thoughtless destruction of a planet of which we are all temporary custodians.

American studies is telling those stories, and we are telling them as stories of change. We are not telling the same stories. Our field is a network of stories—of critiques, analyses, and interpretations—competing, contradictory, and contentious. They reflect a variety of interests, perspectives, and commitments. And they should. If we had no disagreement, we would have no change. But I am

convinced by what I have experienced in more than two decades as a member of the American Studies Association that we in this organization share a passionate conviction that we can change the unjust stories of our world. Now more than ever there is reason for hope, reason to believe that 1 plus 99 might someday make 100. Imagine. Repair. Transform.

### Notes

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1. In my discussion of Henrietta Lacks and the HeLa cells in the context of postwar political theory, I am drawing considerably on my essay "Cells, Genes, and Stories: HeLa's Journey from Labs to Literature," *Genetics and the Unsettled Past: The Collision of Race, DNA, and History*, ed. Keith Wailoo, Alondra Nelson, and Catherine Lee (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2012) as well as my essay "What's in a Cell? John Moore's Spleen and the Language of Bioslavery," *Essays Probing the Boundaries of the Human in Science and Science Fiction*, special issue, *New Literary History* 36.2 (2005): 205–25.
2. For my analysis of this case, I am especially indebted to Michael Gold, *A Conspiracy of Cells: One Woman's Immortal Legacy and the Medical Scandal It Caused* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986); Adam Curtis, *The Way of All Flesh* (BBC documentary, 1997); Hannah Landecker, "Between Beneficence and Chattel: The Human Biological in Law and Science," *Science in Context* 12.1 (1999): 203–25; Landecker, "Immortality, In Vitro: A History of the HeLa Cell Line," in *Biotechnology and Culture: Bodies, Anxieties, Ethics*, ed. Paul E. Brodwin (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 53–72; Landecker, *Culturing Life: How Cells Became Technologies* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007); Lisa H. Weasel, "Feminist Intersections in Science: Race, Gender, and Sexuality through the Microscope," *Hypatia* 19.1 (2004): 183–93; and Rebecca Skloot, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (New York: Crown, 2009). See the three works by Landecker for an extensive discussion of the narratives that emerged from the science and mainstream media that conflated Lacks with her cells and for the anxiety that surrounded the question of how to understand the nature of the cell line.
3. See Landecker's discussion of these questions in relation to the John Moore case in "Between Beneficence and Chattel."
4. Michel Foucault, *An Introduction*, vol. 1 of *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978), 140.
5. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1948; New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1979), 299.
6. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (1961; New York: Grove, 1963), 42. Hereafter cited in the text.
7. Stokely Carmichael, "Black Power," in *To Free a Generation: The Dialectics of Liberation*, ed. David Cooper (1968; New York: Collier Books, 1969), 150–51. Hereafter cited in the text.
8. Johan Galtung, "Violence, Peace, and Peace Research," *Journal of Peace Research* 6.3 (1969): 171.
9. Harold Isaacs, "Color in World Affairs," *Foreign Affairs* 47.2 (1969): 235.
10. Angela Davis, joint speech with Herbert Marcuse, Sproul Plaza, Berkeley, October 24, 1969; transcript, p. 7, phonotape 1130:1bA, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.
11. Eldridge Cleaver, "The White Race and Its Heroes," in *Soul on Ice* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), 69.
12. Mary Helen Washington, "Disturbing the Peace: What Happens to American Studies If You Put African American Studies at the Center? Presidential Address to the American Studies Association, October 29, 1997," *American Quarterly* 50.1 (1998): 1–23.

13. Robert Merideth, *Subverting Culture: The Radical as Teacher* (New University Conference, 1969), 1; cited in Gene Wise, "'Paradigm Dramas' in American Studies: A Cultural and Institutional History of the Movement," *American Quarterly* 31.3 (1979): 312.
14. H. W. Jones Jr., V. A. McKusick, P. S. Harper, and K.-D. Wu, *Journal of Obstetrics and Gynecology* 38 (1971): 945; and Walter A. Nelson-Rees, Robert R. Flandermeyer, and Paula K. Hawthorne, "Branded Marker Chromosomes as Indicators of Intraspecies Cellular Contamination," *Science*, June 7, 1974, 1093–96. See especially Gold, *Conspiracy of Cells* and Landecker, "Immortality, In Vitro" and *Culturing Life*. Landecker documents the earliest appearance of Lacks's name in the mainstream media in the 1950s, but notes that her race was not mentioned until after Gartler's announcement, when it became a significant part of the narrative. The medical scandal clearly sensationalized the story, drawing considerable attention to it following Nelson-Rees's published documentation of contaminated cell lines.
15. B. J. C., "HeLa (for Henrietta Lacks)," *Science*, June 21, 1974, 1268. The citation is from Jones et al. and is often quoted in accounts of the HeLa contamination scandal.
16. Michael Rogers, "The Double-Edged Helix," *Rolling Stone*, March 21, 1976, 48. Hereafter cited in the text.
17. Connie Lauerman, "She's Dead—but Her Cancer Cells Live On," *Chicago Tribune*, March 14, 1976, 18.
18. Harold M. Schmeck Jr., "HeLa's Legacy," *New York Times*, June 15, 1986, BR18.
19. Sam Taylor, *Observer*, March 16, 1997, 81.
20. Glenda Cooper, "Mrs. Lacks Lives Forever," *Independent* (London), March 14, 1997, 2.
21. Nancy Banks-Smith, "The Horrors of Long Division," *Guardian*, March 20, 1997, T6.
22. *Moore v. Regents of the University of California*, 249 Cal. Rptr. (1988) at 506, 504.
23. *Diamond v. Chakrabarty*, 447 U.S. 303 (1980).
24. Alvin Toffler, "What Is Human Now?" *Christian Science Monitor*, June 4, 1987, 21. Hereafter cited in the text.
25. For an excellent discussion of gene patents, see R. Cook-Deegan and C. Heaney, "Patents in Genomics and Human Genetics," *Annual Review of Genomics and Human Genetics* 11.17 (2010): 1–43.