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Performing HeLa: Theatrical Bodies and Living Remains

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4 **Title:** Performing HeLa: Theatrical Bodies and Living Remains

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9 **Abstract**

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11 As a biomedical entity that has been the subject of a plethora of artistic and cultural projects,
12 HeLa, the first immortal human cell line, calls for investigations into the human. Extracted
13 and cultured from the cervical tumour of African American woman, Henrietta Lacks, at Johns
14 Hopkins Hospital in 1950s Baltimore, HeLa's robust capacity to grow has ensured its role in
15 numerous medical advances. The first part of this essay synthesises scientific, socio-cultural,
16 familial and philosophical perspectives on HeLa, while the second half applies these
17 perspectives to a reading of a theatrical production, *HeLa* (2013), written and performed
18 internationally by Black British artist Adura Onashile. The discussion considers ways in
19 which prevailing cultural narratives that situate Lacks as a victim, dispossessed of bodily
20 agency in life and after death, might delimit productive possibilities for thinking about Lacks
21 as a contributor to biotechnological progress, and about HeLa as a living remain. Lacks'
22 labour in the creation of HeLa may have been unwitting, but her role in biotechnological
23 progress is profound in that it is constitutive. Onashile's solo performance – its deft
24 choreography moving across the subjectivities of patient, physician and family – presents the
25 political fact of black female corporeality as part of its exploration of scientific innovation.
26 The theatrical registers of Onashile's *HeLa* open up and nuance imaginings of Lacks/HeLa,
27 moving beyond monolithic conceptions of medical research by creatively investigating
28 Lacks' scientific contribution in the midst (and in the wake) of medical exploitation.
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Patient and Public Involvement

- When and how were patients/public first involved in the research?

The analysis contained in this essay draws on and synthesises historical, cultural and scientific research on the experiences of patients and family members who are deceased.

- How were the research question(s) developed and informed by their priorities, experience, and preferences?

While this research was not developed in direct consultation with patients, the research questions are broadly informed by patient priorities concerning bioethics (particularly informed consent), as indicated by the results of existing research, policy development, and institutional best practice.

- How were patients/public involved in
 - (a) the design and conduct of the study?
 - (b) choice of outcome measures?
 - (c) recruitment to the study?

N/A

- How were (or will) patients/ public be involved in choosing the methods and agreeing plans for dissemination of the study results to participants and linked communities?

Dissemination of this research will not involve living participants or stakeholders. I will seek institutional support for Open Access in order to widen access to the research (to, for example, Black and Global Majority arts and cultural industry practitioners whose work intersects with the artistic case study examined in this research, and associated issues).

Performing HeLa: Theatrical Bodies and Living Remains

Blackness gets constructed as always oppositional to technologically driven chronicles of progress. (Nelson 2002, 1)

I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess. (Haraway 1985, 68)

As a biomedical and biocultural entity that has been the subject of a plethora of artistic and commemorative projects,¹ the first immortal human cell line, HeLa, calls for investigations into the human. The fact that scientific research using human tissue generates the politically-inflected emotional responses it does demonstrates the cultural complexities of comprehending personhood in a biotechnological age (Baumann 2002), as well as the relationship between cellular material cultivated in a laboratory and the body from which it came. As has been widely documented, HeLa cells were derived from Henrietta Lacks, a young African American woman, at Johns Hopkins Hospital in 1950s Baltimore, where they were extracted and cultured without Lacks' knowledge from the cervical tumour that would kill her, aged thirty-one. HeLa cells caused the suffering and death of Lacks, but they are also living remains that are materially continuous with her body. The cells have played a role in numerous major medical advances, including the polio vaccine, cancer treatment, Parkinson's research and more recently, Covid-19 infectivity research (Jackson 2020). HeLa biospecimens have even been used beyond Earth in research on the biological effects of space travel (Ohnishi et al 2002). Lacks' descendants, unaware of the cell line until the 1970s, have been engaged in evolving dialogues with biomedical researchers over genetic data, commercialisation and legacy, all while uncertainty over the type of life a cell line represents has remained a point of emotional unease. This essay considers questions that are pertinent to a culturally contextualised understanding of HeLa: how might the work of biotechnology intersect with the work of anti-racism? How should we historicise informed consent? What are the forms that agency might take? On what terms does artistic work make Lacks and HeLa known?

The first part of this discussion synthesises scientific, socio-cultural, familial and philosophical perspectives on HeLa, while the second half applies these perspectives to a reading of a theatrical production, *HeLa* (2013), written and performed by Black British artist Adura Onashile. This discussion considers the ways in which prevailing cultural narratives that situate Lacks as a victim, dispossessed of bodily agency in life and after death, delimit

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3 productive possibilities for thinking about Lacks as a contributor to biotechnological progress,
4 and about HeLa as a living human remain. The theatrical registers of Onashile's *HeLa* open up
5 and nuance imaginings of Lacks/HeLa, moving beyond monolithic conceptions of medical
6 research by creatively investigating Lacks' scientific contribution in the midst (and in the wake)
7 of medical exploitation. In part, this is a consequence of performance as an artform that
8 uniquely harnesses the semantic subtleties of the live human body. An embodied, theatricalised
9 rendering of narratives that have accumulated around HeLa and Lacks can resist some of the
10 ways in which many of these narratives have – even while recuperating Lacks' historical
11 importance – constructed a sexualised and racialised phantasmagoria.

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19 The phantasmagoric imagery associated with Lacks/HeLa as a biocultural conjunction
20 of science and popular culture, life and death, demands attention to how particular stereotypes
21 have been harnessed and reinforced, both by scientists and by makers of cultural artefacts. This
22 discussion's use of the conjunction 'Lacks/HeLa' signals continuities (conceptual, cultural and
23 material) between the person and the cell line. As a metaphor in cultural analysis,
24 phantasmagoria describes a succession or accumulation of images – bizarre, horrific or
25 fantastical – associated with a thing or idea. The term derives from an early nineteenth century
26 popular exhibition that used magic lanterns, a form that itself enmeshed theatre and technology.
27 Tom Gunning describes Liégeois physicist and stage magician Étienne-Gaspard Robert's
28 phantasmagoria, with its promise to make the dead reappear, as standing 'on the threshold
29 between science and superstition' (Gunning 2004). Two centuries after Robert, the 'magic' of
30 the stage is still understood by theatre scholars to inhere in a complex relationship between
31 liveness and death (Schneider 2012, 150-62; Sofer 2003, 90). Directed by Graham Eatough
32 and produced by the company Iron-Oxide, Glasgow-based writer and performer Onashile's
33 *HeLa* was originally commissioned by the Edinburgh International Science Festival in 2013. It
34 was first performed in the University of Edinburgh's Anatomy Room, part of Summerhall, a
35 converted arts complex that was formerly the Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies. The
36 production has since been staged nationally and internationally.² Edinburgh's Anatomy Room
37 contains the steeply banked rows of curved bench seats familiar to such lecture theatres, their
38 scopic orientation displaying bodies from a high, encompassing vantage.

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54 In such a space, lines of connection are implied between theatrical modes of appearance
55 and performative scientific demonstration using human corpses. Here, Onashile's part realist,
56 part symbolic performance of the life and death of Lacks invites audiences to blend empirical
57 and imaginative knowledges of the human body. The performance also explicitly binds race
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3 with biotechnology in a way that positions *HeLa* as an aesthetic counterpart of Afrofuturist art
4 practice. Centrally concerned with how race manifests (or is obscured) in techno-futurist
5 speculations and as an artistic mode, Afrofuturism posits black histories and memories as
6 containing knowledges for the future. Alondra Nelson observes that assumptions about black
7 people's absence at the vanguard of new technology do 'not account for the centrality of black
8 people's labor in modernization and industrialization as well as the historical truths of black
9 participation in technological development' (Nelson 2002, 6). Lacks' labour in the creation of
10 HeLa may have been unwitting, but her role in biotechnological progress is profound in that it
11 is constitutive. Onashile's solo performance – its deft choreography moving across the
12 subjectivities of patient, physician and family – presents the political fact of black female
13 corporeality as part of its exploration of scientific innovation.

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23 In *Culturing Life: How Cells Became Technologies*, Hannah Landecker insightfully
24 characterises HeLa as a kind of posthumous celebrity, whose 'remarkable public life' makes it
25 'one of the most storied biological entities of the twentieth century' (Landecker 2007, 160).
26 This public life has made it possible to imagine HeLa as a form of life and thereby to think
27 about what is at stake when human tissue is instrumentalised. HeLa cells have been tooled
28 extensively in biomedical research. In artistic projects, too, HeLa, along with Lacks, is subject
29 to creative tooling. Stories and images of Lacks/HeLa respond to a set of historical conditions
30 and events in ways that can recuperate and renew understandings of the gendered and racialised
31 body, past, present and future. As Landecker notes, an important part of HeLa's cultural
32 function is to enjoin science and cultural production in the emergence of new comprehensions
33 of life:

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There is a direct continuity from the scientific papers through to the television
documentaries. Personifications of the cell line in the image of the person, whether in
Science or Rolling Stone, function as accounts of science that we tell one another about
what has happened to the human as biomedical subject and about the human
relationship to biological matter. These accounts, focused by the specter of an
individual human person, are responses to something otherwise not easily
comprehended in narrative: infrastructural change in the conditions of possibility for
human life. (Landecker 2007, 142)

As the following discussion aims to show, the 'direct continuity' to which Landecker refers
involves the absorption in cultural-narrative contexts of scientific understandings, and the
absorption in scientific domains of cultural-narrative understandings. The concept of

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3 ‘natureculture’, originating in Donna Haraway’s posthumanist philosophy, is productive for
4 foregrounding the co-constitutive character of knowledge formation in the sciences and the
5 humanities. Undoubtedly, the biocultural status of Lacks/HeLa has made it a particularly useful
6 crucible for thinking about biomedical ethics, kinship, race, gender and consent.
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10 From cultural and philosophical perspectives, HeLa is ontologically unstable. The
11 condition of HeLa cells as proliferative, increasing in mass as they are cultured in labs around
12 the world, posits complex questions with respect to how the body remains postmortem. HeLa
13 is most often encountered indirectly, via relations, affiliations and derived technologies. In this
14 way it is ‘known’ in much the same manner as global warming, the core example offered by
15 philosopher Timothy Morton in his theorisation of the massively dispersed, temporally
16 unbounded ‘hyperobject’ (Morton 2013), a concept to which this discussion shall return. That
17 HeLa has become the focus of cultural, artistic and philosophical enquiry into the object
18 ontology of the cell line would likely not have occurred to its cell biologist originator. For
19 George Otto Gey, whose laboratory propagated HeLa, working with cancer tissue from patients
20 at Johns Hopkins Hospital was a routinised part of his pioneering work in cell culture. Informed
21 patient consent was not the norm (Wilson 2016, 250). For members of Lacks’ family, the
22 profoundly unfamiliar material reality of the cells – a body’s tissue growing in the absence of
23 the originating body – has been difficult, unsettling, and at times traumatic to apprehend. The
24 case for thinking of HeLa as a living human remain derives in part from its condition as a
25 scientific innovation that is also now a cultural concept: long before the Lacks family had
26 become aware of it, HeLa made what Duncan Wilson describes as its ‘public debut’ in 1951 –
27 on, as it happened, the day of Lacks’ death: ‘Gey held up a vial of the cell line on national
28 television and hailed it as a powerful new weapon in the fight against disease’ (Wilson 2016,
29 248). The identity of Lacks as HeLa’s human source was first revealed in a 1971 article in
30 *Obstetrics and Gynecology* (Jones et al 1971, 945-49) and entered a wider domain upon the
31 publication of journalist Michael Gold’s *A Conspiracy of Cells: One Woman’s Immortal
32 Legacy and the Medical Scandal it Caused* (Gold 1986). HeLa has since then been a discursive
33 as well as scientific entity, its implications for biomedical research, for society and for family
34 tightly intertwined.
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57 **HeLa and Racialisation**

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3 In her book, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, which grapples with the aftermath of
4 transatlantic slavery ‘as a problem of and for thought’ (Sharpe 2016, 5), Christina Sharpe
5 describes the atemporal permeation of slavery into black consciousness, articulating ‘how
6 one’s life and mind are organized by and positioned to apprehend the world through the optic
7 of the door and antiblackness’ (Sharpe 2016, 4). For Lacks/HeLa, the overlapping of scientific,
8 cultural, and artistic perspectives and registers casts race as an epistemologically unstable
9 category. In an analysis of the perceived relevance of race to medical researchers, Amade
10 M’charek contends, ‘For most geneticists Helen Lane [a pseudonym formerly applied to Lacks]
11 has lost her racial identity through becoming a cell line. Her value for genetic research lies in
12 her rapidly reproducing cancer cells. [...] However, in other contexts, [Lacks’] colour was seen
13 as highly significant, allowing geneticists to regard her mtDNA as African’ (M’charek 2005,
14 101). This reading is one that thinks race in terms of genetic data. What a scholar such as Sharpe
15 brings into the frame is an insistence on the cultural and historical casting of all such thought:
16 that any act of deriving, gathering, and archiving black lives is inevitably both in the wake and
17 in the midst of the calamity of black enslavement. What this means for Lacks is a continual
18 revising of the meanings of her racial identity upon and since the advent of HeLa.
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31 In a feminist analysis of scientific practices associated with HeLa, particularly cell
32 culturing, Lisa H. Weasel makes the case that Lacks’ race and gender have profoundly
33 informed the lexicon and narratives surrounding the cell line. These are, she emphasises, a
34 cultural and social context from which scientific research is not exempt, but on the contrary,
35 has been responsible in part for propagating. Weasel considers two articles that put forward
36 ‘the conjecture that the HeLa cell line, due to its many years growing in culture, had strayed
37 far enough from its physiological and genetic connection to the human from whom it was
38 derived to demand denotation as a new species’ (Weasel 2004, 186). These phantasmagorical
39 theories were based on a spurious notion that HeLa represented a kind of reverse evolution.
40 Weasel notes that the
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49 troubling [...] way in which the evolutionary debate within science over these cells,
50 now given a “race” of their own through their connection to the individual Henrietta
51 Lacks, is itself mutated by the contextualization of the debate within a socially derived
52 gendered racial framework. Once race, gender, and sexuality enter into the HeLa story,
53 the debate over whether or not the HeLa cell line, growing in culture now for half a
54 century, represents a new species cannot be separated from the historical evolutionary
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3 debate over the origin of human races and the intersection of race and gender with
4 sexuality. (Weasel 2004, 188)
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7 As Weasel explains, the debates around HeLa and species articulated to theories of racial
8 difference: ‘these debates over the evolutionary origin of human races pitted so-called
9 polygenists – those who believed that human races represented different biological species –
10 against so-called monogenists, who backed a conception of a single human species, albeit
11 divided into differing races, tracing its lineage back to Adam and Eve’ (Weasel 2004, 188). In
12 a sign of a field that is itself evolving in terms of racial biases, more recent scientific studies of
13 HeLa have detected genetic and phenotypical differences between different strains of the cell
14 line (Zimmer 2019), to which race is not relevant, and contrast with the earlier suggestions of
15 species divergence that emerged from deeply embedded racisms.
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23 But accounts of Lacks and HeLa (and often both together) still frequently deploy vivid
24 metaphors of sexual and racial phantasmagoria, with cells lines behaving freakishly, diagnoses
25 of syphilis and gonorrhoea hinting (to a lay person) at promiscuity and a black woman’s cancer
26 treatment described in terms that render her an object of medical cruelty. Descriptions, for
27 example, in reviews of Chicago playwright J. Nicole Brooks’ 2018 theatre production, *HeLa*,
28 such as ‘miraculous’ (Bishop 2018) and ‘infamous tumor cells, still multiplying’ (Wagner
29 2018) posit the nature of the cells somewhere between the necromantic and the enchanted. In
30 Rebecca Skloot’s bestselling and influential account, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*,
31 HeLa cells grow ‘with mythological intensity’ (Skloot 2010, 47). African American physician,
32 scholar and activist, Vanessa Northington Gamble identifies a key racialised element of
33 dramatisation in Skloot’s widely-read text, which Northington Gamble argues ‘at times depicts
34 a stereotypically dysfunctional black family. Skloot spotlights promiscuity, mental illness, and
35 incarceration without any explanation for why these are vital to her larger narrative’
36 (Northington Gamble 2014). For his part, Lacks’ grandson, Ron, has expressed objections to
37 the way Henrietta’s husband is ‘portrayed as the villain of the piece’ in Skloot’s narrative of
38 infidelity and venereal disease (qtd in Collins 2017). The narrative threads of the HeLa
39 phantasmagoria are not confined to cultural products. As Landecker’s notion of discursive
40 ‘direct continuity’ reminds us, scientific texts can be narrativising things: Stephen J. O’Brien
41 posits HeLa’s growth in terms of monstrosity when he writes, in the Proceedings of the
42 National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, ‘HeLa cells were unlike other
43 primary cervical cancer explants in that they grew horrifically in culture, perhaps too
44 aggressively’ (O’Brien 2001, 7656). It is important to recognise that the Lacks/HeLa
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3 phantasmagoria manifests complexly in anti-racist and feminist narratives that would
4 recuperate Lacks, as well as in those that would fetishise and racialise her and indeed in texts
5 that appear merely to be describing HeLa.
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9 In a passage of thought experiment that is worth quoting at length in the context of a
10 discussion of Lacks/HeLa as cultural narrative, Weasel pinpoints telling contingencies that
11 underlie the tone of numerous accounts, observing:
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14 the story comes full circle, the madly proliferating cells, now verging on becoming a
15 separate and inferior species, linked at least in some readers' minds to the unbridled,
16 infectious sexuality of a black woman from Baltimore. Is this mere coincidence? After
17 all, the HeLa cell line could just as easily have been derived from a lung carcinoma
18 from Herbert Langston, a middle-class bank teller from suburban New Jersey, or from
19 the prostate cancer of Henrik Larson, a Scandinavian immigrant living in the Midwest,
20 or from any other number of individuals whose first names began with the letters He
21 and last names with La and were host to a pernicious cancer proliferating wildly within
22 their confines. Then we might read the story differently, or might not tell it at all. After
23 all, hundreds of thousands of cell lines live on in research labs around the world, each
24 with their own identifying initials and life stories behind them, most completely
25 unbeknownst to the researcher. (Weasel 2004, 190)
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36 Crucially implied in Weasel's observation is a distinction between the extraction and culturing
37 of Lacks' cancer cells and the discursive circulation, interpretation and appropriation of these
38 acts in the years that have followed. Weasel's point that the cells 'could just as easily' have
39 been derived from a white male patient should remind us that non-consensual tissue extraction,
40 specifically, was not a racialised act, but rather, that the Lacks/HeLa story has been relegated
41 to the frames of a racialised and gendered natureculture. This is not to deny that Lacks' cancer
42 *treatment* was racialised: taking place in a segregated Johns Hopkins hospital ward, it
43 inevitably was.
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52 **Institutionalising Memory: Family, Legacy, Agency**

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54 In 1974, on the cusp of informed consent legislation coming into force for all National Institutes
55 of Health (NIH) funded research, Johns Hopkins medical geneticist Victor McKusick and
56 postdoctoral fellow Susan Hsu set about collecting blood samples from members of the Lacks
57 family in order to sequence HeLa genes. The process was confounding and frightening for the
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3 family, who knew nothing of the original collection of Henrietta Lacks' cells and did not give
4 informed consent for the genetic testing. Ewen Callaway describes the cursory response to
5 questions from Deborah Lacks, Henrietta's late daughter: 'The researcher [...] autographed a
6 medical textbook he had written and said that everything she needed to know lay within its
7 dense pages' (Callaway 2013, 132). This performative gesture of superiority and expertise
8 exemplifies the stark power disjunctions that have mediated questions of access to information,
9 the possession and deployment of knowledge, and perhaps most crucially, consent regarding
10 HeLa cells.
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These disjunctions remain, but power balances shifted over the decades. The non-
consensual condition of HeLa's creation has been central to battles by members of Lacks'
family for recognition and agency over several decades of encounters with the Johns Hopkins
School of Medicine and the NIH. Callaway describes the more respectful engagements that
occurred in 2013 between medical researchers and the Lacks family, from which an agreement
was brokered with the family to put in place a committee, on which family members would sit,
to decide upon the case-by-case release of Lacks family genetic information and other data
(Callaway 2013, 132). These talks involved the NIH and as Callaway reports, the agreement
that was reached with the Lacks family permitted the publication of the HeLa genome sequence
and the re-release of data that, on the Lacks family's request, had been removed from the public
domain earlier in 2013 (Callaway 2013, 132). This represents a significant shift in practice and
access from the era of Gey who, as Lucey et al note, 'was generous with requests for HeLa
cells' (Lucey et al 2009, 1465) and thereby set in motion their global spread and, in several
contexts, commercialisation.

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The participation and consent agreement on HeLa genetic data is unusual and indicates
that the socio-political framing of Lacks and HeLa has informed institutional legacy work.
Johns Hopkins has been at the forefront of this but it also involves the Morehouse School of
Medicine in Atlanta and the NIH. The Johns Hopkins webpages dedicated to 'The Legacy of
Henrietta Lacks' offer an institutional *mea culpa* that identifies the impact of Skloot's book in
their acknowledgement of Lacks' experience and that of her family:

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The publication of Skloot's book led Johns Hopkins to review our interactions with
Henrietta Lacks and with the Lacks family over more than 50 years. At several points
across those decades, we found that Johns Hopkins could have – and should have –
done more to inform and work with members of Henrietta Lacks' family out of respect
for them, their privacy and their personal interests. (Johns Hopkins, no date)

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Johns Hopkins' legacy work includes engagement with schools, as well as funding of The Henrietta Lacks East Baltimore Health Sciences Scholarship and the Henrietta Lacks Memorial Award. The Johns Hopkins Institute for Clinical and Translational Research (ICTR) hosts two annual symposiums, one focused on medical ethics, and the other oriented towards Baltimore High School students. At one of the 2018 Henrietta Lacks memorial lectures, an announcement was made that a new campus building would be named in Lacks' honour. A similar project aimed at scientific and public engagement in Lacks' memory was established by physician and researcher Roland Pattillo, founder in 1996 of the annual HeLa Women's Health Conference at the Morehouse School of Medicine. Gey's former medical student, Pattillo was an inheritor of one of Gey's cell banks as well as one of his few African American students. He has been an informal intermediary for members of the Lacks family following the high public interest that ensued upon the success of Skloot's book.

The narratives that have become attached to Lacks/HeLa in the context of institutional ethics, legacy and agency require careful probing. Specifically, questions regarding whether and how Lacks' agency manifested at the end of her life, and beyond, are as uncertain as they are sensitive. Divergences in family accounts highlight the ways in which agency and legacy are intertwined with memory: while Lacks' daughter, Deborah, informed and approved Skloot's account, Lacks' son, Lawrence, objected to it, identifying divergences from his own recollection and understanding of his mother: 'she wasn't poor, she could read and write. [...] Skloot says my father worked for the railroad. But he was an engineer – he drove the train. You know some people read that book, they think we live in a shack' (qtd in Collins 2017). Skloot's capacity to create what has become the dominant HeLa narrative is inevitably bound up with her privilege: Lawrence Lacks has claimed that when Skloot sought medical notes on his mother, Johns Hopkins provided access to documents that his family had long been unable to obtain. If consent is indeed racialised, its racialisation must be understood as manifesting over multiple points of contact within research and dissemination cultures in a context of uneven institutional cooperation.

As such, consent and agency in the Lacks case should be considered in terms of a *series of encounters*, and not simply with reference to the originary act of cell extraction. Consent for the use of human tissue for research purposes was not normal practice in the United States in the 1950s. Such research was not undertaken secretly, either: Wilson notes that tissue extraction was publicised in the media in the context of medical innovation and did not attract public resistance (Wilson 2016, 252), though it should of course be noted that a discursive

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3 framing of ‘innovation’ might obviate ethical concerns, particularly from a generalised
4 ‘public’, as opposed to kin. Lucey et al observe that ‘Approximately 30 specimens of cervical
5 cancer had been sent to the laboratory of Dr Gey by the time Ms Lacks presented to the
6 gynecology clinic’ (Lucey et al 2009, 1465). Lucey et al present the first published description
7 of Lacks’ autopsy, a sentence of which indicates enactment of regard for post-mortem rights:
8 that Lacks’ ‘cranial cavity and neck organs were not examined because permission was not
9 granted’ (Lucey et al 2009, 1463). The institutional and interpersonal acts involved in Lacks’
10 cancer treatment and in the creation of the HeLa line are noteworthy in the context of pervasive
11 narrative tendencies to present Lacks as a non-agentive victim of stakeholders more powerful
12 than herself. For Wilson, the ‘now widespread assumption about the HeLa story: that Lacks
13 and her family have been mistreated by researchers’ (Wilson 2016, 249) is part of a wider
14 narrative context that unfairly characterises the relationship between science and society.
15 Wilson situates Skloot’s *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* as an example of ““social
16 unease” writing [that] regularly use[s] historical examples to argue that scientists have long
17 violated [...] widely held values of self-determination, justice and freedom from exploitation,
18 and claim[s] there is a “fearful symmetry” between the past and present’ (Wilson 2016, 250).
19 In order to think through Lacks and discursive violation, it is necessary to look not only to
20 events of 1951 but also to subsequent narrative constructions that have produced a racialised
21 and gendered phantasmagoria.
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36 The question of rights over human tissue was addressed in the landmark Supreme Court
37 of California case, *Moore v. Regents of the University of California* (1990). The case was filed
38 by John Moore, who in 1976 had been treated for hairy cell leukaemia at the UCLA Medical
39 Center, and whose cancer cells had been developed into a commercialised cell line. The court
40 ruled that a person’s discarded tissue and cellular material are not their property and may be
41 commercialised, but that physicians have an obligation to reveal any commercial interest in
42 collected human tissue or cells. Today, in the United States (and elsewhere), permission is
43 required for the extraction of any human tissue, but the California Supreme Court decision has
44 meant most rulings on commercialisation of human tissue have not gone in the favour of
45 complainant families. The victories won by the Lacks family, therefore, in terms of recognition
46 and consent, have been driven less by legal obligation than by questions of reputation and
47 respect, in the context of evolving medical bioethics. The issues of consent which HeLa
48 negotiates are by no means particular to institutional practices in the United States. The UK’s
49 Human Tissue Act was revised in 2004 in the wake of the Alder Hey hospital scandal
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3 (involving the widespread retention of children's organs for research, without parental
4 permission) in order to address deficiencies in The Human Tissue Act 1961 that did not require
5 explicit familial consent for tissue retention. As Alder Hey showed, changes in bioethics
6 practices often emerge as a result of narrativised, affective public understandings. Similarly, it
7 is in becoming an emotive cultural narrative that Lacks' case has informed a fuller
8 understanding of what it means to instrumentalise the diseased body.
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16 **HeLa and Performance: Black Female Corporeal Historiography**

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18 Performing arts, understood broadly, have in common a condition of ephemerality that renders
19 their relationship to memory and to archivable materiality particularly complex. In a nuanced
20 discussion of three bioart installations that utilised HeLa cells by, variously, projecting the cells
21 in microscopic view, admixing them with the blood of an artist, and juxtaposing them with a
22 photograph of Lacks, Adele Senior considers the implications of such artistic practices for
23 thinking through the forms of archival and memory work they (and by extension, HeLa cells)
24 might manifest. Drawing on Rebecca Schneider's account of flesh as non-archivable, Senior
25 notes that HeLa cells confound dominant archival logic: 'In material terms, the ability of HeLa
26 cells to divide infinitely and reproduce undermines the archive in which "flesh is given to be
27 that which slips away"', as Schneider contends [...]. In the case of these cells, flesh does remain'
28 (Senior 2011, 514). Detecting the productive ambiguity of HeLa's ontology as a biological
29 archive, Senior further observes that the use of HeLa cells and other biological materials in art
30 'alludes to what Schneider calls flesh memory as a "genetic" memory that is repeated and that
31 remains in the replication of HeLa cells. Fundamentally, archives negotiate memory, and a
32 crucial capacity, Senior argues, of the more successful of the bioart pieces that she examines
33 concerns memory work: 'What reappears is the memory of Henrietta Lacks, which is
34 disavowed in the storing, use and the making knowable of HeLa as a biological tool within the
35 scientific community' (Senior 2011, 522). While they share comparatively little in terms of
36 performance form and ethical preoccupation, bioart practices and theatrical practices that are
37 responsive to Lacks/HeLa exist at the intersection of bodily remains, cultural memory, and
38 aestheticised (or staged) appearance.
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55 What particular modes of memory work may be accessible to stage performers? Adura
56 Onashile's solo performance in *HeLa* is situated in the thick of ethical issues regarding
57 Lacks/HeLa, memory, family and consent. But where bioart employs techniques of
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3 extracorporeality (utilising parts of a body situated outside the body), Onashile's theatrical
4 production foregrounds the expressive, intersubjective potential of the actorly human form to
5 move between identities, to imagine and present narratives associated with Lacks and other
6 individuals via the living, performing human body. Onashile's work demonstrates an explicit
7 dramaturgical and socio-political interest in Lacks' life and in the far-reaching legacies of the
8 HeLa cell line for Lacks' family. With its use of dramatic text and multi-role theatrical form,
9 *HeLa* represents, on the whole, a more accessible example than the more austere mode of bioart
10 installation. A black woman's body is explicitly to the fore here, and in Onashile's
11 corporealisation, Lacks and the bodies of her kin, as well as those of scientists, are theatrically
12 surrogated. With Onashile as both writer and performer, *HeLa* exemplifies the importance of
13 black women's artistic authorship and embodiment for undertaking the gendered, racialised
14 and historicised processes of coming to know Lacks, and of making Lacks known. Onashile's
15 work forms a testing ground for a black female corporeal historiography.

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Theatrical productions like *HeLa* that represent the lives of real people can bring into sharp relief the ways in which the role of theatre maker overlaps with that of the historian or public educator. When the subjects of a project are perceived to have been disempowered in life, biographical artistic representation merges with a political and ethical imperative to reframe historical narratives. Like many artistic responses to Lacks/HeLa, Onashile's production was informed by Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* and had its starting point in a narrativised moral template of a woman violated by medical science. Vanessa Northington Gamble identifies troubling implications of Skloot's book for public knowledge on race and medical bioethics, arguing that 'it views the history of African Americans in medicine and bioethics exclusively through the lens of exploitation, powerlessness, and victimization' (Northington Gamble 2014). Northington Gamble was Chair of the committee that obtained an apology from President Bill Clinton over the Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male (1932–1972), in which the US Department of Health recruited African American men, allowing untreated subjects to die from the curable disease. In Skloot's account of this egregious study, the men are the epitome of vulnerability and victimhood, but Northington Gamble considers 'how the unexamined use of the description, "poor, uneducated sharecroppers" obscures the men's individuality and resilience' (Northington Gamble 2014). Northington Gamble argues that, as 'the most widely known episodes in the history of African Americans and American medicine and biomedical research' (Northington Gamble 2014) HeLa and Tuskegee have shaped certain popular perceptions and obscured others.

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Political and cultural responses to past injustice go some way towards answering a question posed at the start of this essay: how might we historicise informed consent?³ The presidential apology issued for Tuskegee demonstrates that historicisation can co-exist with a belated acceptance of responsibility for wrongdoing. Clinton's apology, moreover, highlights the power of performance to symbolically elevate informed consent to a universal value, even though it is, in legal terms, an historically-specific innovation. Meanwhile, Northington Gamble's attentiveness to the characterisation of minoritised people performs a kind of socio-cultural historicisation, and a warning against equating structural racism with personal deficiency. If residues of the prevailing victimhood tropes associated with Lacks filter into Onashile's *HeLa*, her performance does more overall to resist them via a creative synthesis of documentary imagery, biography, and perhaps most importantly, a bodily representation of Lacks. By inserting the embodied imagination of theatre into the spaces between prevailing historical accounts, Onashile is able to acknowledge histories of violation – contextualised by racist and sexist institutional legacies – and at the same time, open up motifs that forge images of corporeal self-possession.

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Performances of *HeLa* have taken place in theatres and medical schools, and at arts and science festivals, attesting to the work's purposing in both performing arts and science communication contexts. In a production at the multi-arts Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art in Gateshead, UK (June 2014) – which forms the Vimeo-hosted video archive of *HeLa* from which this analysis draws – Onashile performed in one of the converted industrial spaces of the large 1950s flour mill, in an end-on theatrical configuration. The set design consisted of two wooden stools, a lectern, a blackboard, and a mortuary stretcher, evocative of a scientific demonstration or teaching space. *HeLa* merges several theatrical modes: performance lecture, physical theatre, and dramatic script. Onashile moves between these as she constructs a narrative that is as interested in scientific discovery as in the life of Henrietta Lacks. The piece's opening moments are evocative of the final preparatory acts before a scientific lecture: holding a clipboard and a piece of chalk, Onashile-as-scientist begins to write onto the blackboard's pre-drawn grid: a series of 4-letter codes that she reads from her clipboard: capital letter, lower case, capital letter, lower case. During these first few minutes, audience members find their seats and continue conversations, which gradually subside. Onashile wears a plain white dress, cut just over the shoulders and knees in a generically 1950s fashion, which cross-signifies in performance as a medical practitioner's uniform or hospital gown, depending on context. Having completed four long columns of 4-letter codes, Onashile pauses, contemplates the

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3 board, and returns to the lectern. She studies her papers, stares for a moment at the mortuary
4 stretcher, and returns once more to the board, where she proceeds to cross out the first column
5 of codes, the scratch of chalk on blackboard rhythmic, decisive. This sequence of action is
6 repeated, more rapidly the second time, as every one of the codes is crossed out. The codes
7 represent George Gey's numerous failed attempts at creating a cell line prior to his success
8 with HeLa. Momentarily, Onashile becomes a theatricalised proxy for Gey. The connection
9 between the 4-letter codes and the mortuary stretcher, used to transport and examine the dead,
10 is established with wordless clarity. Some six minutes into the performance, Onashile looks
11 into the audience and speaks: 'On January the 29th 1951, a 30-year-old woman walked into the
12 coloured section of the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. She had a pain in her abdomen.
13 Her examination would conclude she had a malignant tumour to the left opening of the cervix'.
14 Onashile's tone communicates lucid, measured interest, its purpose to inform and engage. But
15 this opening lecture-text also draws on emotional registers familiar to storytelling, and it is
16 established that when Lacks' examining doctor took a biopsy of her cervical tumour, 'he hadn't
17 asked her permission. Nobody ever asked'. These economical lines determine that an absence
18 of informed consent derives from a failure of medical practitioners to initiate it.

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31 Following the opening sequence of *HeLa*, the stage darkens and Onashile lies down on
32 the mortuary stretcher, a simple wheeled object with a plain metal frame and single wooden
33 shelf. Onashile's body is momentarily still, and then nearly imperceptibly begins to lift
34 upwards, in waves: first her chest, then head, then limbs, until almost her entire body, from
35 neck to heel, arches up in an astonishing spasmodic movement. Each movement is
36 accompanied by a buzzing, pulsing sound effect, evoking Lacks' physical suffering, and
37 perhaps also the radium and x-ray treatment that she underwent at Johns Hopkins Hospital –
38 consisting, as Lucey et al report, of '4800 mg-h of radium and 11500 R (roentgen) of deep x-
39 ray' (Lucey et al 2009, 1463). Onashile revises this sequence of movements throughout the
40 performance, creating an embodied repetition of the human suffering at the root of HeLa's
41 creation. For reviewer and theatre practitioner Terry O'Donovan, Onashile's physicality
42 corresponded with the prevailing cultural perception of Lacks' disempowerment: he describes
43 a 'repeated movement sequence that invokes the pain inflicted upon Lacks and her family as a
44 result of actions that were completely out of their hands' (O'Donovan 2013). This reading,
45 strikingly, reduces Lacks' cancer treatment (which was cutting-edge for its time, if not
46 ultimately successful ['The Legacy', Johns Hopkins, no date]) to the deliberate infliction of
47 pain, rather than an attempt to cure; as such, it demonstrates a cultural-critical readiness to
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3 overdetermine an image of Lacks as victim. To read these physical theatre sequences merely
4 as representations of physical trauma is to overlook the layered implications of Onashile's
5 remarkable embodiment, and the dramaturgy of the sequences. The deep arch that Onashile
6 achieves from her prone position on the mortuary stretcher, along with the otherworldly
7 lighting effect of a narrowly directed blue wash, constructs an optical illusion of levitation. The
8 last time Onashile performs the sequence, she pulls her body up into a full back bridge, while
9 her recorded narratorial voice describes HeLa's capacity to contaminate other cell lines, and to
10 survive outside of tissue culture medium, becoming airborne. Audiences are made witness
11 simultaneously to the bodily expertise of the professional performer and to the body in pain
12 that it indexes. Onashile's iteration of these movement sequences functions corporeally to
13 invest a notion of liveness, experienced via the intensified co-presence of bodies in the space
14 of theatre, into the represented body of Lacks, shifting an image of suffering towards a kind of
15 transcendence.
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26 Onashile's theatricalisation of scientific practice weaves historically-derived
27 dramatisation with projections of archival film and photography, including scientific
28 instruments, biomedical researchers at work, and microscopic images of replicating cells. After
29 the first corporealisation of Lacks' painful, levitating spasms, and moments before Onashile
30 stands up from the stretcher, a shimmering projection comes into view of two cells under a
31 microscope. They are dividing, replicating: Lacks' death has segued into her immortal cellular
32 life. Over the course of the production, a video installation of slow-moving cells spreads its
33 way across walls and ceiling of the theatre space, a visualisation of their unstoppable growth
34 that renders as art the microscopic world that scientific technology has made visible (if not
35 fully comprehensible). An important element of the work's dramaturgy is projected black and
36 white archival recordings of biomedical laboratory practice, which accompany several précis
37 of HeLa's history, starting with Gey's innovations. Onashile transitions between lecturer-
38 narrator and character as she embodies key figures in the story. One of these is Gey's
39 Laboratory Assistant, Mary Kubicek, whose role as the person who first cultured HeLa from
40 Lacks' biopsy tissue was discussed above. Here, Onashile's text is derived in part from the
41 interview with Kubicek that Curtis excerpts in his documentary, *The Way of All Flesh* (1997).
42 Onashile's characterisation of Kubicek presents a markedly more naïve, even scientifically
43 disinterested, demeanour than that of the woman herself as is detectable from the historical
44 footage. Onashile's Kubicek remarks, dismissively, 'well, it can wait till I've finished my
45 lunch', before explaining the technical process she will undertake to culture the tissue, in a tone
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3 akin to a faintly bored student reciting a lesson (this section appears to be adapted from Skloot's
4 account of a more conscientious Mary). Inevitably, Onashile's rendering implies that Gey, and
5 not an assistant, is the singular innovator of HeLa. As the theatrical narrative unfolds, the names
6 of Gey and other male scientists are written on the blackboard, their historical significance
7 inscribed. This characterisation of Kubicek reinscribes the traditional gendered power
8 dynamics of the lab, to which Weasel attests in the passage cited above.
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14 If Onashile's characterisation of key scientific figures does little to intervene in
15 conventional narratives of male technological genius, her enactment of Lacks family members
16 in the 1950s and their response to learning about HeLa's existence in the 1970s are more
17 generative of renewed understandings. A passage of text imagines the Lacks family's visit to
18 hospital, several young children in tow, the adults mistrustful of the intentions of medical
19 practitioners; this shifts to a scene in the 1970s, in which Lacks' daughter Deborah grapples
20 with a resurgent grief upon learning that her mother is somehow 'still alive'. Deborah explains
21 that she has found herself making a collection of Mother's Day cards, for all those Lacks never
22 lived to receive. It is an act that Deborah acknowledges is not rational, but is a response to what
23 she cannot help but imagine as her mother's now un-final death. Deborah opens a wooden
24 display cupboard that contains numerous of these cards, intimate epistles to a loved one, and
25 objects signifying a complicated and uneasy grief. The cards surround a wooden crucifix and
26 a photograph of Lacks, transforming the display into a shrine of sorts. She speaks of childhood
27 memories, of how her mother loved to hum and would hum her to sleep at night. In subsequent
28 scenes, Deborah's personification of HeLa in the form of her mother is agitated: she speculates
29 that Henrietta would be angry about what scientists have done to her cells, and indeed, that
30 perhaps she does know, perhaps she can still hear. These deeply felt filial imaginings of what
31 the immortal cell line might conceivably mean for the human being that Lacks was – and may
32 in some capacity remain – are, as audience members will of course be aware, not realistic, but
33 they function as affective expressions of the new conceptual and emotional horizons that have
34 accompanied the advent of cellular immortality. In other words, Deborah's anguished
35 speculations are an entirely comprehensible component of what HeLa's immortality means as
36 a popularised idea.
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54 Deborah's affecting scenes are counterpoised by the lecturer-narrator's descriptions of
55 the cells' immortality – phrases such as, 'they'll never stop living [...] year after year after
56 year', which put an ostensibly objective account of HeLa's immortality in clear continuity with
57 the sentiments of the Lacks family. The effect is to suggest that the family are not merely
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3 proponents of an irrational – and more pointedly, uneducated perspective on HeLa – but that
4 theirs is a psychologically legitimate and indeed more widely expressed ambivalence about the
5 form of life the cell line represents. Hannah Landecker emphasises that accounts of HeLa as
6 immortal that circulate in cultural public discourse should not be assumed to be any less
7 informed, or informative; as she puts it, ‘public discourses of life and death’ that are embedded
8 in ‘accounts of HeLa are not just “popular” renditions of science but ways that scientists
9 themselves narrate assumption-altering, philosophically disturbing technical change in their
10 practices and objects. It would be utterly artificial to demarcate “scientific” from “popular”
11 narratives’ (Landecker 2007, 161). Landecker’s identification here of ‘popular’ may be said to
12 encompass the understandings of the Lacks family, though their position is unique: as family,
13 their ‘renditions’ of HeLa are shot through with grief and emergent familial pride, and as people
14 who have been in direct communication with Johns Hopkins scientists over the years, they are
15 situated as at the vanguard of scientific narration of scientific practice. And of course, in artistic
16 works such as Onashile’s *HeLa*, the Lacks’ family’s understanding becomes enfolded back into
17 public cultural narrative.
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30 The play’s integration of an embodied engagement with Lacks as a young, vibrant
31 woman with renderings of her body in pain operate in conjunction with the visual motif of
32 proliferating cells, whose projected images spread across the performance space. The embodied
33 and the visual form the basis for a racialised opening up of how Lacks and HeLa are to be
34 imagined. Key philosophical frameworks assist in this opening up that the play suggests,
35 specifically in terms of thinking capaciously about the ‘infrastructural change’ (Landecker
36 2007, 142), to which Landecker refers, to the nature of human life. Onashile’s *HeLa* shows us
37 potential versions or stages of a human life, from wellness to illness to cellular remains. In her
38 landmark ‘A Cyborg Manifesto’ (1985), feminist and posthumanist philosopher Donna
39 Haraway articulates the dissolving of former binaries that the so-called cyborg era represents:
40 ‘Late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between
41 natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other
42 distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly
43 lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert’ (Haraway 1985, 11). Bound up with this disturbing
44 quality are the political implications of radically decentralising the human, which are
45 inescapable for our species: as Haraway writes, ‘we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated
46 hybrids of machine and organism—in short, cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us
47 our politics. The cyborg is a condensed image of both imagination and material reality, the two
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3 joined centers structuring any possibility of historical transformation' (Haraway 1985, 7).
4 Haraway emphasises the 'ubiquity and invisibility' (Haraway 1985, 13) of new technologies,
5 and her observations are applicable to the machines that mediate biological research.
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9 But as a conceptual framework for reading Onashile's *HeLa*, Haraway's cyborg
10 philosophy takes us only so far, precisely because her account of cyborg politics runs the risk
11 of occluding race (and gender) from the fabrications of posthumanism. Afrofuturist thinking,
12 in contrast, explicitly resists such occlusion. Advocating a vision of the technological that
13 'looks backward and forward in seeking to provide insights about identity, [...] that asks what
14 was and what if' (Nelson 2002, 4), Alondra Nelson strikes a warning to the potential
15 implications of the cyborgian posthuman:
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21 The racialized digital divide narrative that circulates in the public sphere and the
22 bodiless, color-blind mythotopias of cybertheory and commercial advertising have
23 become the unacknowledged frames of reference for understanding race in the digital
24 age. In these frameworks, the technologically enabled future is by its very nature
25 unmoored from the past and from people of color. (Nelson 2002, 6)
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30 While Haraway 'would rather be a cyborg than a goddess' (Haraway 1985, 68) – a statement
31 that signifies a rejection of mythic constructions of gender, even those that might ostensibly
32 empower the female – Nelson reminds us of what is at stake when 'Blackness gets constructed
33 as always oppositional to technologically driven chronicles of progress' (Nelson 2002, 1). In
34 Onashile's play, thematic touchstones that are sometimes pitted at odds in narrativisations of
35 Lacks' life and legacy – blackness and biotechnology, womanhood and medical expertise – are
36 contained by the material specificity of Onashile's solo performing body. As she moves from
37 medical professional to patient under treatment, her taut choreography and vocal acuity moving
38 with deliberation between these representations, Onashile invites her audiences to hold an
39 intellectual and emotional space in which Lacks might be both an object and agent of progress,
40 both a site and creator of knowledge. In this way, Onashile's performance may be read as subtly
41 Afrofuturist, placing a black female performing body at the centre of a theatrical exploration
42 into Lacks/HeLa's biotechnological legacy.
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53 If semantic slippages between the fecundity of Lacks as a female body that had birthed
54 five children and the site of her cancer at the neck of her birth canal have the potential to reduce
55 her to an object of reproduction – this a vivid component of the Lacks/HeLa phantasmagoria –
56 the means by which HeLa cells reproduce might resist this confluence of ill-fated gendered and
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3 sexed imagery. Donna Haraway's description of cyborgian modes of reproduction and the new
4 cultural metaphors they bring forth is instructive here: 'organisms and organismic, holistic
5 politics depend on metaphors of rebirth and invariably call on the resources of reproductive
6 sex. I would suggest that cyborgs have more to do with regeneration and are suspicious of the
7 reproductive matrix and of most birthing' (Haraway 1985, 67). For Haraway, the cyborg
8 inaugurates an era of liberatory potential to evade gender: 'We require regeneration, not rebirth,
9 and the possibilities for our reconstitution include the utopian dream of the hope for a
10 monstrous world without gender' (Haraway 1985, 67). To perceive HeLa cells in some kind of
11 continuity with Lacks does require that the sexed and gendered body be addressed and possibly
12 superseded in the way Haraway implies.

21 Onashile's theatrical vision of Lacks' contribution to scientific innovation does not
22 mean that *HeLa* underplays the ways race, disempowerment and mistrust are threaded through
23 Lacks' story. Onashile's playtext describes disturbing histories of unethical studies undertaken
24 on African Americans, including the Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male
25 (1932–1972), before she pivots from the structural to the deeply personal in an imagining of
26 Lacks' inner life via a moving vignette in which Lacks decides during a ride on a Ferris wheel
27 to tell two female cousins about her cancer diagnosis. From the momentary liberation of the
28 ride's height, Onashile's Lacks perceives the stars more brightly than she ever had before (a
29 detail she adds to Skloot's account of this moment). Onashile segues into a narration of Lacks'
30 cells being the first human cells sent into space, in 1960, on a Russian satellite. This composite
31 of a life and its cellular remains – an integration of socio-political context and a posthuman
32 horizon – presents a woman simultaneously framed by, but also exceeding the limitations of,
33 her race, class and era. In his review of HeLa for *The Lancet*, science journalist Peter
34 Ranscombe praised Onashile's approach: 'Skloot's book left me feeling uneasy, especially in
35 the way that Lacks and other African Americans were treated by clinicians and researchers. By
36 contrast, Onashile's play for me celebrated the scientific achievements that flowed from Lacks'
37 cells being cultured' (Ranscombe 2013, 459). It is unclear whether Ranscombe's feeling of
38 unease was due to concerns (akin to those of Northington Gamble) over the reductive
39 implications of Skloot's account, or simply to the reality of racialised exploitation in the
40 biomedical domain. The manner in which Ranscombe phrases his praise, that is, from the
41 perspective of cell culturing *per se*, as opposed to an act performed by a human, does tend to
42 distance act of culturing from the culture of humans. Ranscombe's recollection of a celebratory
43 affect appears to respond to the holistic way in which Onashile's *HeLa* characterises Lacks in
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3 life: her narrator-lecturer describes a stylish, physically strong woman who wore vibrant red
4 nail polish on her fingers and toes, and who loved to go dancing. Such descriptions are
5 contained in Skloot's book, but Onashile's embodiment renders them theatrically present,
6 rather than eulogic, as she dances to a rapid piano ragtime tune, knees drawn up high and fast,
7 her body dynamic, jubilant.
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14 **Conclusion: Immortal Life?**

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16 The way in which HeLa cells occupy space is unusual. The cells do not require a glass surface
17 to grow and as such, their potential to take up space is expansive. There are an estimated 50
18 million metric tonnes of HeLa cells in existence in labs around the world. For Timothy Morton,
19 the hyperobject demands perspectival shifts that, he contends, are cognate with the necessity
20 for human perception of vast environmental crises. HeLa is a human remain and is prolific in
21 its modes and spaces of remaining – in other words, it instantiates both the noun and verb forms
22 of 'remain' by way of its post-death dynamism. HeLa pushes against dominant frameworks of
23 knowledge about human life and death, but also of that which connects lives. If we understand
24 living bodies as containers and transmitters of memory, blood relationships as embodied
25 genealogy, what forms of transmission do immortal cells manifest? While it is tempting to
26 compare HeLa's immortality to genetic bonds across generations, HeLa is, if understood as a
27 hyperobject, effectively unitary. HeLa's immortality is perhaps, therefore, best imagined in
28 terms of a form of life that defies normative spatio-temporal bounds. From this juncture, it may
29 be possible to imagine Lacks' 'immortal' life and its negotiation in creative works such as
30 Onashile's *HeLa* in terms of an ineluctable, biotechnologically mediated, process of remaining.
31 To return to a question posed at the start of this essay, such ineluctable remaining may be
32 conceptualised as a form that post-mortem agency might take.
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46 Of course, as an artform that prioritises the integrity of the living human body, theatrical
47 performance sounds a warning against philosophical readings of Lacks/HeLa that might
48 radically decentre the singular human body, and more specifically, marginalise the embodied
49 realities of black womanhood. Here, another of this essay's key questions returns to the frame:
50 how might the work of biotechnology intersect with the work of anti-racism? In Onashile's
51 theatrical account of Lacks/HeLa, the actor's presentation in the performance's silent opening
52 minutes of biotechnological research expertise becomes continuous with her embodiment of
53 its human subject, so that each may be read as contained within the other. If, as I have
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3 suggested, Onashile opens the performance as a theatricalised proxy for Gey, her body
4 demands creative contemplation of Gey's proximity to Lacks. It is through such slippages
5 between character(s) and bodies on stage that biographical theatre registers differently for an
6 audience from literary biography. Theatrical performance is able to make HeLa 'known' in
7 ways that are susceptible to capacious or unbounded visions of life.
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12 Landecker describes the revelatory nature of the emergence in biological science of a
13 geographically and temporally dispersed object: 'With the advent of continuous cell lines that
14 could (apparently) be infinitely reproduced and widely distributed, a much more literal way for
15 different biologists in different times and places to work on "the same thing" became possible'
16 (Landecker 2007, 141). While she does not use the terminology of the hyperobject, Landecker
17 is here describing one of the most critical impacts for science of a unitary entity that exists on
18 an effectively limitless scale. Landecker identifies a
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25 slippage between the literary or citational presence of HeLa and its material ubiquity.

26 Where HeLa cells are, and how they are cited, provides material and literary tangibility
27 for the "body" of knowledge being generated in an increasingly large-scale biomedical
28 research enterprise. A constant preoccupation with mass – what she would weigh now
29 – accompanies the discussion of this scientific corpus. (Landecker 2007, 162)
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34 As a network of relations and effects that is also an effectively inconceivable object, HeLa fits
35 the definition of a hyperobject as Morton theorises it. Nevertheless, it is important to query just
36 how far and how positively capacious conceptualisations of HeLa as disembodied life might
37 serve Lacks' memory, recasting her in agentive terms. The cells that have outlived Lacks
38 caused her death precisely because of their encroaching capacity – that is, because of what the
39 cells took from her. Wilson describes common social-familial attitudes to the scientific use of
40 human tissue, citing UK research wherein 'interviews with parents of children undergoing
41 cancer treatment show they view tumour samples as external to their child and as having an
42 intruder status. Many strongly support the use of these tissues in research and see it as a means
43 of reciprocating the free care their children receive' (Wilson 2016, 255). Members of the Lacks
44 family have expressed pride in the biomedical advances that have been made with the
45 assistance of HeLa cells, but this does not negate the relevance of cancer's 'intruder' status to
46 a comprehensive remembering of Lacks – as Onashile's complex theatrical embodiment
47 implies. For this reason, while it may be materially and ethically appropriate to reify Lacks as
48 a contributor to biomedical science, it is perhaps less so to describe her as a *participant* in the
49 root sense of that term: *sharing in*. A conception of HeLa as hyperobject, then, involves a
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3 sensitive historiography: it understands HeLa as cause of great suffering and an unbounded,
4 living remain.⁴
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7 The perspectival shifts that philosophical readings of HeLa facilitate can create space
8 for renewing the stories we tell about Henrietta Lacks and her immortal cells. The capacity to
9 derive knowledge from HeLa has been claimed by different stakeholders across different
10 disciplines. Northington Gamble offers her own estimation of how Lacks' descendants,
11 contrary to dominant narratives of disempowerment, have claimed their relationship to HeLa:
12 'Their actions make plain that their history should be viewed as one that moves beyond
13 victimization to accomplishment. Now, when considering the family's strengths, my students
14 need look no further than their successful negotiations with the NIH to be granted some control
15 as to how the HeLa genome is used in research' (Northington Gamble 2014). The Lacks family
16 have asserted rights associated with new forms of relatedness, making their case for kinship
17 rights over cellular remains. At the same time, HeLa continues to confound the definitional
18 frames that would hold it in place: dispersed, globalised, even cast into space, these cells ask
19 us – bearers of human bodies and continual discarders of our own cellular tissue – to remember
20 and rethink Henrietta Lacks in and beyond her human life.
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¹ Lacks/HeLa has inspired a number of cultural and artistic projects, including a documentary film directed by Adam Curtis, *The Way of All Flesh* (1997); an influential non-fiction book, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (2010) by Rebecca Skloot; an HBO feature film derived from the book, directed by George C. Wolfe and starring Oprah Winfrey (2017); and a digital memoir by Lacks' son Lawrence Lacks and his wife Bobbette, *HeLa Family Stories* (2013). Lacks/HeLa has generated several visual arts and installation projects. In 2018, an oil portrait by Kadir Nelson, commissioned by HBO in association with the film, *Henrietta Lacks (HeLa): The Mother of Modern Medicine*, was jointly acquired by the National Museum of African American History of Culture and the National Portrait Gallery. As part of her Dream Anatomy series (2008-) British textile artist Rachel Wright created a dress inspired by the cell line and made of recycled materials, 'HeLa Cell/Tree of Life', while several Bioart projects have used HeLa cells to explore issues of bioethics and consent (see Senior 2011). A permanent gallery established in 2019 at London's Wellcome Collection, 'Being Human', contains a vial of HeLa cells and an image of Lacks. African American artists have sought to integrate HeLa into an Afrofuturist aesthetic philosophy that undertakes techno-futurist speculations by and for black people: examples include the theatrical production *HeLa*

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4 by J. Nicole Brooks, staged in Chicago in 2018; *Colored People Time*, curated by Meg Onli at the Institute of
5 Contemporary Art of the University of Pennsylvania in 2019; and *Project LHAXX*, by black collective
6 Intergalactic Soul, shown at Ackland Art Museum, Chapel Hill, North Carolina in 2020. While not all of these
7 works contribute to phantasmagoric imaginings of Lacks / HeLa, like most works on the subject, they share
8 dominant assumptions regarding their subject's victimhood.
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14 ² Following its Edinburgh premiere, an international tour of HeLa in 2014 mapped an itinerary of sites
15 imbricated in histories of colonialism and/or slavery: Mumbai, Delhi, and Bangalore, India; Rio de Janeiro,
16 Brazil; St Ann's, Trinidad; Kingston, Jamaica; Grahamstown, South Africa; Dunedin, Christchurch, Wellington,
17 and Auckland, New Zealand; and in 2015, Harare, Zimbabwe (*Made in Scotland*). Onashile also undertook UK
18 tours in 2014.
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24 ³ The dilemma of historicising informed consent and its intersection with structural racism as well as gender is
25 addressed by Sara Spettel and Mark Donald White (2011) in their analysis of Dr. J. Marion Sims surgical legacy
26 vis-à-vis gynaecological surgery performed on African American women.
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⁴ Similar sensitivities surrounding the notion of a 'living remain' are associated with practices of repatriation of
indigenous human remains from museums; from a performance studies perspective, the ceremonial element of
repatriation events is critical for reckoning with traumatic histories and integrating the dead into postcolonial
cultural memory. See Emma Cox, 'Economies of Atonement in the European Museum: Repatriation and the
Post-Rational'. *Performances of Capitalism, Crises and Resistance: Inside/Outside Europe*, ed. Marilena
Zaroulia and Philip Hager. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2015. 211-231.

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3 **Title:** Performing HeLa: Theatrical Bodies and Living Remains
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5 medhum-2022-012524.R1
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7 **Submission:** Original research [revised submission following peer review]
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11 **Responses to Peer Review 1:**
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- 13 • Observations have been included on page 13 on performance as an ephemeral form,
14 and integrated into a discussion of memory and archiving of performance.
15
- 16 • Re images: I have contacted the producers of Adura Onashile's *HeLa*, Brennan artists,
17 and will include an image if possible, with appropriate permissions.
18
- 19 • Re 'hysteria': While this is a fascinating reading, a discussion of the trope of hysteria
20 here would take the essay on a tangent, and risk undermining the claims made
21 regarding contribution and science; moreover, I would not read Onashile spasmodic
22 choreography as a rendering of 'hysteria' because of the way in which the actor
23 achieves a slow and precise series of movements, highly controlled.
24
- 25 • I have added a footnote on the repatriation of remains connection and a reference to
26 an essay that I have published on the topic, specifically concerned with repatriation
27 ceremonies at museums. The corresponding item has been added to the bibliography.
28
- 29 • Dr Marion Sims is now referenced in footnote 3. Spettel and White are added to the
30 bibliography.
31
- 32 • The sentence that starts 'HeLa is most often encountered indirectly' has been split
33 into two (p.6).
34
- 35 • The sentence that starts 'In an analysis of the perceived relevance' has been
36 rearranged and simplified (p.7).
37
- 38 • Typographical error corrected: 'but it also involves the Morehouse School' (p.11).
39
- 40 • Typographical error corrected: 'The issues of consent which' (p.13)
41
- 42 • The word 'easily' has been deleted on p.15.
43
- 44 • Structure: I have grappled with the issue of where in the essay the analysis of the
45 theatrical production commences, and ultimately, made the decision to dedicate the
46 second half of the essay to the performance analysis, and the first to contextualisation
47 and synthesis of key issues. I have nevertheless sought to offer a precis of the
48 performance, and to identify the unique capacities of theatrical performance, early in
49 the piece. I welcome editorial feedback on this issue of structure, as appropriate.
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- Footnote 1 was originally in the body of the article but I found that it deferred the performance analysis too much; given that it contains significant prose in list form, rather than argumentation, I would prefer to leave it as a footnote.

Responses to Peer Review 2:

- Key questions not addressed in the essay's concluding sections:
 - how might the work of biotechnology intersect with the work of anti-racism? This is now addressed on pages 21-22.
 - How should we historicise informed consent? This is now addressed on pp.14-15 re consent and the Tuskegee apology and on p.16 re Lacks.
 - What are the forms that agency might take? This is now addressed on page 21 re ineluctable agency.
 - On what terms does artistic work make Lacks and HeLa known? This is now addressed on page 22.
- The terminology of 'agency' has been removed, with the 'unwitting' and 'constitutive' argument still in place. In this way, Lacks' profound contribution is claimed, without implying her intention. The statement that 'Lacks' agency outlives her cognitive capacity to claim it' has been deleted.
- The terminology of 'participation' has been removed, and an argument for why it is not appropriate terminology has been inserted on page 23. 'Contribution' has been utilised as an alternative, more appropriate, term.
- On Wilson and tissue extraction: a sentence has been inserted on page 11 vis-à-vis Wilson's claim, specifically addressing why public resistance to medical 'innovation' might not have been prevalent.
- The subheading 'HeLa in the theatre' has been amended. The section has been compressed and edited in order to bring the discussion more quickly to the performance form at hand (theatre); the reading of Senior has been amended to remove the anachronism (straw man argument). Note the trimming of this section also partly addresses the first peer review concerning the deferring of the theatre analysis.
- Re Lacks as 'object and agent of progress': the phrasing in this sentence has been qualified with 'might be' and the discussion has been amended to discuss Onashile's performance of different characters as a series of proxies; the issue of agency, for instance, is framed in terms of the actor's 'guise' as a scientist. The 'connective tissue ... life force' sentence has been removed as it contained vague expression.
- Northington-Gamble's reading of Lacks' case is now described as 'her own' rather than 'a clear eyed'. Greater criticality has been applied to the reading of Ranscombe's theatre review of *HeLa*, though I have not described the subject who undertakes

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3 culturing as ‘white male’ given that in the case of HeLa it was (as discussed in the
4 essay) a female.
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- 6
- 7 • The ‘tropes of exploitation’ phrasing has been removed on p.5 and in the abstract, and
8 the discussion on page 5 and the abstract have been revised.
9
 - 10 • p.19: I cannot find the unfinished sentence that is referred to by the reviewer.
11
 - 12 • The second part of a sentence on p.20 (‘the defined time-space of theatrical
13 performance can suggest a dissolving of distinctions between these versions or
14 phases’) has been deleted, as it was not well supported.
15
 - 16 • p.14 an overview and generic information on Onashile’s work is offered in order to
17 contextualise the production for the reader and lead them into the performance
18 analysis.
19
 - 20 • Clarification of geographical context (US) has been given re informed consent (p.13).
21
 - 22 • The connection between hyperobject and performance analysis now integrated on
23 p.21.
24
 - 25 • Typo p.4: this is not a typo, but I agree that it is grammatically awkward. Ed: I have
26 amended the start of the sentence, to give it greater clarity.
27
 - 28 • Typo p.11: I am not sure what error is being referred to re ‘involves’.
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