

fields harrington

non-exhaustive work

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Is it possible to rethink how immortality is constituted when considering the HeLa cell line? How has the ongoing life of the HeLa cell (which is to say the living force beyond what is observed) complicated or proposed the idea of immortal work or non-exhaustive work? What if we understood the HeLa cell as both captive and fugitive to the conditions of a disembodied imperishable labor time? The etymology of immortality begins around the late 14th century; words that rub around its root are “deathless,” from the Latin *immortalis* which means “undying” (of gods), “imperishable, endless.”¹ Henrietta Lacks’ disembodied self could be understood as imperishable and as such an entity that leans into a state of foreverness. It’s not that Henrietta Lacks the person is literally “undying” nor are the HeLa cells. ● The work of the HeLa cell is uncontested²: HeLa cells have made possible a connection between HPV and cervical cancer, as well as the role of telomerase in preventing chromosome degradation; in 1953 HeLa cells were the first human cells to be successfully cloned by Theodore Puck and Philip I. Marcus;³ in 1953 a cell culture factory was established at Tuskegee University to supply Jonas Salk and other labs with HeLa cells⁴; in 1960 HeLa cells brought forth the birth of space cell biology and the cells were grown in zero gravity; in 1972 HeLa cells were actively used in the international cancer control program with the participation of physicians around the world⁵, and in 2019 a team of virologists found that the Zika virus could not multiply in HeLa cells⁶. But understanding the HeLa cell’s activity and behavior as a social formation of labor obfuscates as much as it illustrates the constitutive elements of observation and discovery (as modes of power, violence, accumulation, and dispossession), and the forms of uninformed consent that enable these processes⁷. How does the ongoing afterlife of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and its conditions of captivity, predate and prefigure the containment and capture of the HeLa cells? To follow Hortense Spillers: what enables the breach of Henrietta Lacks’ biological jurisdiction is an antecedent “hieroglyphics of the flesh,” a violent capture and containment that allowed for the cell to ever be treated as a specimen in the “first” place, to be collected

and
put to work on and beyond the floors of the laboratory at John Hopkins University. The HeLa cell demonstrates how the hieroglyphics of the flesh control and contain all black matter, and not only the racialized surface of *flesh*. Lacks’ cells become *raw material*, treated as a biological substance, and the instruments used by cell biology research reinscribe the markings of political violence projected onto the epidermal surface of captive bodies. In this instance, the removal of Lacks’ cellular body demonstrates the figuration of a sentient, alien, expandable, and non-human substance as a profitable and intensified “atomizing” of the captive body.⁸ However my reading of the HeLa cell is not just an example of *hieroglyphics of the flesh*, but an intensification of it. ● Despite the fact that the HeLa cell’s social activity and endless capture are perpetually transforming material in a “determinate fashion” which is *indispensable* for the *reproduction of human society*, it is inadequate to determine the activity and behavior of the HeLa cell as “labor” or “work” from a Marxist position.⁹ If we were to consider the HeLa cell as a commodity from a Marxian standpoint, a formulation of the measurement of the cell’s “labor time”, a quantitative analysis of its social necessity, and a historically specific determination of the cell’s “magnitude of value” would be met with an incalculable aggregate due to the cruel reality of Henrietta Lacks arriving at John Hopkins hospital in severe pain. The condition of Lacks’ suffering and the coercive measures that are taken to remove her cells from her cervix without consent exceeds any figuration and attachment of how “labor” is constituted from a Marxist framework. A different approach would follow Hartman and suggest *fungibility, rather than labor*, as a framework to constitute the social activity, relations, and reproductive force of the HeLa cell. It’s the fungibility of the commodity that permits a continuation of colonial expansion concealed as scientific discovery. Suppose we imagine the HeLa cell’s activity and behavior as fungible, interchangeable, divisible, and endlessly calculable. In that case, it may be rendered within a sociopolitical order that thinks with and against a Marxian analysis of labor. A fungible scientific object has no limits to the ways it can be controlled; whereas a laboring object promises, even if it does not deliver, the limit of the contract, a working day, and a wage. ● If the *work* of the HeLa cell must not be divorced from its cellular captivity, neither should the fantasy of its infinitely inexhaustible *in vitro* reproductive behavior be separated from the structures of *abstract domination* of scientific inquiry. Perhaps, this cellular captivity that I want to address moves with and beyond the notion of fungibility. Henrietta Lacks’ HeLa cells, and their cellular body, are used for producing value, scientific knowledge, and sharing vulnerabilities of the commodity. The cellular body here is harnessed as an instrument for social, analytical, and physical reproduction.¹⁰ For the moment, I want to experiment with engaging the production of scientific research, the desires of scientific knowledge, and the role of social values in the scientific community as forms of what Moishe Postone calls “abstract domination.”¹¹ This particular form of “abstract domination” that I’m framing exceeds the grammar of the contract and how it’s structurally tied to labor. Rather, I want to address a *two-step* in which “abstract domination” is an accretion of *gratuitous violence* and the collaborative activity of scientific inquiry. The accumulation of the HeLa cell is ruled by a system of ‘abstractions’; Lacks’ disembodied cellular self is not solely dominated by Science with a capital S but instead governed by the collaborative activity and production of cell biology research, cryogenic engineers supported by MIT and Harvard Medicine, John Hopkins University, NASA, and others. The figurative seizure and occupation of the Black cellular body and the myriad of its uses are reimagined through the protocols of cell biology and the collection,

observation, and discovery of biospecimens that are extracted without consent. The practices of scientific protocols like the sampling, cloning, necrosis, and freezing of cells are the continuation of *gratuitous violence*.¹² They may, in fact, be the perfection of this violence that emanates from the protocols of scientific techniques. Mundane scientific routines, procedures, and tasks that are shaped by political patronization *perfectly* improve/cultivate the arrangement of slavery and captivity. ● By all means, cervical cancer research remains an important program for the sciences and absolutely necessary as a form of knowledge production in the field of medicine and cell biology. The discoveries from human biospecimen research are critical to medical advances and the reduction of future diseases. However, the measures of extraction that accomplish this knowledge for this particular research program at John Hopkins University were dictated by uninformed consent. More specifically, uninformed consent describes instances in which a patient has not been advised, briefed, or educated about biospecimens (or in this case tissue samples) that will be taken from their body during diagnosis or treatment for the purpose of scientific research. When Henrietta went back to the hospital for a follow-up visit after she received her biopsy report back from the lab she was under the impression that it was a standard procedure of testing and receiving some medicine from the doctor. However, this was not the case. Upon her arrival, she informed the receptionist that she was there for treatment and signed a form with the words OPERATION PERMIT at the top of the page. It said: *I hereby give consent to the staff of The Johns Hopkins Hospital to perform any operative procedure res and under any anesthetic either local or general that they may deem necessary in the proper surgical care and treatment of _____.* ● A nurse guided Henrietta to a section of the ward that was specifically for colored women and was met by a team of white physicians who ran tubes down her throat and performed tests on her urine, lungs, and blood. After this procedural bodily analysis, an unconscious Henrietta lay bare on the operating table, while Dr. Lawrence Wharton Jr. prepared to

treat
the tumor in her cervix. Before he proceeded with the surgery Wharton Jr. severed two small pieces of tissue from Henrietta’s cervix without her consent and without her knowledge. These samples were placed in a glass dish and were delivered to George Otto Gey’s cell biology lab on behalf of the chair of the John Hopkins gynecology department Richard Weseley Te Linde. ● What social and cultural values allow for the minds of George Otto Gey, Richard Wesley Te Linde, and Margaret Gey to arrive at this site of extraction in the name of scientific inquiry?¹³ What are the forces and relations of production and reproduction that constitute scientific inquiry as means of an ongoing project of extraction, containment, and colonial expansion within the Black body? The social determination of scientific inquiry is dependent on internal and external factors in the production of its inquiry. Observing the patterns of funding within the scope of inquiry, what we discover is that the values and interests of scientific research, observation, and inquiry are contingent on corporate and/or government funding. This reliance on external patronization locates the comportment of science in a highly vulnerable position in relation to the origin of its funding. Helen Longino suggests that scientific inquiry is a “collaborative human activity” when addressing the fascination of individual theories, and how these inquiries are shaped within historical, political, and social contexts that have specific goals in its rational mind.¹⁴ A cell biologist like George Otto Gey does not participate in scientific observations of tissue cell cultures in isolation. Gey’s collection of cervical cancer cells commenced with the sponsorship of Richard Wesley Te Linde, the chairman of John Hopkins University’s gynecology department and president of the American Gynecological Society. Te Linde’s participation in the uninformed extractive measures of Lacks’ cells is significant here because Te Linde understands the excess of visitors to the public ward at John Hopkins Hospital as a site of potential research subjects. In other words, Te Linde and Gey believed that free health care for the public meant that those people were an endless supply of research and clinical material.

1 “Immortal (Adj.).” *Etymology Online*, 2017. <https://www.etymonline.com/word/immortal>.
2 In the early stages of writing this text Constantina Zavitsanos and Geelia Ronkina helped me with thinking through how the work of the HeLa cell is uncontested. The conversations and workshoping of my writing happened at the Back Deck Study sessions. It was through these study sessions that Tina and Geelia presented new ways of thinking about the immortality of the cell and its work.
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4 K. A. Brownlee (1955) Statistics of the 1954 Polio Vaccine Trials”, *Journal of the American Statistical Association*, 50:272, 1005-1013, DOI: 10.1080/01621459.1955.10501286.
5 Lyapun, I. & Andrukov, B. & Bynina, M.. (2019). HeLa Cell Culture: Immortal Heritage of Henrietta Lacks. *Molecular Genetics, Microbiology and Virology*. 34. 195-200. 10.3103/S0891416819040050.
6 Li, Li et al. “Attenuation of Zika Virus by Passage in Human HeLa Cells.” *Vaccines* vol. 7,3 93. 20 Aug. 2019, doi:10.3390/vaccines7030093.
7 Saidiya Hartman (2016) *The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women’s Labors, Souls*, 18:1, 166-173, DOI: 10.1080/10999949.2016.1162596 .

8 Spillers, Hortense J. “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.” *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 65-81. <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>, Weheliye, Alexander G. 2014. *Habeas viscus: racializing assemblages, biopolitics, and black feminist theories of the human*.
9 Postone, Moishe. 1996. *Time, labor, and social domination: a reinterpretation of Marx’s critical theory*. Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press.
10 Saidiya Hartman (2016) *The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women’s Labors, Souls*, 18:1, 166-173, DOI: 10.1080/10999949.2016.1162596
11 Postone, Moishe. 1996. *Time, labor, and social domination: a reinterpretation of Marx’s critical theory*. Cambridge [England]: Cambridge University Press.

12 Hartman, Saidiya V. 1997. *Scenes of subjection: terror, slavery, and self-making in nineteenth-century America*.
13 *Science In Society, Science As Social Knowledge: Values And Objectivity In Scientific Inquiry*, Helen E. Longino, Princeton University Press.
14 *ibid*.

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**PLATE
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