

ARTICLE

The HeLa Bomb and the Science of Unveiling

Sandra Harvey

University of California, Santa Cruz

sharvey1@ucsc.edu

In early 1966, geneticist Stanley Gartler provided some upsetting news to the attendees at the Second Decennial Review Conference on Cell Tissue and Organ Culture. He had reviewed some of their work for his study, “Apparent HeLa Cell Contamination of Human Heteroploid Cell Lines” (1968). The HeLa cell line was derived from the biopsy of a squamous cell carcinoma taken from the cervix of Henrietta Lacks, an African-American woman who died from this cancer in 1951. In his presentation, Gartler revealed the HeLa cells’ capacity to pass themselves off as other cells and contaminate the samples with which they came into contact. He was able to identify the HeLa cells because they formed the only cell line included in Gartler’s sample that was derived from a black person. Based on his findings, Gartler argued that much of the attendees’ work was “open to serious question...[and some] would be best discarded” (Gartler, 1968, p. 175). As Robert Stevenson, who later became president of the

American Type Culture Collection, put it, the geneticist “showed up at that meeting with no background or anything else in cell culture and proceeded to drop a turd in the punch bowl” (Skloot, 2011, p. 154). Scientists who attended the conference allegedly referred to this unexpected news as the “HeLa bomb.”¹

This essay returns to the HeLa cell stories and reveals the violence and underlying fear of miscegenation that fed public intrigue at the time. While narratives about HeLa contamination are not new, I ask that we stop to contemplate Gartler’s revelation and its description as a bomb to grasp how race and gender inform contemporary ways of knowing in the United States. Key to comprehending this moment are narratives of black racial passing, which assume a black subject who is able and eager to belie their blackness and pass for white. Scientific racism re-enforced passing narratives through the “one-drop” rule linking blackness to blood, and blood to purity. The rule assumes that black blood is a contaminating substance to which white blood (and any other blood) is vulnerable; if a person had at least a “drop” of black blood, they would be read as black within the United States. Tracing the *accusation* of passing highlights it as an apparatus of knowing the other, a technology of disciplining and surveilling bodies, and a regime for regulating populations. Given this historical context, this essay considers the moment the HeLa cells are

“discovered” to have originated in a black body rather than a white one as an accusation of racial passing leveled at the cells themselves. In doing so, it demonstrates the ways that the accusation of passing, as both an *in vivo* and *in vitro* reading apparatus, becomes an important mechanism for knowing, steeped in epistemological violence.

Considering the accusation of HeLa’s passing allows for a departure from the ways the trope has most often been debated within US literature, film, and socio-cultural studies.² Most scholars have been preoccupied with the “passer” and their alleged strategy rather than the anxiety, excitement, and panic that animate the accuser’s attempts to see, classify, and regulate bodies. In focusing on the “passer’s” agency, such scholarship also often comes close to reducing the passing dynamic to the decisions of an autonomous and rational subject.³ HeLa contamination is an instance in which the passing offender is not a subject but an object—basic biological material. Thus, one must reject much of the journalistic reporting that imbues HeLa with an anthropomorphized agency. At the same time, following the lead of Mel Chen (2012) and New Materialists, I ask how the HeLa cells have been animated by the fantasies and phobias of black violence and racial contamination.

Focusing on passing as a reading apparatus of

bodies, this essay makes explicit the violence present in “the act of scientific innovation” (Wald, 2012, p. 202). This is because science (social, biological, or otherwise) that rests on the relationship between an autonomous seeing, measuring, and creating subject and a knowable and measurable object is implicated in the epistemological claims of the passing accusation. Coming to terms with the racialized and sexualized animacies that enliven the HeLa cells, this paper thus follows from feminist works in science and technology studies that have illustrated the ways we are not the sole beings producing knowledge, works that call for us to wrestle with the failing conceits of modern (scientific, colonial, and nationalist) mastery. In so doing, it demands that we move beyond contemporary bioethical concerns regulating the object’s informed consent and participation in order to imagine an ethics of knowing that is consequential with our own complex vulnerability amongst other racialized and gendered objects.

In this vein, I examine the narratives about HeLa’s passing from the 1950s to the present, including peer-reviewed articles on cell culturing and genetics, science journalism, and cultural studies literature. Rather than reinforce a “Science” versus “Culture” binary, one must consider these bodies of writing as interdependent genres within the archive of scientific knowledge production. This approach

troubles the notion that scholarly work within the laboratory or the peer-reviewed journal can be read outside of socio-cultural and historic contexts, and imagines the possibility of critical scientific discussions about blackness, gender, or sexuality that do not take essence as either their assumption or goal.⁴ The rules dictating what is appropriate scholarly or scientific knowledge do not insulate its practices or findings from popular discourse. On the contrary, they obfuscate the discursive power that historical narratives exert within scientific and other scholarly work. Leaving them unchecked produces a naturalizing effect.⁵ To consider the intricacies of scientific discourse within this larger network of knowledge production, it is necessary to read archival documents alongside more informal exchanges at scholarly conferences, interviews between scientists and journalists, and other popular literature and cultural studies writings. In this way, I trace what cultural studies scholar Hortense Spillers (1987) calls an “American grammar” shaping and ordering concepts of blackness and gender within even scientific discourse. This grammar overdetermines black women as at once commodities, laborers, hypersexualized objects, and duplicitous subjects. Reading the archive in this way, I argue that the threat of miscegenation continues to be a disavowed phobia that places race and gender passing narratives at the crux of biopolitics, biotechnology, and bioethics.⁶

The first “HeLa Bomb” and its fallout

The story of Henrietta Lacks and the HeLa cell line is not a new one. In 1951, George Gey, the director of tissue culture research at Johns Hopkins University, discovered the sample of cancerous cells he had received from Lacks’s cervical biopsy divided continuously within the correct conditions, something no other cells were known to do at the time. The discovery opened the possibilities for *in vitro* studies exponentially. Narratives of the cell line and the identity of the woman from whom the cells were taken emerged fairly soon after and quite strategically. In fact, one of the earliest narratives of the HeLa cell line and the identity of Henrietta Lacks was publicized to garner support and funding for the Foundation for Infantile Paralysis and its efforts to find a poliovirus vaccine; the discovery of the HeLa cell line and the lab technology developed to keep the cells dividing were the greatest contributions to the effort’s success. The foundation’s director Roland Berg convinced Gey, who was uncomfortable with publicizing Lacks’s name, that the story of the HeLa cells must also include a story of the cell “donor.” How else could the foundation garner interest? The cell line discovery story needed to also be a personal story. In a letter to Gartler, Berg explained that it was “axiomatic in presenting this type of material to the public that to inform

them you must also interest them. As one who has been writing for the public for the past fifteen years in this field, I have learned that you do not engage the attention of the reader unless your story has basic human-interest elements. And the story of the HeLa cells, from what little I know of it now, has all those elements” (Berg, 1953). Thus, since the cells’ “discovery,” foundations, science journalists, science studies and cultural studies scholars, and even (or especially) the scientists who have used her cells to further their own research have told and retold stories of Henrietta Lacks and her cells.

During this early period, however, race was not central to the HeLa narratives (Landecker, 2007). In fact, the identity of the woman from whom the cells originated was unclear and often misstated. Some authors referred to her as Henrietta Lakes or Helen Lane; others named her Helen L. Even as Roland Berg attempted to convince Gey to reveal the woman’s background publically, he referred to her as “Mrs. Lakes” (Berg, 1953). Further, because Lacks was not explicitly described as black, she was assumed by most to be a white woman, as the Foundation for Infantile Paralysis no doubt tacitly implied—the “unsung heroine of medicine” (Landecker, 2007, p. 164). Indeed, Berg wrote, “Here is a situation where cancer cells—potential destroyers of human life—have been channeled by medical science to a new, beneficent course, that of aiding the fight against another disease” (Berg,

1953). In science literature, “HeLa” began to refer not to the specific cancerous cells of a black woman’s cervix, but to the universal, “generalized human or cellular subject” (Landecker, 2007, p. 165). Even Gey’s attempt to keep Lacks’s name and information private contributed to the fabrication of this symbolic woman. He assured Berg, “an interesting story could still be built around a fictitious name” (Gey, 1953). In this period, HeLa’s was a story of how any individual—presumably, of course, a white individual—could contribute to scientific advancement and, thus, the progress of the nation. This raises the question of how the HeLa cell line became racially fixed as black.

Rebecca Skloot’s now widely read and critiqued book, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (2011), had a chapter on this particular moment—the 1966 Second Decennial Review Conference on Cell Tissue and Organ Culture—yet she did not elaborate on its cultural and political significance. She, however, recognized that it was an important event in the scientific community and thus named the five-page chapter she dedicated to it, “The HeLa Bomb,” appropriating the term scientists used informally to refer to the scandal of HeLa contamination.

Race, specifically blackness, was at the center of Gartler’s presentation. In his research, he had compared both phenotypes and genotypes of twenty sample cell lines and found them to be

sharing the same phenotype variations. More specifically, of the two principal variants, the samples had a type that appeared most frequently in the “American Negro male population” (Gartler, 1968, p. 750). In March 1966, Gartler wrote to Gey to confirm the race of the woman from whom the HeLa cells were taken and concluded, “I have not ascertained the racial origin of all the lines examined; it is known, however, that at least some were thought to have been derived from Caucasians (*KB*, *WISH*, Prostate, *CMP*) and at least one (HeLa) from a Negro” (Gartler, 1968, p. 750).⁷ Through the framework of racial biostatistics, Gartler concluded that the sample cell lines had been taken over by HeLa cells and marked by a phenotype most commonly held by black men. He made no comment about any sex discrepancy. Instead, the narrative told by cell culture scientists and popular science journalists was one of white cells vulnerable to contamination and disappearance by aggressive, duplicitous black cells.⁸ Prudent scientists should be vigilant of the cell lines and tissue cultures in their own laboratory, the narrative warned. Gartler argued that much of the work using cell lines that assumed a particular origin was “open to serious question...[and] would be best discarded” (p. 175).

Upon HeLa’s unveiling, many researchers and funders were concerned about the validity of their work. Popular science journalist Michael

Rogers reported, “Careers had been built on the basis of human tissue culture research, papers written and published, grants and fellowships received—and now, abruptly arose the possibility that the fundamental unit of study might not have been even vaguely what it was supposed to be” (1976, p. 50). However, scientists’ reactions to HeLa cells passing were also affected by socio-cultural imaginaries. The fallout from Gartler’s accusation blurred the lines between the professional, the personal, and the ideals and practices of disinterested scientific inquiry for the cell tissue community and the biotechnology industrial complex more broadly.

For example, during the conference, one of the affected cell lines that Gartler identified was fellow scientist Leonard Hayflick’s *WISH* line, which was derived from tissue originally in the amniotic sac of Hayflick’s infant daughter. Upon hearing Gartler’s presentation, Hayflick’s concern for his cell line turned to racial paranoia. Worried about the possibility of *in vivo* rather than *in vitro* contamination, he called his wife during the conference break to ask whether he was, in fact, his daughter’s biological father. As he retold the anecdote during his own presentation, “She assured me that my worst fears were unfounded” (Skloot, 2011, p. 156). The room, reportedly, “erupted in laughter, and no one said anything else publicly about Gartler’s findings” (Skloot, 2011, p. 156). Racial and sexual anxiety turned to comedy as the

threat of miscegenation was temporarily covered over. It was not just that HeLa appeared to the scientific community as a passing actant, but that it had the capacity to make passing subjects out of others—for example, Hayflick’s daughter.

The link between HeLa contamination and the destruction of professional careers and scientific progress emerged through the racialization, gendering, and hypersexualization of both the cells and their human source. Suturing the cells to the subject, this anthropomorphism drew from tropes of black female hypersexuality and labor. The narratives were rampant in popular science journalism, but also existed in the traffic between scientists, science journalism, and cultural studies. One journalist wrote that for a cell culture lab to receive a letter from Walter Nelson-Rees, a cell culturist who dedicated his work to the detection of HeLa contamination, was like receiving “a note from the school nurse informing the parents that little Darlene had VD” (Michael Gold, quoted in Landecker, 2007, p. 172). In an essay for the *London Review of Books*, novelist Anne Enright recounted a series of websites that explained how to detect the papillomavirus DNA in HeLa cells. She reflected, “I think this means that Henrietta Lacks had genital warts. I *think* this means that she slept around” (Enright, 2000, p. 9, emphasis in original). Additionally, in an article for the feminist philosophy journal *Hypatia*, cellular biologist Lisa Weasel described HeLa cells as “a

laboratory workhorse” that, although unreliable, performed the role of control group (Weasel, 2004, p. 185). HeLa and Henrietta Lacks were contagious and were so together because of the discursive slippage between the narratives of the cellular material and the woman as subject. As Michael Rogers’s particularly sensationalist journalistic account of HeLa contamination argued, “In life, the HeLa source had been black and female. Even as a single layer of cells in a tissue culture laboratory, she remains so” (1976, p. 50).

These tropes animated scientific discourse as well. For example, in an interview with Michael Rogers, Nelson-Rees underscored just how toilsome the task had become, acknowledging, “I hoped I’d never have to look another HeLa in the face” (Rogers, 1976, p. 51). If the cells had at one time signified the universal human cellular subject, the unveiling of their passing resulted in a confrontation between scientists and the particularities of their object of study. Racial phobia and its concomitant desires manifested in a black woman’s face returning the gaze. The uncanny moment of the passing object violently and obscenely ruptures any assumptions of science’s inherent goodness.

In returning to the question of how the uncovering of this cell line came into discourse through a bomb metaphor, one must ask after the biopolitical work that this metaphor enacts.

To take the bellicose reference literally is to assume the HeLa passing as a warlike moment in the midst of the compiling of biomaterials for medical research. As the basis for his argument about biopolitics, Michel Foucault insisted that medicine itself is “a political intervention-technique with specific power-effects” (2003, p. 252). The underlying biopolitics of defending society is a matter of “destroying that [sort] of biological threat that those people over there represent to our race” (Foucault, 2003, p. 257). Thus, to think of the HeLa passing as a bomb within the historical context of the time—1966—is to think the passing threat together with other bomb threats and detonations of the time: the Cuban Missile Crisis in 1962, the escalation of the Vietnam War between 1963 and 1969, and the bomb that ripped through Birmingham’s 16th St. Church in 1963. During the Cold War and black uprisings against Jim Crow, the threat of a nuclear bomb encouraged duck and cover practices and hypervigilance against the communist that might be lurking in our own backyard—“Red Under the Bed.” The metaphor projects the threat of a black woman and worker, who passes undetected in the sample of cervical cells. Within the passing narrative, HeLa threatens the sort of categorization necessary for biopolitics of the sovereign state and for the integrity and coherency of the individual, knowing subject. Within the context of war, the threat of HeLa passing constituted the possibility of not knowing who the other was, not knowing

how to identify and target the other or, even worse, to discover that one was the other.⁹

With this frame of reference, surveillance and regulation become critical techniques that bind medicine and science to a larger national and geopolitical project—one that biologists see themselves as taking on. For example, in an article in *Science*, journalist Rhitu Chatterjee referred to Roland Nardone, a cell biologist at the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC as “the Paul Revere of cell contamination” (Chatterjee, 2007, p. 929). To this day, so critical is the threat of contamination that Nardone authored and widely disseminated a white paper titled, “Eradication of Cross-Contaminated Cell Lines: A Call for Action” in which he characterized the 1970s as a decade full of “revelations” of cell contamination and “concealment of knowledge [of wide spread contamination] and manipulation [of results] through editing” (Nardone, 2007, p. 2). Washington reporter David Dickson wrote that the reluctance to authenticate cell samples resulted in “corruption of scientific literature...forgery...falsifying data...fraud against the federal government...[and] a criminal offense” (Dickson, cited in Nardone, 2007, p. 2). Nardone recommended that government, private funding institutions, scientific journals, professional societies, laboratory directors, and academic department heads contribute to the surveillance and

authentication of cell samples (Nardone, 2007, p. 4). In these ways, scientific practice and the practices and ideologies of nationalism and accumulation are mutually informed phenomena.

What is more, this form of knowledge production must be understood as a moral task that enables the proliferation of the human over the unpredictability of nature and its objects. The epigraph to Michael Gold's book, *A Conspiracy of Cells*, cites Francis Bacon on this ethics of knowing: "If a man will begin with certainties, he shall end in doubts; But if he will be content to begin with doubts, he shall end in certainties" (Gold, 1986). The quotation is placed opposite a full-length image of Henrietta Lacks in a suit with her hands on her hips. The promise of modern scientific research invokes a moral disposition towards knowing; it asserts that one be humble, that one make no assumptions. This particular ethics of knowing begins with a presumption of humility and gives rise to a deserving subject capable of knowing the truth about the world itself as object.¹⁰

However, Gold's use of Bacon's quotation to offer a solution to HeLa contamination disavows the ethic's epistemological investment in mastery. I am reminded of another Francis Bacon quotation that feminist scholar Anne McClintock underscores: "My only earthly wish...is to stretch the deplorably narrow limits of man's dominion over the universe to their

promised bounds...leading to you Nature with all her children to bind her to your service and make her your slave” (McClintock, 1995, p. 23). Bacon’s remark reveals modern science’s colonial underpinnings by positing a female and othered Nature to be discovered by and contained under the dominion of Europe’s man. Bacon’s sentiment is rooted in what McClintock calls “porno-tropics,” a structure of colonial epistemology that allows the knowing subject to project his fantasies, desires, taboos, and phobias onto the colonial space ripe for discovery and mastery (1995, p. 23). To have dominion over and make visible its veiled, feminized interior is to “know” or be certain about the occulted other. As such, Nature and women occupy a similar position in colonial and scientific discourse—each existing for the sole purpose of being known and thus possessed, contained, and enjoyed. This process of knowledge accumulation is not a disinterested practice of empiricism but a psycho-political-economic acting out of the phantasy of mastery.

The biopolitics that shape scientists’ search for HeLa contamination and journalists’ actions in retelling the story of Henrietta Lacks and the HeLa cells must also be read alongside patterns of black surveillance in the US. The term “passing” emerges in antebellum runaway slave narratives about the “tendency” of black slaves to pass themselves off as free to escape bondage.¹¹ Some did so by literally forging paper

passes, while others tried hiding their blackness from public perception by passing for white, for native, or for immigrant. The passing slave was a fugitive slave. Thus, the passing accusation is one form of unveiling, which assumes that the most important properties of a black subject/object are fugitivity and fraud. In the more contemporary case of Henrietta Lacks, both scientists and science journalists used her blackness and her sexuality to describe the cells' tendency to be out-of-control and deceptive. Nonetheless, in their practice of detecting HeLa, scientists and journalists cannot rely on the visual to confirm the cells' racial "truth." Cellular biologists track this interiority through the material "data" of Lacks's cells. The centrality of visual evidence in scientific progress maintains that the regulatory technique of unveiling has become more precise in identifying, grasping the truth of the subject or matter, and tracing its every move. The western gaze is taken up in DNA fingerprinting, a practice science journalist Rithu Chatterjee argued "has become the standard tool for authenticating cell lines" as well as identifying criminal and foreign bodies (2007, p. 929). The "digital epidermalization" of biometric surveillance renders bodies as racialized, "digitized code," demanding that they respond to the questions, "Who are you?" and "Are you who you say you are?" (Brown, 2015, p. 109).

While the HeLa passing emerges as a crisis of

security and instability, the passing narrative works to contain and regulate the incalculability and unwieldiness of blackness, gender, and sexuality. The accusation of passing reasserts the human's ability, even its moral imperative, to trace and manage nature's order of things so that they might not ever unexpectedly "stare you in the face." Thus, Gartler's revelation of HeLa contamination was, paradoxically, a story of the stability and predictability of other noncancerous human cells. The 1966 presentation concluded with just this argument. He reasserted that his findings demonstrated "the remarkable stability of normal human cultures, that is, the virtual absence of spontaneous cellular transformation among them" (Gartler, 1968, p. 175). Gartler suggested that "the incorporation of *stable* genetic markers in material to be cultured is the best guarantee against contamination" (Gartler, 1968, p. 175, my emphasis). What scientists needed to do was identify and categorize the stable cell characteristics that would also allow them to grasp the truth of the cell (and limit black female sexuality). Once this was accomplished, there would be no cases of "mistaken identity" or "identity theft," as Chatterjee would later describe the HeLa phenomenon (Chatterjee, 2007).

Unveiling new biocitizens

A more recent iteration of unveiling occurred in

2013 when German scientists from the European Molecular Biology Laboratory published the HeLa genome in an article titled “The Genomic and Transcriptomic Landscape of a HeLa Cell Line” (Landry et al., 2013). The paper was widely available on the Internet and the scientists had not consulted the Lacks family before publishing. At the same time, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) funded a study by University of Washington researchers, who had also sequenced the HeLa genome and were about to publish it in the journal *Nature*, when public outrage erupted. NIH Director Francis Collins acknowledged that the study’s principal investigators should have discussed their plans with the Lacks family even before seeking funding to begin their project. The German researchers pointed out that they had followed the ethical standards set for genomic research in publishing their findings. They did, however, apologize for publishing them given the conditions under which the HeLa cells were initially harvested. It is true; scientists are not required to seek informed consent from a donor to publish their genome sequencing. Nonetheless, the HeLa case was special, as almost everyone (the NIH, the genome community, science journalists, the editorial board of the *New York Times*) agreed. It was special even though Henrietta Lacks was but one of many persons whose biomaterials have been taken for scientific use without their knowledge.

Francis Collins moved quickly to address the bioethical concern by meeting with the Lacks family. The parties agreed that in the future, researchers who wanted to work with the HeLa genome could apply for the data stored in the NIH's database of genotypes and phenotypes. In addition, the NIH would form a HeLa Genome Data Access working group, which would review the applications and require researchers to submit annual reports of their work. Finally, two Lacks family members would participate in the working group. When a family member asked about financial restitution for the use of the genome and about profits from the use of commercial products derived from the genome, Collins insisted that this could not happen. *Nature* reported, “[d]irectly paying the family was not on the table, but [Collins] and his advisers tried to think of other ways the family could benefit, such as patenting a genetic test for cancer based on HeLa-cell mutations. They could not think of any” (Callaway, 2013, p. 133). What resulted from the Collins deal is an arrangement in which descendants of Henrietta Lacks were to contribute to scientific inquiry by participating in the ritual of giving or refusing consent to researchers wishing to use her body (parts) for the public good. At the same time that the family's inclusion became institutionalized, any notion of reparations was denied.

Participatory initiatives have often been taken up

as a solution to science's etho-political crisis and its historical relationship to certain killable subjects and useful bodies and body parts. However, the family's participation emerges through the research establishment's response to yet another unveiling of Henrietta Lacks and HeLa via the publication of the HeLa genome. The family was concerned the publication exposed, once again, Lacks's identity, but it also exposed the medical research establishment's inability to prevent further injury. We can consider this moment in which the HeLa Genome Data Access working group was formed as a result of what Sheila Jasanoff calls "bioconstitutionalism." These are moments of negotiation that "redefine the obligations of the state in relation to lives in its care" (Jasanoff, 2011, p. 3). The term reflects a liberal tradition in which a state is sovereign over its polity to the extent that it is able to ensure security. The dynamic is evident in a published interview with Patricia King, the head of the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research (2004). Discussing guidelines for increasing African Americans' participation in clinical studies, King pointed to a tension between pushing for inclusion in science and offering protection from science. She comments, "I think that we just haven't been able to figure out yet how to include people without putting them at more risk than we want to put them" (2004, p. 11). Thus, the bioconstitutional

moment is one that pieces together biopolitical needs of the state with those of the individual. National security dictates that the state must invest in medical research but must also reduce risk, for example, by protecting the privacy of individual participants. This dynamic includes a series of public unveilings (published medical research, knowledge production, and data sharing) and re-veilings (reifying and protecting individual identity, labor relations in research, and desire and pleasure in colonial underpinnings) as constituting a liberal ethics of knowing, or as research bioethics.

The multiple acts of veiling and unveiling make possible the contemporary biopolitical social contract, which does not merely encourage participation but requires it. As research continues to be privatized, neoliberal biocitizens must ensure their own protection, and are thus responsible for their own health outcomes. Sociologist Nikolas Rose argued, “our somatic, corporeal neurochemical individuality has become opened up to choice, prudence, and responsibility, to experimentation, to contestation, and so to a politics of life itself” (2007, p. 8). As emergent members of the body politic, black people have both the entrepreneurial responsibility to manage our own individual health and to further the nation’s collective biosecurity. Because it favors the individual’s responsibility to keep their body alive, this formation forgoes the possibility of

addressing collective historical trauma. Instead, the narrative frames participation as a moral imperative, which designates those who cooperate as civilized. For the good of the individual and the state, the message proclaims, one must not stand in the way of research.

In the case of HeLa research, Skloot's advocating for "justice" and protection for the Lacks family was also an attempt to make the case that family members supported scientific progress and the public good and simply wanted to be informed of and consent to their participation. For example, in her 2013 opinion piece for the *New York Times*, she argued that "[t]he Lacks family is proud of HeLa's contributions to society, and they don't want to stop HeLa research. But they do want to learn about the HeLa genome—how it can be used for the good of science while still protecting the family's privacy—so they can decide whether to consent to its publication" (Skloot, 2013). In this rendition of the contract, new biocitizens come into being, or are unveiled, in their capacity to own themselves—their body parts, their biomaterial—and in their capacity to "gift" their bodies to science. In managing these economies of exchange and inclusion, liberalism sets up its bioethical dilemma—when does one's right to research infringe upon another's right to protect themselves from the risks of research? This article's goal is not to prescribe the right balance but to underscore what the

question itself forecloses. What is not acceptable, and what becomes transgressive in this scenario, is a politics of refusal.

The bioconstitutional moment is a coercive and violent one as Henrietta Lacks and her family are repeatedly interpellated as biopolitical subjects through the act of participation. As cultural studies scholar Karla Holloway wrote, “The experiences of women and black Americans are particularly vulnerable to public unveiling” (2011, p. 9). HeLa has become the exemplary case for examining the bioethics of cell tissue and genomics research, particularly with regard to informed consent, in the same way the Tuskegee syphilis experiment signals the worst-case scenario of bioethical risks in US clinical trials. Fantasies and phobias around deviant black sexuality overdetermine who must represent subjects of injury. The result is both epistemological and material violence for those expected to be science’s continuously productive subjects. In his 1953 letter to Gey, Berg perhaps unwittingly named the heart of the matter. HeLa is required to repeatedly perform as the example *par excellence* of science research’s progress and risks because of the racial passing and contamination accusations unleashed on them. A major concern following the 2013 genome unveiling is the extent to which the privacy of Henrietta Lacks and her family, already public icons, can be managed. As Skloot argued in the *Times*, “[the family

members] want researchers to acknowledge that HeLa cells are not anonymous and should be treated accordingly” (Skloot, 2013). The comment underscores the reason this case has become special: there is already no hope for anonymity.

In reading Skloot’s comment against the grain, one could conclude that *anonymity* is not the same as *privacy*. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines anonymity as “a lack of outstanding, individual, or unusual features.” To be anonymous is to be able to escape the particularizing surveillance of the racial biometric regime. Accordingly, one might read anonymity as that which makes possible the universal human with all his privileges, autonomy, and rational decision-making. That is, anonymous cells are those that are able to stand in for the universal or human cellular subject rather than stare back at scientists with a confrontational and particularizing gaze. We might understand anonymity as a prerequisite not just for the status of human but also for the status of the liberal biocitizen, which, as Holloway (2011) notes, has full capacity to negotiate privacy. In this regard, privacy as an extension of citizenship refers to the right of the autonomous subject, the individual citizen who has the right to privacy, to private property, and even to his/her own body as property. Privacy becomes a critical component of liberal risk reduction. However, HeLa has no hope for anonymity, just

as black subjects more broadly lack access to anonymity.

What, then, is to be made of a call for refusal?¹² Further, what is to be made of a black public that refuses to participate especially when the health-care systems pay little attention to the ongoing trauma of colonialism and the after life of chattel slavery as fundamental to collective wellness? This is the sort of exchange that does not play by the rules of the health market's regulation of individual moral virtues. Requests for reparations from institutions of knowledge production are often seen as "getting in the way" of knowing and as affronts to colonial science, the nation, and the universal subject.¹³ The demand for reparations troubles the notion of the inherent good of science and the gestures of inclusion that liberal multicultural scientists and policymakers have made toward black subjects, including the Lacks.

Vital passages and an ethical practice of knowing

With regard to the researcher, what might an ethical practice of knowing look like? This might be one that does not only acknowledge others' refusal but is also complicit in it. Additionally, ethical learning must be willfully permeable to contamination. This is not a contamination that assumes whiteness as vulnerable and black or brown bodies as always already contaminated,

such that ongoing lead contamination in Flint, Michigan or uranium contamination on Navajo lands remains invisible. It is rather an openness to contaminate an epistemology that relies on the equivalence of knowing and mastery and disavows the violence this produces. It is also a call for openness to temporal contamination, which troubles the teleological narrative of progress with regard to knowledge production.

To turn to the question of temporality, and specifically immortality, and to blur the boundaries between its figurative and material instantiations, one might take seriously the proposition of “The *Immortal* Life of Henrietta Lacks” (my emphasis). However, this consideration must deviate from the way in which Skloot and others have trafficked in “immortality” for sensationalist ends. Instead, this ethical consideration refuses to dismiss the Lacks family’s concerns as scientific illiteracy. It also refuses to anthropomorphize the cells. Certainly, scholars like Priscilla Wald were right to insist that the cells are not “Lacks herself,” yet this argument will be always already too late (2012, p. 202). The HeLa cells, once fixed as black and thus incapable of anonymity, continue to be animated by the iconicity of Henrietta Lacks as a sign of black female hypersexuality. However, taking seriously the concerns that the HeLa cells are an instantiation of Henrietta Lacks opens up a different truth. It allows one to return to the violence of the act of colonial

unveiling (the bomb), to HeLa's confrontational "stare," and to the radical potential of the object. As Toni Morrison warned us in her novel, *Beloved* (1988), nothing ever really dies.

Thus, what if the cells are, in fact, black, uncontrollable, unreliable, and contaminating? For example, the gender assigned to the cells in many narratives change, as each discursive passage animates them in different ways. In the 1950s, HeLa was understood as an example of the universal human subject—cells from a white woman. Then, in 1966, Gartler's statistical analysis of the cells briefly included them in the category "Negro male population." Finally, once the cells were fixed to Henrietta Lacks, scientists, science journalists, and others began describing the cells as hypersexual, black, and female. The ease with which the public has attached different genders to the cells has not received much attention. The fungibility of blackness and the cells as both laborer and commodity allow for HeLa to move fluidly (perhaps fugitively) through a variety of raced and gendered positions. As scholar Saidiya Hartman argued this fluidity enables "the black body...to serve as the vehicle of white self-exploration, renunciation, and enjoyment" (Hartman, 1997, p. 26). On the other hand, blackness as a contaminating agent refuses to be "containable within a given trajectory of movement and desire" (Chen, 2012, p. 178). This is a politics of refusal that stages HeLa as a "bad object." The cells not only create

a momentary crisis of paternity for Hayflick's daughter, but also threaten to make the child a passing actant herself. This is something black cells are still wont to do, as can be attested by Jennifer Cramblett, a white woman who filed a lawsuit against Midwest Sperm Bank in 2014 for "wrongful birth" after it unwittingly impregnated her with sperm from a black donor (Cuevas, 2014).

Considering the immortality of HeLa and Henrietta Lacks together demands an encounter with the pain of their fixation, constant unveiling, and fetishized consumption. As black feminist scholar M. Jacqui Alexander described, affect survived the Middle Passage even when ancestors did not. She wrote, "Not only humans made the Crossing, traveling only in one direction through Ocean given the name Atlantic. Grief traveled as well" (Alexander, 2005, p. 289). This is the case in spite of institutional efforts to leave the past behind. Countering this narrative of progress, HeLa becomes a temporal and affective force of accumulation that shatters or explodes the integrity of black subjectivity in each moment it is publically unveiled.¹⁴ Each passing of HeLa, each HeLa "bomb," ruptures linear biopolitics, making "the past" palpable, material, and confrontational. To argue that HeLa is an uncanny temporal force, then, is not to simply say that the cells offer an alternative vision of time. Instead, HeLa becomes a worlding force that troubles any notion of linear

biopolitical time by violently demanding that the boundaries between “past,” “present,” and “future” be called into question. HeLa’s animacy resides in the affective, material power of memory, in what physicist and feminist scholar Karen Barad called “the very nature of spacetime mattering” (2011, p. 29).

In forging an ethical practice of knowing we might take away some important considerations. Because history, with all its seeping wounds, endures in the material, we must take seriously its multiple forms of entanglement and specific material relationships. We must do this not in simply observing or measuring an other, nor in affecting an other, but in the ways the other is already in us. This ethics of learning, then, consists in taking seriously the politics of refusal in which HeLa engages when evading containment. It requires a will towards understanding the self and its time as contaminated. At last, this openness to learning as permeability and contamination is a risk that cannot be managed.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Tala Khanmalek, James Battle, Herman Gray, and Jennifer Reardon for their invaluable comments, questions, and inspiration and to the UC Santa Cruz Science and Justice Research Center.

Notes

¹ “[S]cientists who were at the conference where Gartler made his initial presentation, and others who were active in the field at the time,” used this term. Quoted from the author’s personal correspondence with Rebecca Skloot on 27 March 2015.

² See the following novels written in the early twentieth century: Charles W. Chesnutt’s *The House Behind the Cedars* (1993), Jessie Fauset’s *Plum Bun* (1999), James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1995), and Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (2001). Examples of films extending into the late twentieth century include *Imitation of Life* (1959), *Pinky* (1949), *Illusions* (1982), and *True Identity* (1991).

³ Take, for example, Rudolph P. Byrd’s and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s note (2011) about Jean Toomer passing in which they speculated about Toomer’s motivations with regard to social mobility and ideological and literary movements. Additionally, scholar Gayle Wald provides an account of black folks’ refusal to pass and the intelligibility of black American identity within the national body politic (2000). Scholars of trans politics also debate the strategy of passing. For example, Sandy Stone calls for a radical refusal

to pass: “Transsexuals who pass seem able to ignore the fact that by creating totalized, monistic identities, forgoing physical and subjective intertextuality, they have foreclosed the possibility of authentic relationships. Under the principle of passing, denying the destabilizing power of being ‘read,’ relationships begin as lies... transsexuals must take responsibility for all of their history, to begin to rearticulate their lives not as a series of erasures in the service of a species of feminism conceived from within a traditional frame, but as a political action begun by reappropriating difference and reclaiming the power of the refigured and reinscribed body” (1992, p. 170). In contrast, C. Riley Snorton (2009) highlights the radical promise of trans passing.

⁴ There is abundant literature on race and genomics, for example, but the effort has often been led by science and technology social scientists and published in humanities or social science focused mediums. See, for example, the writings of Fullwiley (2008), Roberts (2014), Duster (2005), TallBear (2013), and Reardon (2009). Some scientists such as Lisa Weasel, a cell and molecular biologist, have addressed these intersections yet this scholarship is also often published in humanities or social science focused journals. However, there are exceptions in journals that address the cross sections of biology, health, and the social. See for example Ruha Benjamin and Ian McGonigle’s

“Molecularization of Identity” (2016) in *Genetics Research*, Sarah Franklin’s “Culturing Biology” (2001) in *Health*, Lisa Parker’s “The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, Feminist Themes, and Research Ethics” (2012) in the *International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics*, and Priscilla Wald’s “The Art of Medicine: Cognitive Estrangement, Science Fiction, and Medical Ethics” (2008) in *The Lancet*.

⁵ As an example, George Gey’s personal files contain his lab notes and peer-reviewed articles on the possible cellular sources of cancer, as well as newspaper clippings about his laboratory and his personal and professional life, human interest stories on the discovery of HeLa cells and Henrietta Lacks, and correspondence with funders that discussed the importance of Lacks’s story to garner additional research funding.

⁶ I analyze race and gender together to underscore how subjects are always passed in terms of both, not one or the other. More than making an argument about intersectionality, I am gesturing along the lines of Frantz Fanon (2008), Hortense Spillers (1987), and Saidiya Hartman (1997), that subjects emerge (they pass) as a racialized gender or a gendered race, that there are multiple race/genders that emerge both materially and discursively. For example, Spillers argues that black women are passed for “‘Peaches’ and Brown Sugar,’ ‘Sapphire’ and

‘Earth Mother,’ [and] ‘Aunty,’” and against the expectations of a variety of white womanhoods (1987, p. 65). HeLa, of course, is passed within this same American grammar.

⁷ On April 1, 1966, Gey responded to Gartler's inquiry noting that the HeLa cell line initiated from "the cervix in a colored woman aged 31 years" (Gey, 1966).

⁸ See Rogers (1976) for an example of this and Landecker (2007) for a critique.

⁹ One key component of sovereignty theories, from those by Jean Bodin, Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau to those of Immanuel Kant, is that of identifying who is a member of the body politic held together through the social contract. The making of the sovereign is a constant, delineating practice of identification. See, for example, Bodin (1992), Kant (1983), and Rousseau (2011).

¹⁰ For examples of earlier writing on this form of knowing in the world and the sort of subject to which it gives form, see Heidegger (1977) and Foucault (1970).

¹¹ See, for example, Marshall (2010), Johnson (2000), Waldstreicher (1999), Smith and Wojtowicz (1989), and McCaskill (1994).

¹² For a thorough discussion of refusal see

Benjamin (2016) and (2013), Reardon and TallBear (2012), and Simpson (2007).

¹³ For example, see the case of *Farmer-Paellmann v. FleetBoston* in Alondra Nelson's *The Social Life of DNA* (2016, p. 121-140).

¹⁴ See Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*. "Locked in this suffocating reification, I appealed to the Other so that his liberating gaze, gliding over my body suddenly smoothed of rough edges, would...put me back in the world...Nothing doing. I explode. Here are the fragments put together by another me" (2008, p. 89).

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Bio

Sandra Harvey is a PhD candidate in Politics with a designated emphasis in Feminist Studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her scholarship investigates the production of race

and gender through surveillance technologies originating in colonialism and chattel slavery. Her dissertation, *Passing for Free, Passing for Sovereign*, traces narratives of race/gender passing as they emerge in science, settler colonial law, conceptual art, and Enlightenment philosophy.