Some Approaches to Teaching Rebecca Skloot’s *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*

Daniel M. Scott III
Professor, English and Africana Studies

*The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* relates to a great many strategies and themes that I use in my courses. Rebecca Skloot’s narration of the personal, social and scientific forces that surround Henrietta Lacks, her family and her cells intersects with some of the most fundamental and controversial aspects of contemporary culture. As I considered how I might integrate the book into my courses, I arrived at clusters of texts and themes that I feel reflect some of the complexities that run through the book.

Commodification of the Black Body

One course I have imagined might examine the processes of commodification and de-humanization that have defined the West’s relations with Africa and Africans. Such a course might include the *Narrative* (1845) by Frederick Douglass, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) by Harriet Jacobs, poems and short stories by Paul Laurence Dunbar, Claude McKay, Richard Wright, the history of the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment, and *Venus* (1996) a play by Suzan-Lori Parks. In *Venus*, Parks dramatizes the life of Sarah Baartman – known as the “Hottentot Venus” – who was made a public spectacle and scientific curiosity in the early years of the nineteenth century. Works like these could provide historical and cultural contexts for a broader discussion about the erasure of black subjectivity and personal agency. They could help a class connect the disregard of Henrietta Lacks’ body (and soul) to forces and attitudes that extend well beyond Baltimore, 1951.

In addition, I think that material and texts that could problematize this further could ask questions about how and why black subjects have at times intervened in these processes of commodification to resist and subvert them. They throw commodification of the black body into stark relief (Josephine Baker); they re-signify these reductive energies. In *The Cancer Journals* (1980) Audre Lorde re-defines her illness in terms of resisting medical discourses that would empty and ignore the realities of her black and lesbian experience.

Race, Science and Science Fiction

While it emphasizes the obvious seriousness of the events it documents, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* reflects in its characterizations and descriptions some of the
terms and tones of science fiction writing – as in this description of HeLa’s contamination of other cells:

It turned out Henrietta's cells could float through the air on dust particles. They could travel from one culture to the next on unwashed hands or used pipettes; they could tide from lab to lab on researchers’ coats and shoes, or through ventilation systems. And they were strong: if just one HeLa cell landed in a culture dish, it took over, consuming all the media and filling all the space. (153)

A course might ask the book to participate in an inquiry into the ways science fiction and even non-fiction participate in culturally-rooted and very popular notions of alien identities and alternative humanities -- both here on earth and in outer space. (What can science fiction texts teach us about race and racial anxieties?)

Such a course could make a lot of non-print texts. In many science fiction films, race and racial otherness are constituent parts of the narrative’s commentary on contemporary social realities – either directly as in John Sayles’ The Brother from Another Planet (1984), or indirectly as in the problematic racial dynamics of George Romero’s Night of the Living Dead (1968), Ridley Scott’s Alien (1979), and Francis Lawrence’s I Am Legend (2007). In many of these films the possibilities of black agency in a scientific context are negated or abbreviated – as if such a thing could not be possible.

“Can black people be scientific heroes?” seems to the question that is posed by these texts. Such representations as these -- while more or less disposable individually -- add up to a hesitation in science fiction texts to represent black subjects as successful players in these imagined worlds. The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks may help us examine this hesitation.

In addition, there is a wealth of science fiction written by back writers that one might bring to bear on this question. Contrary to most science fiction texts, these works emphasize and celebrate the presence of the black subject in a scientistic world: Black No More (1931) by George Schuyler; “The Space Traders” (1992) by Derrick Bell, Kindred (1971) and Imago (1997) by Octavia Butler, and much of the work of Samuel Delany (Stars in My Pocket Like Grains of Sand -- 1984).

Versions of Immortality

Of course, the very idea of immortality is an important and continuing presence in a wide variety of texts. In many cases immortality has been a motivator for producing the texts in the first place. So, we could use The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks to reflect and respond to some of these visions of immortality. Questions like “what does it mean to live forever?,” “what constitutes human life?,” and “is Henrietta Lacks really
immortal?” could be the foundation for reading and discussing some of the Greatest Hits of Immortality Literature. Texts like: William Shakespeare’s Sonnets, William Wordsworth’s “Ode: Intimations of Immortality,” the work of Emily Dickinson, Greek mythology, African mythology, Malone Dies by Samuel Beckett, etc. We could even bring the consideration of the immortal human into more popular and contemporary expressions of the idea: vampires, clones, androids, and celebrities.

Migration and Urban Black Vernacular Culture

As she tells the story of Henrietta Lacks’ (and her family’s) relations with Johns Hopkins, Rebecca Skloot takes on the complex of issues of identity, community, and resistance-to-power. A course might use The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks as part of a concentration on the political and social changes taking place in black communities during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. More than focusing on the post-WWII activities of national organizers like a Philip Randolph and Adam Clayton Powell, this course could focus on the shaping of black vernacular culture in America’s cities. This is the context for Henrietta and Day’s migration to Baltimore and for her family’s stories.

This story of black urban vernacular culture – especially during the period between the end of the war and the Civil Rights Era – has been under-discussed and under-documented by scholars. The course could bring to the surface the efforts of several unsung heroes of the pre-Civil Rights movement like Harry T. Moore and Ella Baker. And Baltimore itself plays a big part in the shaping of this vernacular culture. According to Black Baltimore (1993) by Harold McDougall, thirty-three thousand black people arrived in Baltimore in the few years of the early 1940s. They would have been aware of the still treacherous atmosphere in Maryland towards blacks: the spate of lynchings in Maryland’s Eastern Shore in the late 1930s and 1940s, the presence of the young Thurgood Marshall (who grew up in Baltimore). They would have also been attending popular musical and theatrical events that provided opportunities for release and relief. By the 1940s and 1950s, a black popular music and dance had begun to contribute considerably to American popular culture in general. It was the music and dance that Henrietta and Day loved in their younger days. It is reflected in the stance and the sass we see in the famous photo of Henrietta on the cover of the book.

Texts we could use include: the paintings of Jacob Lawrence, the collages of Romare Bearden, the music of Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday (who is from Baltimore); fiction like The Simple Stories of Langston Hughes, Cotton Comes to Harlem (1965) by Chester Himes, The Street (1946) by Ann Petry; poetry from Gwendolyn Brooks, Sterling Brown, and the Black Arts Movement of the 1he 1960s and 1970s.

But we must be careful not to be too quick or too neat about the terms of migration. The Immortal illustrates that for Henrietta the move to Maryland from Virginia was not
a one-way departure (she returned to Clover often) and that even as she lived an urbanized life she loved a life informed by the rhythms and mores of the country: how might she help us to see the Great Migration as a more nuanced and fluid process? One that black Americans are still participating in. In fact, there have been many reports of a reversal of the migrations for blacks – back to the South.

We are early yet in the process of understanding the processes, consequences, and potentialities of migration. Perhaps, we would be able to use some of the insights emerging from the newly-constructed field of Migration Studies to open up the complexities that characterize the Great Migration here in the United States. There is friction between Henrietta’s knowing of her own body and the medical knowledge Johns Hopkins mobilized to commandeer her body. Her racial, gender, class and cultural differences rendered her vulnerable to their authority. Henrietta’s migration from Clover to Baltimore was more than a movement of people, it was (and is) a shifting of world-views, moralities and logics. When telling Henrietta’s story and that of her children and grandchildren, Skloot’s book opens the door for us to consider personal and communal displacement in a wider and even more global context.

As I said at the beginning of this piece, The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks has enormous potential to find its way into a lot of disciplinary and cross-disciplinary discussions in the College. I hope that the ideas and approaches above inspire more ideas about how to bring this book into the classroom. Lastly, though, I would like us to consider one of the book’s most useful insights: that institutions -- institutions like Rhode Island College -- can be indifferent in their interactions with some parts of the U.S. population. A history of ideological and systemic mis-use and mis-recognition has built a wall of distrust between such institutions and those who might benefit tremendously from participating more fully in them. How do we cross the divide and work towards a situation that benefits more people in Rhode Island? How can we become better teachers? How can educational institutions reach and change more lives?