

INSIDE
THE BODY
OF BLACK
FEMINISM

SCIENCE,
RACE,
CULTURE

SAMANTHA
PINTO

INSIDE THE BODY OF BLACK FEMINISM



BLACK FEMINISM ON THE EDGE

A series edited by Jennifer C. Nash and Samantha Pinto

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To the tired mommies

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INTRODUCTION

MATERIAL AND METAPHOR

Two spiky, otherworldly bodies, translucent, nearly split apart, with twinned dense clusters stained chartreuse nested within (fig. I.1). These are two formerly cancerous cervical cells, dividing. They are HeLa cells, of the generations harvested and grown for medical research from Henrietta Lacks—a Black woman with cervical cancer whose cells were isolated from a testing sample in 1951 without her informed consent and reproduced for profit, with no compensation for her family for their use for over seventy years. Never before had cells been able to be reproduced in a lab like HeLa’s—and they are still reproducing. Their monetary and scientific value is incalculable. This 2016 image captured from the microscope of a cell biologist follows Lacks’s catapult to worldwide recognition in 2010. HeLa cells are now credited to her. Her family has finally received compensation for their use.¹ Her cells still proliferate in medical research and in scientific and cultural representation.

Of course, Henrietta Lacks’s life, as represented by her reproducible cells, was no secret before 2010. She was, and is, materially, everywhere—in the words of her daughter, Deborah, “When I go to the doctor for my checkups I always say my mother was HeLa. They get all excited, tell me stuff like how her cells helped make my blood pressure medicines and antidepressant pills and how all this important stuff in science happen cause of her. . . . Yeah, your mother was on the moon, she been in nuclear bombs and made that polio vaccine.”² Her

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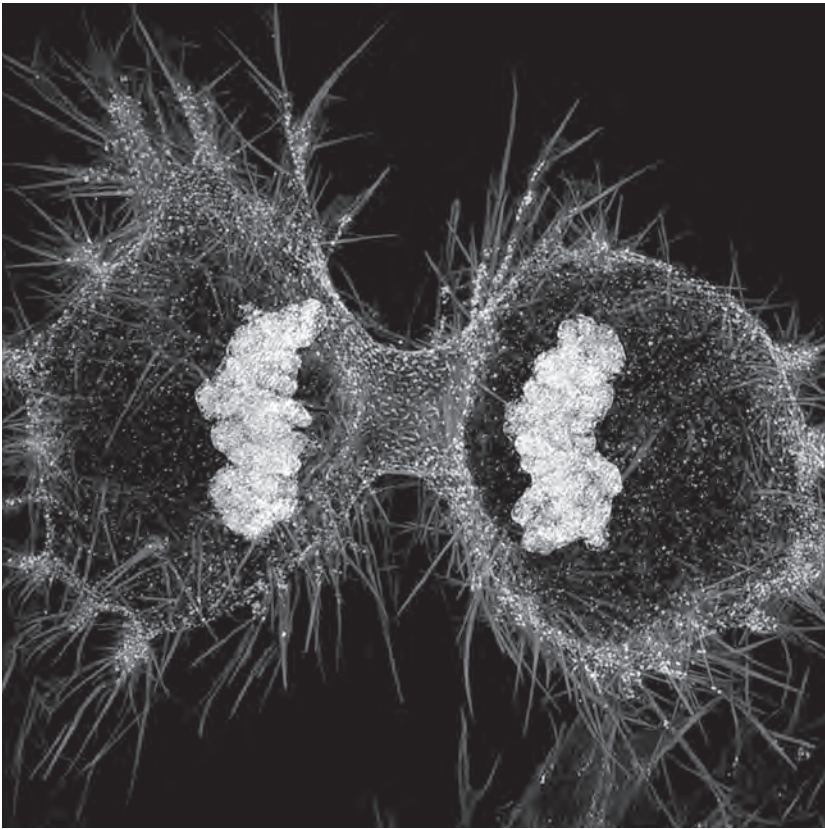


FIGURE 1.1. HeLa cells. Photograph by Dylan Burnette, 2016.

cells were also used to research and develop a COVID-19 vaccine. Hers is a story of particular erasure and spectacular visibility at once; the hypercirculation of her cells ballooned while for years her identity was subsumed. This un- and misattributed overexposure of the inside of her body was followed by a surge of biographical interest in the twenty-first century that finds her memorialized in widely popular nonfiction, narrative film, sculpture, fine art, and more.

Inside the Body of Black Feminism starts from overexposed vectors of the inside of the body to think anew about saturated cultural representations of the Black feminine body. I begin with the image of Lacks's cells to suggest the material and metonymic ubiquity of the Black feminine body's interior in representing as well as understanding race and gender. Focusing on habits of study and representation of the inside of the body—biological organs, processes, matter—this book seeks both to reveal their significance in making

social meaning and to extend their attached epistemological patterns in ways that upend existing logics of racial formation. A range of historians, journalists, scientists, and artists have documented the anti-Black and misogynist history of medicine—including nonconsensual experimentation and acts of spurious theorization of inferiority—that haunts medical and scientific culture’s current engagements with equity and access.³

Black feminist studies charts an uneasy course through these epistemic pathways. Black feminist thought has, on the one hand, engaged in resistant and creative repetition of particular conceptual teleologies and objects that have defined anti-Blackness through, primarily, the externalization of the body. It has, as a field, also charted routes to an expansive imaginative remaking of the body and the body politic through the representation of the body, materially and metaphorically. *Inside the Body of Black Feminism* understands the Black feminine body and the field of Black feminist theory through a pivot to the critical and creative mobilization of some of the most visible *internal* sites of racialization, including bones, blood, brains, hearts, guts, and wombs. This book operates delicately with its objects of study, trying to avoid methodologies of exposure—of seeing more deeply and accurately—as the sole forms that Black feminist inquiry into the body can take. Instead, going inside, this book follows the winding, compromised paths of the HeLa cell, which is at once a bounded building block of life as well as a flexible, reproducible material that exceeds its standardized form. Theorizing Black feminism from the inside of the body reveals a political imaginary that can be generative, porous, vulnerable, and changeable—over time, geography, experience, and genre.

Lacks and the opening image of her cells illustrate the simultaneous ubiquity and particularity of the Black feminine body’s material and figurative infusion into global culture. We know now that Lacks’s name was shortened to HeLa to label her cells. For years she was misnamed Helen Lane in certain scientific records. In the 1970s, her family brought her story to the Black magazines *Ebony* and *Jet* with a call for remuneration from the scientific industrial complex profiting off Lacks’s bodily material.⁴ *Rolling Stone* presented her story as a tale of science’s murky ethical futures, under the title “The Double-Edged Helix,” in 1976.⁵ In the twenty-first century, Lacks’s story was brought to renewed public interest by white reporter Rebecca Skloot in her 2010 book, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (preceded by a *New York Times* magazine story in 2006). The book was a blockbuster hit, optioned for a film produced by and starring Oprah Winfrey in 2017 and assigned as a common read on many college campuses.

The narrative of Lacks’s cells is replicated, then, though each venue scales that representation and its intervention differently: in melodramatic biopic

fashion as a story of medical racism; through candid family photographs and crumpled sepia prints in journalistic appeals for financial justice, as shown in Black popular magazine features in the 1970s (fig. I.2); and through counter-cultural graphics to tell a remarkable story of scientific breakthrough in *Rolling Stone*—a glass jar with a cloudy blue wash of a photograph of Lacks (fig. I.3). Lacks is now a bronzed life-sized statue on international college campuses and a national portrait in the United States (figs. I.4 and I.5).

Copied, mediated, reproduced so that “Henrietta’s cells have now been living outside of her body far longer than they ever lived inside it,” Lacks is everywhere: her cells, her image, her story, her cautionary tale of medical racism and the biological marvel of her matter, still proliferating.⁶ HeLa cells have been operationalized as a material way to conceive of race, gender, medicine, scientific practice, and racial capitalism; they have also represented social, health, and economic inequity in the United States and beyond as surely as they have been abstracted in the images and uses of isolated cells. *Inside the Body of Black Feminism* dwells on how, as well as why, this material and metaphor of the body matter for futures of antiracist, feminist politics. This book also engages what Black feminist thought does—and might do more—with what’s under the skin, intentionally and creatively.

Knowing the Black Feminist Body

The microscope image of the HeLa cells shows us a difficult glimpse of the inside of the Black feminist body—an internal part that’s given meaning as it attaches to a legacy of the Black feminine corporeal form. The cell is an experiment in interpretation based in the scopic economy of race—and also is Lacks’s biological material. Her cells’ plasticity and reproducibility have made them famous, usable, circulating beyond traditional definitions of property and sovereignty, beyond her or her family’s intent. The story of Black women’s bodies in modernity is both key to understanding how the cells were harvested without compensation or consent and to their recasting as a Black feminist narrative of injury and justice. These negotiations with the body in Black feminism also underpin this book’s insistence on destabilizing political imaginaries away from these recognizable poles.

Black feminist theory relies on the body—particularly on the image and invocation of the external Black feminine body as a site of violence, beauty, and repair. HeLa cells and their circulation reflect and refract this reliance on the body as the specific object and the undergirding of the field’s political imaginary. The refraction pushes at the edges of another set of visions and



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FIGURE 1.2. Personal photograph of Henrietta Lacks, date unknown.

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FIGURE I.3. Illustration accompanying the article by Michael Rogers, “The Double-Edged Helix,” in *Rolling Stone*, March 25, 1976. Charley Brown, illustrator.

groundings for Black feminist theory, as the cell gives a glimpse inside the Black feminine body, inside another set of scales and processes of Black feminist political imagination.

We can start with the cell. HeLa’s cells, here undeniably appropriated if finally named, are made gorgeous, made strange, made new in the image (fig. I.1). And yet, “If we went to almost any cell culture lab in the world and opened its



FIGURE 1.4. Helen Wilson-Roe, statue of Henrietta Lacks, University of Bristol, 2021.

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FIGURE 1.5. Kadir Nelson, *Henrietta Lacks (HeLa): The Mother of Modern Medicine*, 2017. Collection of the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery and National Museum of African American History and Culture.

freezers . . . we'd probably find millions—if not billions—of Henrietta's cells in small vials on ice.⁷ The miniature of the cell blown up and made new sits next to the vastness of the “empire of collection” that insists on comprehensive representativeness.⁸ Though Lacks sought treatment in a segregated health care system, here are her material cells representing abstracted medical knowledge production across the universe. Here is the violence of what Harriet Washington termed “medical apartheid” in the United States and what Helen Tilley has

referred to as empire's treatment of Africa itself as a "laboratory."⁹ HeLa stands as a "medical superboddy" in Deirdre Cooper Owens's terms, wherein Western science characterizes Black bodies as "inferior" even as they are deemed human enough to yield broadly applicable experimental results.¹⁰ This focus on the Black gendered body's capacities for surviving scientific experimentation and racism while it aids in inventing universalized best practices can be tracked through colonialism, chattel enslavement, eugenics, and Jim Crow, as well as the "war on drugs" and "welfare reform" rhetorics of the late twentieth century.

At the same time, antiracist science promises redress in the form of epigenetic research on the hereditary effects of trauma and racism, studies that center on health inequity rather than naturalized difference.¹¹ As Britt Rusert argues in *Fugitive Science*, the long tail of racist science established in the nineteenth century still holds sway in interpretive, social, policy, and market efforts to manage race, difference, and inequality into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In scholarly work like Rusert's and Cooper Owens's, we see the difficult balancing act of detailing the horrifying medical and theoretical experimentation derived through the nineteenth century and eugenics eras, and also locating Black agency in these archives. Scholars have carefully thought through the potential joys and medical-knowledge-gathering potential of learning one's ancestry for those with genealogical lines severed due to colonialism, chattel slavery, and other rendings of Black social life.¹² Scientific journalism and history of science have often focused on correcting bad science—exposing the racist underpinnings of skull-race identifications, showing how genetically similar interracial genes are to the point that it proves race is a biological fiction, and narrating the assumed whiteness and maleness of medical studies and instruments that dangerously leave women and/or nonwhite experiences of illness and embodiment out.¹³ The pulse oximeter, a crucial measure of blood-oxygen levels touted as diagnostically crucial during the COVID-19 epidemic, is just one of the most glaring contemporary illustrations of such scholarly and journalistic work—getting the copious medical research out to the public that it is an instrument literally designed to take measurements based off of white skin.¹⁴

These material and metaphoric pasts meet the promises of these recalibrations, recuperations, and replications with a difference on the field of the Black feminist body. Not just racist science but antiracist scholarship produces a particular way of knowing Black feminism and the Black feminist body.

Consider *Vitreous Body (Hemorrhage)*, a 2019 painting by Black queer artist adriane nieves (fig. 1.6). Here the brushstrokes are heavy and thick rather than lines sharply delineated by a microscope. Here we read the text "body" in script hovering below center, below the concentrated action of the piece, which over



FIGURE 1.6. adriane nieves, *Vitreous Body (Hemorrhage)*, 2019.

a large span of canvas has visible overlaps of contrasting colors, a deliberate messiness. nieves depicts not one bodily process but many, all at once. Her abstraction is a world, not a specificity; it is concentrated, dense, full. But this Black feminist body is also vitreous—letting us see through the skin, to the gelatinous inside, giving us access to surface and substance at once through the abstraction.

The graphic almost-symmetry of HeLa cells, stained and dividing under a microscope in neon colors, represents one among many genres of the Black material interior this book encounters. nieves's abstracted "body" represents another genealogy and an experiment. Both suggest that turning to the inside of the Black body might locate inventive ways of seeing and knowing the Black feminist political imagination. This book operates within that *might*—a methodology of the experiment, Saidiya Hartman's term to think about ways that Black women in the early twentieth century forged innovative modes of living not always captured by official archival record.¹⁵ I read both Lacks's cells and nieves's abstraction alongside the realism of empire's science and through the

lens of intentional aesthetic uncertainty. The inside of the Black body is, in component parts, a rich inventory of overexposed racist theorizing and anti-racist recuperation. Risking the objectifying blazon of physiognomy as destiny, this book moves through specific materials of the body with deep, hypervisible histories in science and theories of racial-sexual difference: from the cell of this introduction as the site of ultimate fictional difference, DNA, and exploited medical experiment material; to bones and blood, both intense sites of social and medical segregation; to the imagined biological control centers of both inherent difference and doggedly pursued social change, the brain and the heart; and finally to organs that have stood in for politics of failed will and potential rescue, the gut and the womb. Throughout, I mark the scripts of overdetermined knowledge that append to these internal objects and trace genealogies that refract those overexposures into new political possibilities and ways of knowing within Black feminism.

Significantly, for this project, I also turn to not knowing—to the disorienting experience of being a body that knows itself and sees itself as both subject and object. The body, vitreous. The Black feminine body, seemingly transparent but also textured, murky, surface and/as substance. The material of Henrietta Lacks's body, for instance, exceeds her lifetime in absolutely unexpected ways. The story of her cells and her cells themselves both coordinate with and defy narratives of Black feminine embodiment across Black, feminist, and scientific study. The reach and range of Lacks's cells constellate the ways we might attend to, acknowledge, and incorporate changing orientations to difference across methodologies, disciplines, desires, risks, harms, geographies, institutions, histories, and scales of intellectual enterprise within Black feminist theory.

Black feminism's history of grappling with the body is a site of regeneration for the metaphoric and material possibilities of both politics and health. Black feminism's grammars of knowing the body hit differently when we bring them, acutely, inside—to specific sites of function and understanding within the body and within historical discourse. *Inside the Body of Black Feminism* gently presses alongside and against narratives of righteous and accurate exposure as a remedy for racist histories of medicine and science that have abused and appropriated the Black body as material and metaphor. This book commits to thinking of the body not against science but instead with an attention to Black feminism's attachments to metaphors of surface and depth, interiority and exteriority, organic and inorganic, visible and invisible. Focusing on how the body is known in and through Black feminism, and how it as a field also uses the internalized body to make its claims to political life, I ask, how do we know the inside of the Black body differently through Black feminism and,

through those ways of knowing and practicing scientific and medical and expressive inquiry, understand Black feminist thought anew?

Black feminist thought teaches us ways to understand the body through the politics of vision and the politics of flesh. Because the inside of the body is often depicted as unseeable, and hence as unknowable, verbal thick descriptions of appearance and function as well as illustrated renderings have been critical methods for visualizing the body's interior. The quest to *see* the inside of the body, and seeing as a way of knowing, is also deeply entwined with the will to visualize Blackness as a marker of racial difference. The development of visual and photographic technologies was often born of the wish to capture racial difference in visual evidence.¹⁶ The visual is a way to render knowing, and knowing race, differently.¹⁷ It is also the dominant sensory mode of scientific discovery—what can be observed dictates the formulation of questions and the direction of inquiry. For medical research, technologies that allow researchers to see the inside of the body differently also alter medical knowledge fundamentally.

The history of visualizing Blackness as a way to chart and document difference as fact has led to an understandable suspicion of white attachment to sight and visibility. Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí suggests that this is also a racialized production and projection of gendered difference.¹⁸ Indeed, the mistrust of a white science that follows white sight, categorizing humans from generalized phenotypic typings, haunts antiracist engagements with the internal body, as they must claim biological sameness and racism-induced health inequities at the same time. Grappling with variation and the function of the appearance of skin and racial surface, several contemporary critics—Michelle Stephens, Anne Anlin Cheng, Krista Thompson—have revalued Black skin's aesthetic and political function as more than a sign of white vision or resistance against racism.¹⁹ They have flipped, then, the question of Black skin, and Black difference, on its head, not as a form of rebuttal but rather to say: What else does it do, can it do, given its spectacularity? What else can we ask of Black skin?

Which leads me to the second figuration that is both case and challenge for this book: flesh. Hortense Spillers's 1980 formation of flesh as the object-oriented Blackness left in the wake of the world-rending violence of the Middle Passage and race-based chattel slavery has undergirded a significant amount of Black feminist, sexuality, and political theory. Spillers's "grammar" of the flesh gives materiality to the process of raced and gendered objectification and its long aftermath to critics as broad as queer-of-color critique's Amber Jamilla Musser to Jessica Marie Johnson's seventeenth-century Black diaspora historiography. In many ways a response to more bloodless metaphors of political and social relations, this turn to flesh dwells in the material. Flesh does not *feel*

like a metaphor even as it is deployed as such—animating modes and methods of thought that hover between skin and body with the promise of encapsulating processes of violence, coercion, and dispossession.²⁰ It weds surface and system in one term.

My turn to the inside of the body is an engagement with and a refraction of Black feminist figurations of sight and flesh. Going inside the body is not, then, a way to go beyond the surface, or the objectification of the Black feminine body, but to inhabit that objectness even more fully. As Tiffany Lethabo King says of flesh, its status as outside of normative gendered representation of the West can also “free it from the constraints of a liberal humanist body.”²¹ To go to the Black material interior is to mark the affordances of what is inside that is not fully described by Black feminist attachments to skin and sight as its grammars and currency in representational exchange. The flexibility in various modes of seeing and the materiality of flesh meet in a series of questions that make race anew at sites under the skin—questions I ask through the lens of bones and blood, brains and hearts, guts and wombs. The ties between past and present racial medical history are made clear by numerous contemporary historiographies and interdisciplinary monographs.²² These and many other works discussed in the course of this book have created an archive of race and the body that arcs into the past to explain these parts and systems as carefully and complexly constructed through a “medical imagination,” which has since sought to sever its history of cultural engagement—for better and for worse, as Sari Altschuler maps in her book, *The Medical Imagination* (2018), on the development of professional medicine and its relationship to literary and other cultural expression. I follow these wide-ranging engagements with the inside of the Black, gendered, sexualized, colonized body—its health, its composition, its limits, its possibilities, its interior geography—to create an expansive archive of a Black material interior that mimics and extends the infamous blazon of the Black body given as a sermon by Baby Suggs in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. There, she exhorts the community to love their parts—hands, flesh—especially when no one else will or can. Here, I look to an internal catalog of overexposed bodily parts that are made by the scales of anti-Blackness as well as by the creative, variable, imaginative practices that include and exceed its knowable frame.

Which is also to say: Given the important scholarship happening in the burgeoning fields of Black feminist history, Africa-based medical anthropology, and histories of empire through medicine and disease, scholars might feel like we know the story of Western medicine and the Black (un)gendered body. The details and sites vary and abound, from seventeenth-century slave ships and ports, to nineteenth-century medical experimentation on the enslaved, to

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twentieth-century research studies that refuse informed consent as an ethic, to the contemporary horror of global and US-based racial health disparities. These histories are careful and necessary, and they form the backbone of any claims I make herein. They track the making of the Black body both inside and out, from phenotypic claims to skin- and sight-level difference to physiological digs for hierarchical variations in brain, heart, nerve, kidney, reproductive, musculoskeletal, digestive, breath, and even blood-level function between races. The parsing out of the body into parts mimics and produces the objectification of racialized Black bodies as commodities, objects, things, and as less than human. Inside and outside are made equivalent and damned by the institutions and structures upholding racial capitalism, who bring to the internal body the same will to see and exploit constructed differences as interpretations of moral, human, and intellectual worth.

Undergirded and evidenced by this overwhelming history of medicine and science as both generator and alibi of anti-Blackness and misogyny, Black studies and feminist studies scholars have often had to maintain what Elizabeth Wilson has called an “antibiological stance,” with feminist studies cautiously establishing more science and technology studies (STS)-based theories that don’t just debunk the specious misogynist stories of absolute difference but offer their own interpretations and understandings of the potential of embodied difference.²³ As race-based metrics of micro-bodily function still hold sway—one need only look at COVID-era headlines about the melatonin-biased readings of pulse oximeters mentioned above or disparities in appeals for health releases of prisoners based on racist science of kidney function in Black vs. white physiology—Black studies cannot afford, it feels, to take those risks or liberties in interpreting the biological body. New Materialism itself, and its turn to the scientific, has been held as suspect in the face of the history and present of scientific failing around race, gender, and equity. Black studies and Black feminist studies have understandably remained resolutely focused on uncovering more and more specific histories of scientific racism.

Another way of Black feminist knowing that might be brought to bear on this methodology of exposure is, as Kevin Quashie and Jennifer C. Nash show us, a poetics of life and living.²⁴ Black feminism isn’t the heroine of this method; instead, it is a context, an aesthetics of authorship but even more a way of reading. *Inside the Body of Black Feminism* is immersed in, but also in tension with, Black feminist metaphors, attachments, and desires around the body as an object. As a scholar of the field, I engage methods of Black feminist life and living to find new ways of understanding its pathways through embodiment that don’t easily reproduce existing frames of understanding. I

focus on very specific parts—bone, blood, brains, hearts, guts, wombs—not to undo their objectification in the name of Black feminism but to think through the possibilities of the object that Black feminism has taught me.²⁵ I build on the historiography of Black embodiment and its interface with the medical as written outside of academia, by journalists like Harriet Washington and Linda Villarosa, and inside of scholarly Black feminist thought by scholars such as Dorothy Roberts and Deirdre Cooper Owens, as much as I work through Black cultural studies and cultural expression, to find a dynamic, living way into the Black feminist material interior.

Finally, the impasse of knowledge formation in the West has largely (but not always) locked out Black, African, and women subjects from writing their own traditional narratives of science and medicine. Knowing the Black feminist body, then, has to be an exercise in different kinds of evidence beyond asserting resistant agency and authorship. I start with Lacks as a way of getting at the thorniness of how the story of the Black feminine and feminist body has been told over and over again, how its internal material circulates beyond purity. In keeping with the slippery stakes of authorship, authority, and authenticity that I've outlined above, I don't claim all of the texts in this book as Black feminist, but rather seek to think Black feminist theory as and in the scene of the Black body. This is sometimes to disarticulate the naturalized relationship/conflation between the two and at other times to align the seeming distance between a point of vulnerable contact. I acknowledge the risks of attending to Black feminine embodiment as a site of not always self-authored difference when the stakes of racist eugenic thinking are still so devastatingly high. I write from a place of living debt, then, as I think material and metaphor together through Black feminist theory's interdisciplinary reach inside of the body and across spheres of representation.

Metaphor and the Black Material Interior

This introduction then considers the material cell—gorgeous, toxic, divisible, extractable, reproducible, undeniably singular and part of a vast collection—and moves through the oxymoron of overexposed yet interior flesh from this space. It also considers the inside of the Black feminine body in the abstract, as the vitreous metaphor that is an object of both the scientific gaze and of Left politics—and of Black studies and Black feminist studies. The interior, here, doesn't represent the authentic self, uncovered by methods of close reading. Instead, it is another threshold—like skin but different—that is animated as a series of objects and metaphorized at the particular level as it is collapsed into the joint functions of a body, whole, until one part fails or stands out.

Black interiority then represents a way of knowing not a true or hidden self but, as Elizabeth Alexander maps it, a sort of living room (here, biological living) that is self-conscious performance and self-regulating pleasure—a space of display and of use, a place of receiving, digesting, moving, and metabolizing the external and making it part of the self.²⁶ It is, as Kevin Quashie says, a space not of “realness” but of wild impulses and desires, too, and a concept that has, as Christopher Freeburg suggests, its own aesthetic landscapes within Black art and white constructions of Black selfhood.²⁷ The Black material interior, for this book, is a space to “know otherwise,” to disrupt Black studies’ genealogy of itself as contesting whiteness and making Blackness legible through its resistant frames. Instead, *Inside the Body of Black Feminism* asks how Black and antiracist expressive culture, and in particular Black feminist theory, might disrupt not just white assumed understandings of embodiment, medicine, and science but, more importantly, Black studies’ own political metaphors and ways of knowing politics and history.

There is, too, the potential of the deployment of the language of science to understand something that seems self-evidently locked into death-bound antiracist logics: Hartman’s *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, as previously mentioned, reframes the ordinary/extraordinary living of Black girls and women in New York City in the early twentieth century through the metaphor of scientific method, the experiment. In the 1980s, antiracist public science author Stephen Jay Gould mirrored this move in humanistic terms, rather than in the language of objectivity, when he described the scientific method itself as a form of “creative interpretation.”²⁸ Both Hartman and Gould deploy new disciplinary metaphors to their objects of inquiry as a way to reshape what we think their fields do, can do, should do. It is this crossing of metaphors—the ways that metaphors come to define disciplinary and political horizons and the ways that innovative scholars, researchers, writers, artists, scientists, and others have deployed them otherwise and against their typical use—that this book takes up, ultimately, by recentering the interior Black body within Black feminism and recentering Black feminism through the Black material interior. Scientific, political, humanistic, and aesthetic meaning generates itself from and through metaphor, and generates change from that space, too—for better and for worse, and otherwise.

I use metaphor here to think about the abstractions that language, gesture, analogy, and aesthetics ask of us as interpreters of the world, and of medical phenomena in particular.²⁹ I turn to specific sites of the interior of the body to think about the very different data and metaphors they’ve created as engines and reflections of the desire of those doing the looking, writing, feeling, and

knowing. Attention to metaphor allows me, along with many who study science communication, to scrutinize the ways that science does not in fact track with a self-evident gaze but is recalibrated as new methods of seeing and knowing take root (be it thinking of a body ruled by the four humors or fluids, or believing women's education saps the energy from their uteri into their brains). Metaphor can be dismissed within political narrative analysis as surface, as distraction, as unreal against material and matter ("just language"). I strain that assumed relation, taking metaphor seriously as a way of knowing the most material of things and experiences; I sit with the ruse of being beyond mediation—ruses that both science and political theory can engage, knowingly and unknowingly. It is all surfaces, then, for this book. I take from that an assumption that I am not smarter than my forebears or my objects of study; my job as a critic is not to understand metaphor more or better but rather to ask different questions and see if that pieces together ways of knowing, of seeing, of sensing difference that risk misinterpretation—and in fact take that risk as their object of description and inquiry.

The vectors of knowing the interior of the Black body run through not just material histories but through their various representations, in their own day and in current critical discourse. As I discuss in chapter 6, Lacks narrates her own medical dilemma through the feeling and language of "the knot" on her womb; what do scholars in the field of Black studies make of the knot of linguistic and representational work we put on the inside of the Black body, how we put that interior to use, to make it seen, knowable, scrutable but also (sometimes) to occlude, analogize, reshape, pivot an understanding? Repetition, scale, collection, the affordances of the forms that the interior can take in the imagination when it cannot be readily seen in most of our everyday lives—all become paramount to our understanding of how the inside of the body works, how we think it should or does work, how we imagine its limits and what can be done with it, about it.

This is a tension within some strands of disability studies' and Black studies' articulation of the need for concrete narrative centrality: What of allowing the inside of the Black body to be and remain metaphor? Metaphors, as figures of speech, can empty out material form and experience of its political meaning, engaging what David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have termed "Narrative Prosthesis," what Frank Wilderson calls the "ruse of analogy," what Patricia Stuelke deems "the ruse of repair," what Julie Livingston asserts is the "moral imagination" ascribed to the inside of the body, to what it can or can't do in the neocolonial world and its discourse.³⁰ Ann duCille cautions about metaphor: "Black culture is more easily intellectualized (and canonized) when transferred

from the danger of lived Black experience to the safety of white metaphor, when you can have . . . Black difference without the difference of significant Blackness.”³¹ As scholars like Banu Subramaniam remind us, language is the realm in which science asserts its own metaphors of meaning, like ascribing married heterosexuality to plant life, or militarizing sperm while describing fertilization.³²

Of course, biological systems and medicine improvise around a given set of circumstances and materialities—and these creative moments make of these metaphors and analogies something else entirely—art out of cancer cells and also medical intervention through abstraction. Many feminist, Black studies, and medical anthropology scholars attempt to reanimate methodological questions around health, medicine, and the body through metaphor. I write here not to save metaphor, to convince you it is, in this case, resistant or that it somehow gets out of the exploitative nature, the distorting nature, of representation when we think we mean well or better. As disability studies has pushed against using disability or illness as metaphor, and rightly so, we have to take accountability for what happens for cultural producers when they don’t have access to power in terms of material resources, when all they have is the material of their bodies and expressive culture to render what’s inside legible. I also want to explore the methodological problem that metaphor offers the critic and scholar and scientist, as description: creative interpretation as science, beautiful experiments as Black women’s living. Euphemism, analogy, metaphor, metonym. Figures of speech figured as scholarly method. Figures of speech that matter, that shape matter, that shape what we think of as material, as fact. Disability studies has taught us to be skeptical of metaphors as impulses that undergird our language, our study—of the body, specifically, but also of other objects through a colonizing process of narrative prosthesis. I want to hold on to that as I excavate the ways that the haunts of cure and repair infuse the language of feminist, antiracist, Black, and ethnic studies, and how metaphor becomes the scapegoat rather than a necessary tool to pivot from the binaries produced by racist, sexist, ableist histories.

From this held tension between metaphor and materiality, I return to the language of risk and objectification as I move to this introduction’s conclusion and the book’s organizing structure. HeLa cells at once demand biological authorship and exceed the terms of authorial consent; they have been made spectacular through their denied particularity in scientific circulation without informed consent and are then issued particularity in Lacks’s recovered story, which has made them spectacular again, in a new and different way. They are obvious, overexposed; they are abstract, demanding interpretation to make

meaning. The sections, chapters, and cases of this book necessarily toggle between these modes and find in that excruciating uncertainty a new political narration of Black feminism's relationship to and theorization of the body.

In part I, I take on bones and blood as the sites of some foundational metaphors and materials around racial formation and structure, ones that rely on history—chronological and natural—to determine racial meaning. Bones form a collection of meaning-making work around fixed racial categories that come from aggregated data that assume biological race, and also around the centrality of death-bound explanations for racial belonging projected into every future. I look to a series of Black feminist investments in reading bones otherwise as early articulations of the untrustworthiness of both white supremacist interpretation of race and the seductive calls for sacred and unchanging ties to Black kinship. Blood, as the companion to bone as a primary site of nineteenth-century racial science and social segregation, continues this inquiry, as the line of racial history that promises genealogical fixedness but betrays the complex erotic operations that underpin Black community. Blood and bone here thwart *and* tether forms of Black feminist self-making, as well as offer venues for Black expressive culture to chafe against the binds of political, cultural, and social belonging. These chapters take on long- and short-form fiction, historical accounts, popular medical journalism, various infrastructures of death and bone collecting (through harrowing repatriation battles over the contents of cemeteries and museums), anthropology, memoir, and films to build archives of bone and blood work that both engage and disrupt historical narrative as the cause and cure for Black feminist interpretation.

In part II, *Inside the Body of Black Feminism* engages with the brain and the heart, two sites of injury—from the bell curve to theories of an excess of Black feeling—and imagined sites of repair around social justice through the promise of education and sentiment. Here, I apply Black feminist analysis to the materials and metaphors of thinking and feeling in antiracist genres. How does Black feminism hold on to ideas of teaching antiracism and feminism through the repeated exposure of Black pain, and attachments to changing the hearts and minds of its audience, and how might it imagine “letting go”?³³ The brain is the site of massive speculation on racial and gendered intelligence, as well as the nerve center for bodily sensations, particularly around pleasure and pain. What do horror narratives—film, television, genre novels, and so on—tell us about not just racist histories of the brain but also speculative futures of thinking race and gender anew? The heart is a juggernaut of metaphoric and capital investment in emotion, be it around feeling race and racism differently through modes like sentimentalism and melodrama, or arguing for the ethics

of extending life spans through radical intervention, innovation, and even transplantation. From medical autobiography to visual art to historical biopics to children's books, the heart in Black feminist hands renders itself a difficult organ full of the tensions and possibilities of living with and moving through contradiction—circulating around organic and inorganic modes of survival, thriving, and interpretative schemas that insist on the power of feeling wrong about politics.³⁴ Together, these chapters explore the complex signaling and circulatory systems of the brain and the heart as moves away from the zero-sum-game methods of injury/resistance analysis.

In the final section of the book, I look to the gut and the womb to grapple with the Black material interior's association with excess and surplus, be it enslavement-era investments in reproducing capital, governmental and ecological concern-trolling about Black overpopulation, or stereotypes around Black food consumption. What does antiracist and feminist history reproduce, and how do we, as scholars of the field and as a global set of subjects in a market for these histories, consume anti-Black violence, metabolize it, repeat it, and see the work out into the world with a respect for appetites, desires, pleasure beyond rationality, and variable taste? I turn to the gut, the metaphor for instinctual right feeling and moral direction, to think through not just the rhetorics of food deserts, overconsumption, and failure of individual will in the face of desires and appetites but to consider more seriously how Black feminism as a field metabolizes its own histories of attachments, desires, and surplus relation to institutionality. In Afropolitan speculative fiction, Caribbean and African American memoir, and children's books, I find a network of strategies for representing the consumption of food as a practice and metaphor of consumerism, community, personal choice, and painful intake. These texts treat eating as an orientation to history and futures of living through violence and vulnerability. As such, they offer a different metaphor for memory than the sense of traumatic repetition—re-memory—that dominates many discussions of the afterlives of slavery and the futures of antiracism.³⁵ In the final chapter, I turn to the womb, looking at what intra-Black diaspora negotiations of the space of the uterus (metaphorically representing safety, care, protection, and the replication of race) and the historical weight of Black reproductive life look like in imagining political futures of Black feminist thought, futures that include ugly feelings and impasses beyond the romance of care and community and the seduction of imagined bodily autonomy. Turning to diasporic fictions that include scenes of graphic birth and abortion, as well as thwarted and refused use of the womb, this final chapter considers the womb as what Lacks referred to as a “knot” where Black and feminist political desire meet in uneasy

and temporary community with the materiality of biology. The gut and the womb represent threshold spaces where a singular body takes in and expels the foreign, the other—ingests and gestates difference, holds it close, and works through it with varying degrees of emotion, sensation, and thought.

The three sections (and six chapters) of *Inside the Body of Black Feminism* chart moments of division and collision where Black feminist thought and scientific history and method meet. These meetings happen on the terrain of cultural expression and through the disciplinary methodology of cultural and literary studies that allows for a vitreous understanding of the evidence of the body. Black feminist cultural, literary, and theoretical studies offer a genealogy of holding objecthood and subjectivity simultaneously—a formation born of being the subject of multiple disciplinary gazes that one cannot merely refuse or resist, but through which one lives, adapts, and makes a way through, materially and metaphorically.

This understanding of embodiment insists on a body that is both vulnerable and spectacular, with pitfalls and possibilities to that vitreous uncertainty. I also hope that the turn to the inside of the body can point to a different set of grammars for the field of Black feminist and Black studies to theorize from as a basis for “critical fabulation”—the creative making of the facts of Black historical record into something more fully invested in Black life.³⁶ Black expressive culture imagines the inside of the body differently as surely as technological breakthroughs in science and medicine alter the course and mode of knowledge production around the body’s functions and futures. *Inside the Body of Black Feminism* seeks not to expose what’s under the skin, then, but to trace the Black interior as a key understudied thread in how Black feminist studies has structured its political imagination.

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NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. Skene and Brumfield, “Henrietta Lacks’ Family Settles Lawsuit.”
2. Skloot, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, 9.
3. I reference many below, but Harriet Washington, Deirdre Cooper Owens, Jim Downs, Britt Rusert, Lundy Braun, Anne Pollack, and others will repeat across these pages.
4. *Ebony*, “The Miracle of HeLa”; *Jet*, “25 Years After Death, Black Mother’s Cells Live for Cancer Study.”
5. Rogers, “The Double-Edged Helix.”
6. Skloot, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, 4.
7. Skloot, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, 4.
8. On collection, empire, and scale, see Stewart, *On Longing*; Kim, *The Politics of Collecting*.
9. Washington, *Medical Apartheid*; Tilley, *Africa as a Living Laboratory*.
10. Cooper Owens, *Medical Bondage*.
11. For critiques of cell-based and epigenetic research on social/sexual/racial difference, see Richardson, *Sex Itself*; Valdez, *Weighing the Future*.
12. See Nelson, *The Social Life of DNA*.
13. See Braun, *Breathing Race into the Machine*; Pollock, *Sickening*.
14. Moran-Thomas, “How a Popular Medical Device Encodes Racial Bias.”
15. See Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*.
16. See Cobb, *Picture Freedom*; Hochman, *Savage Preservation*; Morris-Reich, *Race and Photography*; Smith, *Photographic Returns*.
17. See Cobb, *Picture Freedom*; Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision*; Thompson, *Shine*; Willis, *Posing Beauty*.
18. See Oyèwùmí, *The Invention of Women*.
19. See Stephens, *Skin Acts*; Cheng, *Second Skin*; Thompson, *Shine*.
20. Anker, *Fictions of Dignity*.
21. King, “Flesh,” 95.

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22. See Helen Tilley's *Africa as a Living Laboratory*, which extends "laboratory" across medical and other sciences in the colonial era, Andrew Curran's *The Anatomy of Blackness*, Jim Downs's *Maladies of Empire*, Deirdre Cooper Owens's *Medical Bondage*, Lundy Braun's *Breathing Race into the Machine*, and Siobhan Somerville's *Queering the Color Line*. Across colonialism and chattel enslavement and their long aftermaths to today, the history of science, medicine, race, epidemiology, and embodiment has explored the ways anti-Blackness, in particular, has been woven into medical knowledge production from the West. Other work, like Pablo Gomez's *The Experiential Caribbean* and Britt Rusert's *Fugitive Science*, tells the story of Black and mixed-race scientific knowledge production—often in forms heretofore unrecognized through official Western modes. Andrea Stone's *Black Well-Being*, Sharla Fett's *Working Cures*, and Gretchen Long's *Doctoring Freedom* emphasize these resistant histories as well. Alondra Nelson has not only given us a critical history of how the Black Panthers reimaged health care as a radical human right and community resource, but also a new way to think about Black genetic inheritance as a site of possible historical redress. Still other work, from Durba Mitra's *Indian Sex Life*, a stunning history of how the concept of the prostitute in India was the base for social science development within the modern Indian state, to Julie Livingston's *Improvising Medicine*, a historical ethnography of cancer treatment in Botswana, to Noémi Tousignant's *Edges of Exposure*, explores the internal workings of science, sexuality, and race in precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial contexts to imagine what embodiment and constructions of scientific and social difference, as well as the material conditions of doing science in the Global South, might bring to this history. Antiracist feminist science studies from Banu Subramaniam, Sarah Richardson, Sandra Harding, Natali Valdez, and others has teased out the intersectional stakes of creating difference as hierarchical scale as well as deconstructed traditional science to ask new questions with "naturecultural" (Subramaniam, *Ghost Stories for Darwin*) methods that assume systemic social inequity at their base—such as the tracking of epigenetics and trauma imprinted on genes within and across generations. Feminist STS has also taken possible biological variations seriously as a place of generative rather than diagnostic inquiry—such as Elizabeth Wilson's questioning of how genetically female bodies digest various pharmaceuticals into their systems, or the mapping of women's heart health and emergency cardiac events apart from typically male symptoms.

23. See Wilson, *Gut Feminism*.

24. See Quashie, *Black Aliveness*; Nash, *How We Write Now*.

25. See Musser, *Sensational Flesh*; Cheng, *Ornamentalism*; Vogel, *Stolen Time*; Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy*; Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*.

26. See Alexander, *The Black Interior*.

27. Quashie, *The Sovereignty of Quiet*; Freeburg, *Black Aesthetics and the Interior Life*.

28. Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man*.

29. There is abundant work within science, science education and communications, and within science and literature and science and rhetoric studies on the links between metaphor and scientific process and cognition. See, for instance, Amin et al., "Conceptual Metaphor and Embodied Cognition in Science Learning"; Anderson and Thomas, "Prospecting for Metacognition' in a Science Museum"; Augé, *Metaphor*

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and *Argumentation in Climate Crisis Discourse*; Beger and Smith, *How Metaphors Guide, Teach and Popularize Science*; Bongard and Levin, "Living Things Are Not (20th Century) Machines"; Brown, *Making Truth*; Campill, *Re-Inventing Organic Metaphors for the Social Sciences*; Charteris-Black, "Epidemiology"; Ervas et al., *Metaphor in Communication, Science and Education*; Gleyse, "The Machine Body Metaphor"; Helmreich, "Not a Metaphor"; Holyoak, *The Spider's Thread*; Humar, "Metaphors as Models"; Keijzer, "Is 'the Brain' a Helpful Metaphor for Neuroscience?"; Kemp, "Science Meets a Metaphor"; Newman, "Microbial Metaphors"; Niebert et al., "Understanding Needs Embodiment"; Olson, *Science as Metaphor*; Pielke, "A 'SEDATIVE' for Science Policy"; Regehr, "It's NOT Rocket Science"; Reynolds, *Understanding Metaphors in the Life Sciences*; Shuttleworth, "Translational Behaviour at the Frontiers of Scientific Knowledge"; Tee Ng, "Examining the Use of New Science Metaphors in the Learning Organisation"; Veit and Ney, "Metaphors in Arts and Science"; Wall, *Myth, Metaphor and Science*; Wuppuluri and Grayling, *Metaphors and Analogies in Sciences and Humanities*; Zhang, "Metaphor in Science Communication."

30. Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*; Wilderson, *Red, White and Black*; Stuelke, *The Ruse of Repair*; Livingston, *Self-Devouring Growth*.

31. DuCille, "The Occult of True Black Womanhood," 600.

32. Subramaniam, *Botany of Empire*. See also Martin, *The Woman in the Body*, where she famously unpacks the gendered, militaristic metaphors of conception.

33. Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined*.

34. Levy-Hussen, *How to Read African American Literature*.

35. Morrison, *Beloved*.

36. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts."

I. BONES

1. Imbler, "Can Skeletons Have a Racial Identity?"

2. Tadiar, *Remaindered Life*.

3. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 2.

4. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 3–4.

5. See Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery*.

6. Work on misappropriation and repatriation of skeletal remains across empire abounds: Collingwood-Whittick, "Skeletons in the Cupboard," 65; Holland, *an other*; Takahata, "Skeletal Testimony"; Johnson, *The Rich Earth Between Us*; Hobart, "What Returns, What Remains"; Moudileno, "Returning Remains."

7. Williams, "Structures of Feeling."

8. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*. Fred Moten lingers on this sound/scene in *In the Break*.

9. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts"; Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives*; Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe."

10. Fun-Da-Mental, "English Breakfast," on *Seize the Time* (Mammoth Records, 1994).

11. Willoughby, "Running Away from Drapetomania."

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