

ONE BOOK + ONE LOOK

WCU Fine Art Museum

*The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* + *Return from Exile: Contemporary Southeastern Indian Art* exhibition  
Fall 2017

**Goals:**

To use major themes found in *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* as interpretive lenses through which to consider artworks in the WCU Fine Art Museum exhibition, *Return from Exile: Contemporary Southeastern Indian Art*. Visits may be facilitated by a Museum staff member or conducted as a self-guided tour using the following worksheet and prompts.

Please schedule all group tours (guided or self-guided) by contacting the WCU Fine Art Museum at (828) 227-3591 or [museum@wcu.edu](mailto:museum@wcu.edu). If you would like to visit the exhibition individually, feel free to do so during our opening hours: Mondays (closed); Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Fridays (10AM – 4PM); Thursdays (10AM – 7PM).

**Exhibition Description for *Return from Exile: Contemporary Southeastern Indian Art***

Curated by Tony A. Tiger, Bobby C. Martin, and Jace Weaver, *Return from Exile* features more than thirty contemporary Southeastern Native American artists working in a variety of media including painting, drawing, printmaking, basketry, sculpture, and pottery. *Return from Exile* is one of the first major exhibitions to focus on contemporary artists from tribal nations with an historical connection to the Southeastern United States. These include the so-called Five Civilized Tribes, the Choctaw, Chickasaw, Cherokee, Muscogee (or Creek), and Seminole, all of whom were forcibly removed in the 1830s to present-day Oklahoma as a result of the Indian Removal Act of 1830. The title of the exhibition represents the return of these artists to their ancestral homelands.

**Themes:**

- Voice and Perspective (Who tells the story?)
- Race/History
- Family
- Poverty
- Healthcare

**Starter Discussion Questions:**

- 1) What kind of book is *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*?
- 2) In what ways does this book initiate thinking about important issues?
- 3) What things would you like to know that the book does not tell you?
- 4) What is your personal assessment of this book? Would you recommend it to friends or family?

## **Theme 1: Voice & Perspective (Who tells the story?)**

### **ONE LOOK: *Return from Exile***

In her essay for the *Return from Exile* exhibition catalogue, native scholar Dr. Mary Jo Watson begins with a quote taken from a 1976 book titled *The Southeastern Indians*. The quote reads, “All peoples have blind spots in their memories of the past, but the Southeastern Indians are the victims of a virtual amnesia in our historical consciousness.” Dr. Watson continues, “These words written some forty years ago remain pervasive in many areas of American history and art history. To correct this ‘blind spot’, a group of Southeastern Indian artists are now reclaiming their cultural heritage and artistic histories...This special exhibition, *Return from Exile: Cotemporary Southeastern Indian Art*, makes a bold statement. We are here! We live and remember.”

- What does this quote tell you about the exhibition and the artists included in it?
- Why is it significant to know that this exhibition was curated by native artists and the catalogue essays written by native scholars?
- What perspectives do you expect to encounter through the works in this exhibition?

### **ONE BOOK: *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks***

**Perspective also plays a role in *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. Please read the following quote and discuss the questions below.**

“I’ve done my best to capture the language with which each person spoke and wrote: dialogue appears in native dialects; passages from diaries and other personal writings are quoted exactly as written. As one of Henrietta’s relatives said to me, “If you pretty up how people spoke and change the things they said, that’s dishonest. It’s taking away their lives, their experiences, and their selves” (Skloot, xiii).

- In your opinion, author Rebecca Skloot successful in her aim to accurately represent the Lacks family and their stories?
- Who are the characters in *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*?
- Whose perspectives are represented in the book?
- Why is it important to represent multiple voices?

## Theme 2: Race/History

### ONE LOOK: *Return from Exile*



Look closely at the drawing *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* by Eastern Band Cherokee artist Faren Sanders Crews.

Here, Crews depicts the Cherokee's Green Corn Ceremony, which was traditionally held when the corn was ripe. The ceremony was held annually after the removal in the 1830s and through 1914. After this, it is unclear if the ceremony was practiced or how often for most of the twentieth century as many traditions and languages were lost. The dance was revived in 1988 and is still practiced today.

In the artist's own words about the Green Corn Ceremony, "Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow, is my triptych depiction. We endeavor to persevere, we remain, we survive, we are here, we are the same—we are a living culture. Our arts and traditions define us. We endure—we are *Tsa-la-gi*—a strong, great and proud race."

- What does the title of this artwork mean to you?
- What are the differences and similarities you perceive between the three panels?
- How does the artist write about and depict both traditional and contemporary Cherokee culture?

### ONE BOOK: *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*

In *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, Deborah states, "Like I'm always telling my brothers, if you gonna go into history, you can't do it with a hate attitude. You got to remember, times was different" (Skloot, 276).

- What does she mean by this statement?
- How are race and history crucial to the story of Henrietta Lacks and her family?

## Theme 3: Family

### ONE BOOK: *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*

At the beginning of the book, Rebecca Skloot writes, “I’ve spent years staring at photo, wondering what kind of life she led, what happened to her children, and what she’d think about cells from her cervix living on forever – bought, sold, packaged, and shipped by the trillions to laboratories around the world” (Skloot, 1).

- Have you ever looked at a photograph and wanted to know more about the person depicted in it?
  - What did the photograph look like and who was in it?
- Do you have old photographs of your family? Friends? Self? What do you think about or remember when you see these?

### ONE LOOK: *Return from Exile*

Now look at the artwork by Bobby C. Martin (Muscogee Creek), *Uncle David Killed in Action, 1944*.

- What is the historical context for this work?
- Do you recognize the brand name seen behind the figure?
- What does this painting say to you about remembering the past?
- How might you connect ideas behind this painting to those found in *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*?



Next, consider the sculpture by Bobby C. Martin (Muscogee Creek) and Tony A. Tiger (Creek/Seminole/Sac & Fox), *Mekusape Fullvynna: Muscogee Gravehouse*.

This title of this piece is taken from a Muscogee hymn typically sung in church, commonly at funerals. The song is about how a person lived a life of Christian faith. The sculpture is a similar construction to that of a Muscogee gravehouse, built over the grave of a deceased loved one to mourn that individual. The structure is not disturbed after it is built and slowly falls apart during the course of the remaining mourners’ lifetimes. It is then dismantled by the next generation.



The artists write “Our thoughts for creating the piece allowed us to remember and honor our ancestors who were removed from ancestral homelands from the Southeast and Northeast to Indian Territory: our ancestors were Muscogee Creek, Seminole and Sac & Fox. All three tribes had their own Trail of Tears. The gravehouse is not a mournful remembrance, it is a thoughtful reminder that we are more than just physical beings, we are soul and spirit as well.”

- Who do you think is depicted on the roof of the gravehouse?
- How does this artwork incorporate religion?
- How do the artists represent their past and present?
- Do you find this work to be meaningful?

## **ONE BOOK: *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks***

**Compare what you now know of this artwork to Henrietta's funeral scene in the book.**

“The Lacks cousins don't remember much about the service—they figure there were some words, probably a song or two. But they all remember what happened next. As Cliff and Fred lowered Henrietta's coffin into her grave and began covering her with handfuls of dirt, the sky turned black as strap molasses... Years later, when Henrietta's cousin Peter looked back on that day, he just shook his bald head and laughed: ‘Hennie never was what you'd call a beatin-around-the-bush woman,’ he said. ‘We shoulda knew she was tryin to tell us somthin with that storm’” (Skloot, 92).

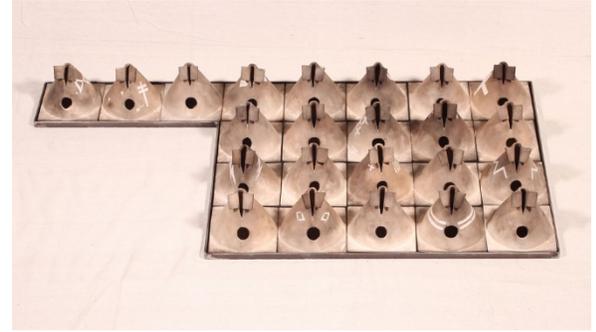
- How are funerals and death portrayed in the artwork and the book?
- What is the importance of memory to the artists and the characters in the book?

## **Theme 4: Poverty**

### **ONE LOOK: *Return from Exile***

**Examine Mel Cornshucker’s work titled *Oklahoma: We’re OK*.**

The artist writes, “Georgia, Alabama, Eastern Tennessee, and Western North Carolina—these lands were ours to own. We raised our families and thrived as a People and a Nation. Then came the removal. Our lives were changed forever. When the forced march finally ended, we were confined by the government to lands not of our choosing. We were confined by invisible boundaries—depicted in *Oklahoma—We’re OK* by the steel frame—to lands deemed useless. And here we remained. But, as is our nature, we took an adversity and made the most of our lives, in spite of the hardship forced upon us.”



- What is the artist depicting in this work?
- What do you notice about all of the structures?
- What is the significance of the shape and way in which the teepees are placed?
- What is the significance of the title of this work?
- How does this work demonstrate resilience?

### **ONE BOOK: *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks***

**Now, recall the descriptions provided by Rebecca Skloot of Lacks Town and Clover when she travels there to speak with Henrietta’s relatives.**

“The dividing line between Lacks Town and the rest of Clover was stark. On one side of the two-lane road from downtown, there were vast, well-manicured rolling hills, acres and acres of wide-open property with horses, a small pond, a well-kept house set back from the road, a minivan, and a white picket fence. Directly across the street stood a small one-room shack about seven feet wide and twelve feet long; it was made of unpainted wood, with large gaps between the wallboards where vines and weeds grew” (Skloot, 78).

- What are the visible markers of poverty in this passage?
- How do boundaries, both physical and abstract, feature in Mel Cornshucker’s artwork and *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*? What do these boundaries tell us?

**Read the following quote from *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*.**

“Sonny had a quintuple bypass in 2003, when he was fifty-six years old—the last thing he remembered before falling unconscious under the anesthesia was a doctor saying his mother’s cells were one of the most important things that had ever happened to medicine. Sonny woke up more than \$125,000 in debt because he didn’t have health insurance to cover the surgery” (Skloot, 306).

- What strikes you as ironic about this situation?
- What other instances of poverty and inequity do you recall from the book? Why do these particular examples stand out to you?

**ONE LOOK: *Return from Exile***

Now, take a look at look at the painting *Cultural Baggage* by Starr Hardridge (Muscogee Creek), which examines the exiled Native Americans who were sent to Oklahoma with very few possessions.

- Imagine having to leave all of your possessions behind. What would you bring with you to survive?
- Even if you were not able to bring physical possessions, you could bring parts of your culture and identity. What would you hold on to and preserve from your own culture and identity?



## **Theme 5: Healthcare**

### **ONE LOOK: *Return from Exile***

Look at the oil painting *Allotment II* by Sallyann Paschall (Cherokee Nation).

The title of this work references the General Allotment Act or the Dawes Act of 1887, which gave the President of the United States the authority to divide tribal lands into allotments for individual Native Americans and families. This drastically reduced the landholdings of Native Americans on reservations. In her painting, Paschall has depicted traditional Cherokee medicinal plants in the shape of a four directions cross, which represents the boundaries of the allotment system. The cross is surrounded by barbed wire. In an interview about this work and the exhibition, Paschall says, "The tie in with the Return from Exile [theme] is the renewed interest in medicinal plants and all of the things they are good for and the way all of the individuals address that usage. And now people are really gaining their knowledge again..."



Today, Native Americans struggle with receiving quality medical care from such causes as cultural barriers, geographic isolation, discrimination, inadequate education, and poverty. Some of the leading diseases and causes of death in native communities include heart disease, cancer, unintentional injuries (accidents), diabetes, liver disease, assault/homicide, and suicide.

- Using the perspectives on ethics and medicine covered in *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, how might you connect the deficiencies and issues in native health to inequities seen in the past and present of the Lacks family?
- What might be some avenues for solving these disparities?

### **ONE BOOK: *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks***

Read the quote from Mary Kubicek, George Gey's lab assistant, "I started imagining her sitting in her bathroom painting those toenails, and it hit me for the first time that those cells we'd been working with all this time and sending all over the world, they came from a live woman. I'd never thought of it that way" (Skloot, 91).

- How does Mary connect with Henrietta's humanity?
- Why does the medical community sometimes disassociate from their patients' humanity?

**Finally, read the excerpt from the section "Deborah's Voice."**

"But I always thought it was strange, if our mother cells done so much for medicine, how come her family can't afford to see no doctors? Don't make no sense. People got rich off my mother without us even knowin about them takin her cells, now we don't get a dime. I used to get so mad about that to where it made me sick and I had to take pills. But I don't got it in me no more to fight. I just want to know who my mother was" (Skloot, 9).

- In your opinion, who is Henrietta Lacks?
- What is her story and why is it important to tell?