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Illness and Ecology: Resilience Amid Capitalist Exploitation in Medical and Environmental Narratives

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Abstract

This paper examines how *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* by Terry Tempest Williams and *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot illuminate the intertwined vulnerabilities of bodies and environments under systems of capitalist and institutional exploitation. Both texts interrogate the socio-political and ecological forces that render illness not merely a biological condition, but a manifestation of broader structural injustices. Williams offers an ecofeminist critique of militarized and patriarchal governance, illustrating how nuclear testing in the American West caused profound ecological destruction and generational health crises, particularly among women. Skloot, drawing from critical race theory and biopolitical analysis, explores the unethical extraction and commodification of Henrietta Lacks' cells, revealing how racial and gendered exploitation underpins biomedical progress. Through personal yet politically charged narratives, both authors challenge the reader to understand illness within a nexus of environmental degradation, medical ethics, and global capitalism. This study argues that Williams and Skloot collectively call for an expansive model of justice—one that integrates ecological sustainability, bodily autonomy, and systemic equity through interdisciplinary engagement with environmental humanities, medical ethics, and critical theory.

Keywords: *Ecofeminism, Biopolitics, Environmental Racism, Medical Ethics, Capitalist Exploitation and Resilience.*

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Illness and Ecology: Resilience Amid Capitalist Exploitation in Medical and Environmental Narratives

Introduction

In the intertwined crises of environmental degradation and public health, narratives that illuminate systemic exploitation offer critical insight into the roots of human and ecological suffering. This paper examines Terry Tempest Williams' *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* and Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* as two influential works that interrogate the intersections of bodily and ecological vulnerability. Through the lenses of ecofeminism, critical race theory, and biopolitics, both authors reveal how illness—whether personal, environmental, or institutional—cannot be divorced from broader systems of capitalist, patriarchal, and racialized exploitation.

Williams' *Refuge* offers a poignant ecofeminist account of how nuclear testing in the American West resulted in environmental destruction and long-term health consequences, especially for women. The memoir situates personal grief within a broader critique of militarized governance and ecological injustice. In parallel, Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* exposes the racialized violence inherent in biomedical research, focusing on the unauthorized use of Henrietta Lacks' cancer cells and the exploitative medical systems that persist under global capitalism.

This paper explores how these narratives articulate a multidimensional view of illness—as not merely a medical or personal condition, but as a symptom of entrenched sociopolitical and ecological crises. It argues that both texts call for a reconfiguration of justice that transcends the human-nature divide and emphasizes collective resilience in the face of systemic exploitation.

Objectives

1. To investigate how both texts depict the body and environment as intertwined sites of exploitation and resistance.
2. To analyse the use of illness as a metaphor for broader ecological and systemic crises.
3. To apply interdisciplinary frameworks—eco-criticism, medical ethics, and critical theory—to explore new paradigms of justice and resilience.
4. To argue for a multidimensional understanding of health that includes environmental, racial, and gendered perspectives.

Methodology

This qualitative study conducts a comparative literary analysis of *Refuge* and *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, guided by ecofeminism, biopolitics, critical race theory, and environmental humanities. Through textual analysis, it examines thematic parallels, rhetorical strategies, and sociohistorical contexts to explore how personal narratives of illness and suffering reflect broader systems of environmental, racial, and medical injustice, as well as resilience within ecological and political frameworks.

Ecological Illness and Militarized Landscapes in *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place*

Terry Tempest Williams' *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* serves as a profound eco-memoir that intricately weaves personal grief with environmental degradation, positioning illness—particularly cancer—as a manifestation of broader ecological and political trauma. Drawing upon ecofeminist, biopolitical, and ecocritical frameworks, the text interrogates the entangled relationships between women's bodies, militarized landscapes, and the patriarchal state apparatus.

At its core, *Refuge* foregrounds the embodied consequences of ecological destruction, especially as they affect women. Williams documents the harrowing rise of cancer among the women in her family, implicitly linking it to the radioactive fallout from nuclear testing in Utah during the Cold War. This connection reframes illness as not merely a private or natural occurrence, but as an outcome of state-sanctioned violence—an unnatural history imposed upon both the human body and the land. Through this lens, the body becomes a site where environmental and political injustices converge, making the personal inherently political.

Ecofeminist theory is particularly resonant in Williams's narrative, as she draws clear parallels between the exploitation of nature and the systemic oppression of women. The same patriarchal and militaristic logic that rationalizes the domination of ecosystems is shown to underwrite the sacrificial treatment of women's bodies in the name of national security. This critique aligns with the ecofeminist assertion that dualisms—male/female, culture/nature, reason/emotion—reinforce hierarchies that

justify both ecological degradation and gendered violence. Williams's invocation of an ethics of care and interconnectedness challenges these binaries, offering a vision of healing rooted in relational ontology rather than control and domination.

Biopolitical theory also undergirds the narrative. The state's capacity to determine who lives and who dies—what Foucault terms "biopower"—is evident in the historical disregard for communities downwind of nuclear tests. These "sacrifice zones," populated largely by rural, often Mormon families, are rendered invisible in national discourse. Williams resists this erasure through testimonial writing, reclaiming the authority of lived experience against the silence imposed by institutional power. Her family's illnesses are not framed as isolated tragedies but as symptomatic of a diseased body politic—one poisoned by capitalist, militarist, and technocratic hubris.

The shifting ecology of the Great Salt Lake and the endangered Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge mirrors the instability of Williams's personal life as her mother succumbs to cancer. These landscapes, constantly altered by both natural forces and human intervention, underscore the futility of attempts to control nature. The state's multimillion-dollar pumping projects designed to manipulate lake levels illustrate a broader ideological failure: a belief in technological mastery as a solution to ecological crisis. This illusion of control is critiqued through the narrative's recurring juxtaposition of migratory birds—symbols of adaptation and freedom—with human structures built on rigidity and fear of change.

In literary terms, *Refuge* employs a hybrid form that blends memoir, environmental writing, and spiritual meditation. This structure itself resists categorization, echoing the book's thematic resistance to imposed binaries and rigid frameworks. Williams's poetic, introspective prose functions as a form of mourning and resistance. Her mother Diane's decision to face death without excessive medical intervention becomes a metaphor for ecological humility—an acceptance of natural cycles over artificial prolongation.

Spaces of sanctuary, such as the bird refuge and the family home, become central motifs representing both physical and emotional refuge. As the refuge is threatened by floodwaters and Diane's body deteriorates, these losses become inseparable. Both woman and land are treated with reverence, revealing their shared vulnerability under systems of exploitation. The refusal to apply makeup to Diane's corpse—a rejection of cosmetic denial—encapsulates the book's commitment to truth, naturalness, and unflinching witness.

In the final chapters, the recurrence of cancer in Williams's grandmother and the increasing mechanization of landscape management reflects a pattern of repression rather than reckoning. Yet, Williams offers a counternarrative through feminine solidarity, storytelling, and ecological consciousness. These alternatives illuminate pathways of resilience rooted in memory, care, and sacred connection to place.

Ultimately, *Refuge* is both elegy and manifesto. Through its literary form and philosophical commitments, it critiques environmental injustice and calls for a renewed ecological and ethical sensibility. By merging ecological illness with militarized landscapes, Williams positions healing not as a return to innocence, but as a courageous act of remembering, mourning, and reimagining the relationship between body, land, and state.

Medical Ethics and Racial Biopolitics in *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*

Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* is a compelling fusion of investigative journalism, biography, and critical social commentary, interrogating the convergence of race, medicine, and ethics in modern scientific practice. At the heart of this narrative lies the story of Henrietta Lacks, an African-American woman whose cervical cancer cells—taken without her knowledge or consent in 1951 at Johns Hopkins Hospital—became the first immortal human cell line, known as HeLa. These cells proved foundational to numerous medical breakthroughs, including the polio vaccine, cancer treatments, gene mapping, and in vitro fertilization. Yet, this scientific triumph is shadowed by a legacy of racial exploitation and bioethical failure.

Using frameworks derived from biopolitical theory and critical race studies, Skloot reveals how Black bodies have historically been sites of extractive science, governed by institutional forces that commodify life under the guise of progress. Henrietta's body becomes emblematic of what Michel Foucault would call *biopower*—the regulation and exploitation of life by systems of authority. Her cells were circulated, commercialized, and decontextualized from her personhood, all while her family lived in poverty, unaware of her global scientific legacy for decades. This stark dichotomy between personal

dispossession and institutional gain underscores a key tension in biomedical ethics: the disjuncture between the individual as subject and the body as object.

Skloot's narrative challenges the myth of scientific objectivity rooted in the Enlightenment tradition, exposing how race, class, and gender shape who is seen as a worthy participant in the scientific endeavour and who is reduced to raw material. The book draws attention to the exploitative medical practices of the mid-20th century, especially within segregated hospitals like Johns Hopkins, where tissue samples were routinely taken from poor Black patients without consent. Skloot situates Henrietta's experience within a longer historical arc of medical racism, including the Tuskegee syphilis experiment and the "Mississippi appendectomies"—forced sterilizations of Black women under the pretence of medical care.

Through the emotional journey of Henrietta's daughter, Deborah Lacks, Skloot amplifies the intergenerational trauma engendered by scientific opacity and systemic disregard. Deborah's fears that her mother still feels pain in laboratories where HeLa cells are tested reflect both a lack of scientific communication and a deeper cultural alienation—a symbolic wound left by decades of exclusion from medical narratives. Skloot navigates these moments with a critical but compassionate lens, revealing the necessity of restorative narrative ethics that bridge the gap between scientific communities and marginalized publics.

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks thereby raises pressing questions about informed consent, bodily autonomy, and the ownership of biological material. Who controls the products of our bodies once they are removed? What responsibilities do institutions have to the individuals and communities whose tissues sustain profitable research? And how can biomedical innovation reconcile with social justice and equitable healthcare?

Skloot does not merely recount the past—she stages a reckoning. By embedding Henrietta's story within broader systems of racial capitalism and environmental racism, she reveals how medical institutions have long rendered certain lives disposable, all while profiting from their dehumanization. In this light, Henrietta's legacy is not only scientific but also political: a call to democratize bioethics, prioritize community engagement, and interrogate the power dynamics that underpin medical knowledge production.

Johns Hopkins, the site of Henrietta's treatment and unconsented tissue collection, has since acknowledged these ethical breaches and engaged in public efforts to honour her memory. Still, such gestures—while symbolically significant—underscore the structural inequities that remain unresolved. Skloot's text urges a shift from symbolic reparations to substantive justice, advocating for a model of research that centres dignity, transparency, and accountability.

Ultimately, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* is not only a chronicle of scientific progress but also a critical intervention in how we understand the entanglements of race, ethics, and biopower. Skloot's meticulous research and ethical insight transform this story into a vital cultural text—one that demands a reimagining of who benefits from science and at what cost.

Illness as Symptom of Systemic Crisis

In both *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* by Terry Tempest Williams and *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot, illness is not portrayed as an isolated biological malfunction or a matter of individual misfortune. Rather, it is framed as a symptom—an embodied manifestation—of broader systemic crises. These authors expose the ways in which disease reflects deep structural injustices rooted in empire, capitalism, racism, and environmental degradation. Their narratives reveal how the body, particularly the vulnerable, gendered, and racialized body, becomes a site where histories of exploitation, negligence, and violence are inscribed.

Williams and Skloot deploy storytelling as a critical methodology—what Arthur Frank might call a "wounded storyteller" approach—where narrative itself becomes a vehicle for healing, witnessing, and resistance. By interweaving memoir, investigative journalism, and oral history, they challenge dominant biomedical discourses that treat illness as apolitical and individualized. Instead, both authors locate disease within what theorist Rob Nixon terms "slow violence": the incremental and often invisible harm inflicted by environmental destruction, racialized science, and systemic neglect.

In *Refuge*, Williams juxtaposes her family's tragic history of breast and ovarian cancer with the ecological crisis unfolding at the Bear River Migratory Bird Refuge. The flooding of the Great Salt Lake and the rampant spread of cancer among the women in her family are not coincidental but deeply intertwined. Williams implicates the U.S. government's nuclear testing in the American West, drawing

a direct line between political decisions, environmental contamination, and corporeal suffering. Here, illness is ecological and political—a response to what Stacy Alaimo would describe as "trans-corporeality," the idea that human bodies are porous and inextricably linked to the material world. Radiation seeps into land, water, and eventually human cells, dissolving the false binary between nature and culture, body and environment.

Themes of control versus surrender permeate Williams's narrative. While institutions cling to technological fixes and authoritative management of nature, Williams and her mother turn to a more ecological ethic of acceptance, attunement, and mutual vulnerability. Her mother's decision to cease cancer treatment becomes an act of resistance—a reclaiming of bodily agency in the face of medicalization and institutional power. Gender plays a central role in this narrative, as women serve both as caretakers and as casualties of a world out of balance. Their suffering, however, is not pathologized but honoured, seen as a mirror to societal dislocation from ecological wisdom and interdependence.

Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* similarly reconfigures illness as a reflection of systemic exploitation—specifically, the racialized commodification of Black bodies within biomedicine. Henrietta Lacks's cervical cancer cells were harvested without her consent in 1951, ultimately becoming the first immortal human cell line, known as HeLa. These cells revolutionized medical science, facilitating advances in everything from the polio vaccine to genetic research. Yet the Lacks family remained impoverished, uninsured, and uninformed—excluded from the very system that profited from their mother's body.

Skloot's narrative functions as a powerful critique of medical ethics, or the lack thereof, particularly in relation to Black communities. Drawing attention to the history of racialized medical abuses—from the Tuskegee syphilis study to forced sterilizations—Skloot positions Henrietta's story within a long continuum of biomedical racism. Here, Michel Foucault's concept of *biopower* becomes relevant: the state's control over bodies through medical discourse and scientific regulation. The use of Henrietta's cells without informed consent exemplifies how marginalized bodies are rendered both hyper-visible and invisible—instrumentalized for scientific progress yet erased from the narrative of that progress.

Furthermore, the story of Henrietta's daughter Deborah highlights the intergenerational trauma that medical exploitation produces. Her search for answers and connection becomes a narrative of both rupture and restoration, mirroring broader calls for reparative justice within health care and scientific communities. Skloot's own role as a white science journalist navigating these histories adds another layer of ethical complexity, underscoring the importance of accountability, empathy, and collaborative storytelling.

In both texts, the convergence of the personal and the political disrupts the binaries of nature/culture, health/disease, and individual/system. Illness is not simply a condition to be cured but a social and ecological signal—a barometer of systemic imbalance. As Judith Butler notes, the body is always already political; its vulnerability reflects the distribution of precarity across social hierarchies. Williams and Skloot, through their respective genres and lenses, amplify this truth, inviting readers to understand resilience not as passive endurance but as active resistance, restoration, and collective healing.

Ultimately, these works illuminate the entangled relationships between body, place, history, and power. They challenge readers to see illness not as an endpoint, but as a portal—an invitation to reckon with the conditions that produce suffering and to imagine more just and sustainable futures.

Conclusion:

Terry Tempest Williams' *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* and Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* offer profound critiques of the systems that render bodies and environments vulnerable to exploitation, neglect, and erasure. Positioned at the intersection of environmental degradation, medical ethics, and global capitalism, these texts illuminate how illness—whether rooted in radiation-induced cancer or the unauthorized use of biological material—is not a matter of personal misfortune alone, but a symptom of entrenched structural violence.

Through ecofeminist and biopolitical frameworks, Williams and Skloot interrogate how patriarchal governance, racialized science, and capitalist extraction converge to produce conditions of suffering that are disproportionately borne by women, marginalized communities, and the natural world. Williams links the cancer that ravages the women in her family to militarized environmental destruction, while Skloot traces the commodification of Henrietta Lacks' cells to histories of racial

injustice and biomedical exploitation. In both narratives, the human body becomes a site where systemic inequities are inscribed, managed, and often denied.

By deploying narrative as a method of resistance—whether through memoir, testimonial, or investigative journalism—these authors reframe illness as an urgent ethical and political question. Their storytelling foregrounds lived experience, emotional truth, and relational accountability, pushing against the objectifying tendencies of dominant scientific and governmental discourses. Illness, in their hands, becomes a critical lens through which to examine the failures of institutional systems and to advocate for a more just and holistic understanding of health and healing.

Ultimately, *Refuge* and *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* converge in their call for a multidimensional form of justice—one that attends to the entanglements of race, gender, class, ecology, and bodily autonomy. These works compel readers not only to witness the deep imprints of systemic harm but to recognize the possibility of transformation through memory, care, and ethical engagement. In an era marked by ecological crisis and health inequities, Williams and Skloot remind us that confronting illness means confronting the conditions that produce it—and that justice must begin with listening to those who have borne the cost.

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