The Thursday rehearsal had actually been pushed back to start later at noon, to allow for extra
time to do more re-writing of the play. Because of this re-writing, the rehearsal started with a
run-through of the new material, followed by a feedback and questions session, where everyone
gave their thoughts to help with the re-writing of the second half of the play that was to occur
later that day. It seemed as though it was the first time the actors had read through the new
script, which was an interesting process to observe. For this read-through, the woman who I
assumed to be the director (since she seemed to be calling the shots and was sitting in the
middle) also read all the time stamps of the play, in order to help everyone track the
protagonist’s emotional journey through the play, which was helpful for me, as I had never read
nor heard the play before. The read-through process was interesting to watch because the
actors really had the ability to continue acting, even though it was their first time reading the
play. There was the occasional stumble, or typo, but the actors pushed past bumps smoothly
and remarkably; conversations between two people in the play maintained the feeling of a
conversation, in which those two people were the only thing that mattered, despite the fact that
they were at a table of seven. Actors would look up often, occasionally making eye contact with
the person they were talking to, which particularly impressed me, as I struggle to read things out
loud without looking at every word intensely. But then again, I am not an actor.

Beyond the process of the rehearsal, I also thought that the themes within the play were
fascinating. The play centers on an untenured black professor, Alice, who wants to write a book
about HeLa cells, at the risk of potentially not getting tenure. I’m not sure how commonly known
the story of HeLa cells are, but I personally first learned about them in a literature class at MIT,
where we read the famous book on HeLa cells, which was written by a white woman, and
discussed the problematic implications of her writing the book as well as the racial politics of
HeLa cells in general. I am assuming that this is the book that is briefly referenced in the
play—The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks—and that reference made me wonder if it was put in
the play as a self-acknowledgement of the play having been written by a white man.
Regardless, the play made me think about the material from the class I had taken, especially
when Alice begins the play in a lecture, posing the question, “Do we own our bodies?” Rather
than first thinking of the discussions we had on Henrietta Lacks, this actually reminded me of a
different novel we studied in that class, Dawn by Octavia Butler, in which Lilith, a black female
human, is picked against her will to be the first to breed with an alien species and change
humanity as the world knows it. The play made me realize that Henrietta Lacks is a real-world
version of Lilith—her body exploited against her will “for the better of humanity”— and she was
probably treated in this way because she was black. This connection is something that perhaps
I should have made three years ago, when I was actually taking the literature course, but as
they say, better late than never!