In early 1951, scientists at Johns Hopkins Medical Center developed the first immortal cell line from the cells of an African American woman named Henrietta Lacks dying from an aggressive form of cervical cancer. The HeLa cell line revolutionized cell biology, and generated important ethical debates about biotechnology and commodification, but the focus of those debates have characteristically neglected the central problem, which remains unresolved: the challenge to the definition of human being posed by an immortal cell line. Priscilla Wald will discuss Octavia Butler’s analysis of this case, exploring the displacement of fundamental questions about institutionalized racism and social justice.

Priscilla Wald is a professor of English at Duke University, and the 2011-12 President of the American Studies Association. Her books include *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (2008), and *Constituting Americans: Cultural Anxiety and Narrative Form* (1995).

SEMINAR SESSION, NOVEMBER 3, 4-6pm, Room 8201
This session’s focus on genomics and race speaks to the importance of working across the science/humanities divide, and points to new or understudied directions that American studies might take.