

Mathematics and Music: Structure and Form, Fall 2010

Paper on *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*

Due: Friday, Sept. 17, Start of Class

Your task is to write an essay responding to one of the three topics described below. The paper should be 3-4 double-spaced pages in length. This is not intended to be a “research paper” but rather a detailed and thoughtful response, supported with information and quotes from the text, to one of the three given topics. Your goal is to construct a thorough and well-supported argument. You will be given two grades – one for the quality of your argument, the other for the quality of the writing (correct grammar, spelling, sentence structure, organization, etc.).

The specific questions you are addressing and your response(s) to them should be clearly stated in the first paragraph. The body of the paper should contain your reasoning and the evidence that led to your conclusions. You might consider presenting opposing points of view, then reasoning as to why you decided against them.

When quoting directly from the text, please include a reference to the page using the following style:

Skloot states that “[o]n appeal, one judge compared the study to Southam’s HeLa injections, the Tuskegee study, and Nazi research, and the case eventually settled out of court” (Skloot, p. 168).

You may utilize sources other than Skloot’s book, but this is not required. If you do use other sources and use quotations or other information, you should:

1. Identify direct quotations with quotes and a note in parentheses giving information where the quote can be found within your source.
2. List all your sources in a References section at the end of your paper:
 - a) Books: give the author, the title, the publisher and year of publication.
 - b) Magazine or newspaper articles: give the author, the title of the magazine or newspaper, the date of publication, and the starting and ending page of the specific article.
 - c) Websites: give an author (if you can determine that), the full URL (Internet address) and the date you accessed it (since information on the Internet often changes).

Topics

- *George Gey: Medical Maverick or Unethical Doctor?*

Based on the reading, what is your opinion of George Gey? Do you think he was an admirable person? Do you believe the story on page 66 about the supposed meeting between Henrietta and Gey? Why do you think he failed to correct a preliminary version of the 1954 *Collier’s* article and identify Henrietta Lacks as the person behind the cells? Do you think he was pressured by Johns Hopkins Hospital not to do so? Was he trying to protect the family? Was it a cover-up? Would Gey and other doctors involved with Henrietta’s cells have gotten into trouble if they had released the name to *Collier’s* in 1954? Try to take a firm position here and support your conclusions with information from the text.

- *Inequality: The Issue of Race and Class*

Throughout the book, Skloot describes many social inequalities both explicitly and implicitly. What role did racism play in this story? What part of Henrietta's story would have been different had she been white? Would the Lacks family have been treated differently had they been white? What if they had been middle or upper class? In general, how were black and poor people treated by the medical establishment? Many African-Americans in Baltimore continue to be reluctant to visit Johns Hopkins hospital and don't fully trust that institution. Is this a reasonable view?

- *Ethics and Making Amends*

Do you think that Henrietta was mistreated by her doctors? Was it unethical to take her cells without permission, even though that was standard practice at the time? Would Henrietta have granted consent for her cells to be taken and used had she been asked? Was the Lacks family mistreated by members of the medical community? Are they owed an apology? If so, from whom and in what form should it take? Should the Lacks family be monetarily compensated in some form? Again, if so, from whom and in what form should it take? Should individuals be allowed to profit from their cells or their tissue? Do you think Henrietta should be honored in some way?