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The True Motive Behind

*The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*

Henrietta Lacks, a young, vivacious woman, died on October 4, 1951, after being diagnosed and treated for cervical cancer at Johns Hopkins Hospital. The mid-forties and early-fifties were a time for scientific growth and development: development that would be forever changed by Henrietta Lacks. Shortly before her death, scientist George Gey discovered just how impressive Henrietta’s cancer cells were, and began distributing them. In hindsight, many people believe Henrietta Lacks received unethical treatment and was deceived by her white doctors – including writer Rebecca Skloot, author of *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks,* a non-fiction slanted piece on Henrietta’s life. However, when truly understanding life in the early 1950s, one could hardly say Lacks was treated unfairly, even after reading Skloot’s literature. Skloot takes the facts about Henrietta’s experience with the doctors and juxtaposes them with horrible experiments of the time, forcing the reader to come to the incorrect conclusion that the science field unethically tricked the Lacks family.

The treatment Henrietta Lacks received seems decent – considering Henrietta was a young, poor, black woman of the early 50’s when segregation and prejudice were still commonly found. When Henrietta arrived at Johns Hopkins Hospital, the staff did their best to identify her condition and treat her as soon as they knew what was wrong. “According to Howard Jones, (one of Henrietta’s doctors), Henrietta got the same care any white patient would have had; the biopsy, the radium treatment, and radiation were all standard for the day” (Skloot 64). Though readers of today cannot be sure if Henrietta received treatment equivocal to that a white person would have received, Henrietta’s treatment was standard for her color for the time. In fact, before her cervical cancer spread throughout her entire lower abdomen, “her doctors were so sure of her recovery that while she was in the hospital for her second radium treatment, they’d preformed reconstructive surgery on her nose, fixing the deviated septum that had given her sinus infections and headaches her whole life” (Skloot 46). Each treatment of radiation, blood transfusions and even the reconstructive surgery was gratis. The doctors truly believed ridding her from cancer “was a new beginning” – a start at a new life – for Henrietta, and they did the best they could to help her (Skloot 46). And, when the doctors realized that despite their best efforts, Henrietta’s case was irreversible, “each day, Henrietta’s doctors increased her dose of radiation, hoping it would shrink the tumors and ease the pain until her death” (Skloot 65). Henrietta’s care and overall comfort were extremely important to the doctors at Johns Hopkins, as exemplified by their multiple complimentary procedures to try to cure her and lessen her pain.

Unfortunately, Rebecca Skloot does not highlight the extensive care the doctors gave Henrietta in her book. Though the quotes from above are all from her book, *Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, Skloot tends to contrast the positive details with mostly irrelevant, negative aspects. For example, the quote Skloot gives about Lacks’ reconstructive surgery was present on the same page when she claims “several studies have shown black patients were treated and hospitalized at later stages of their illnesses than white patients. And once hospitalized, they got fewer pain medications, and had higher mortality rates” without a reference to any source at all (Skloot 64). However, Skloot’s research here seems substandard: who knows which “studies” this information came from – whether it was biased, incomplete, double-blinded or came from a valid experiment? But Skloot manages to squeeze it into her story without raising many questions of how legitimate the data is. Soon after, Skloot quotes Henrietta’s medical records stating, “only weeks after a pervious entry declared her healthy, one of the doctors wrote, ‘The patient looks chronically ill. She is obviously in pain.’ He sent her home to bed” (Skloot 64). In doing this, Skloot makes Henrietta’s doctors seem inexperienced and incompetent: after telling her she was fine for weeks, the doctors *finally* figured out they were wrong. From this perspective, it appears Lacks’ doctors were unconcerned with her recovery, even though this is a definite assumption. No one can answer whether Henrietta’s doctors had her best intentions at heart except for Henrietta herself, and her doctors. One of the few quotes from her doctors (stated above) said Henrietta received standard treatment; but Skloot makes this doctor seem foolish by putting his quote just above the reference to Lacks’ medical records. Upon first read, doctors seem to have tricked the Lacks’ from the beginning, but at closes glance, any reader could tell Skloot is using deceiving juxtapositions to convince her readers.

Skloot also includes irreverent information in *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* to influence the public. She clearly slanders the Johns Hopkins Hospitals name on page 167 by juxtaposing the goodness of Johns Hopkins (“[Johns Hopkins was established to help] the indigent sick of this city…without regard sex, age, or color, who require surgical or medical treatment”) next to the KKK, night doctors, and malpractice research at Johns Hopkins (Skloot 166,167). Rebecca Skloot designed a full subsection of chapter 21 to do just this, appropriately titling the chapter “Night Doctors”. Though this might just seem like another juxtaposition, information on the KKK is completely unnecessary in the story of Henrietta Lacks. Skloot begins her subsection by stating, “black oral history has been filled with tales of…doctors…kidnap[ping] black people for research.” Therefore, the entire subsection is written without any true tie to Henrietta’s story – just to scare readers. Skloot includes irrelevant information many times, such as when she talks about the Mississippi Appendectomies or the Tuskegee Trials. She introduces the Tuskegee Trials through an apparent phone conversation, when she told Ronald Pattillo things she knew about “African Americans and science” (Skloot 50). These are two scary, awful research experiments - experiments that have nothing to do with Henrietta Lacks. Skloot’s multiple unnecessary additions of irrelevant information appear ridiculous and unreasonable.

But still, the question remains as to whether the doctors had the right to use Henrietta’s cells. Rebecca Skloot does not inform her readers that it is not illegal for a doctor to use cells left behind or taken during exams, until more than halfway into her book. Here, she briefly states in 1990, the Supreme Court ruled “when tissues are removed for your body, with or without your consent, any claim you might have had to owing them vanishes” (Skloot 205). In fact, consent for a doctor to keep and distribute a patient’s cells is still not even required today, which isn’t mentioned until her afterword. Skloot claims to have written a book “to present [issues regarding science, ethics, race, and class] clearly within the narrative of the Lacks story” but her true underlying motive was to prejudice her readers against the Johns Hopkins doctors who treated Henrietta and all doctors in general who conducted any morally questionable experiments in the past (Skloot x). Two minuscule sections of her book are spent writing about how the doctors treating Henrietta really hadn’t done much of anything wrong – but since the majority of her book slanders doctors of the time, the juxtapositions cause readers to be tricked to making rash conclusions. Neither Henrietta’s doctors, the ones who did not inform her that she was soon to die and the ones who took her cells, nor George Gey, the man who discovered her immortal cells, did anything unethical for the time. Since consent was (and is still) not required, the doctors using and selling her cells could not be considered unethical, but Skloot does her best to make you believe otherwise.