The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks. Rebecca Skloot. United States: Crown Publishers, 2010.

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1 The thriving pharmaceutical industries, modern medical breakthroughs and increased dependency on prescription medicine have captured much media and academic interests lately. Rebecca Skloot's acclaimed book, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* contributes to this discourse. It incisively weaves issues related to gender, race and class with health, medical practice myth, art, miracle, history and science and exposes the benefits and abuse of medical advances. At the center of this book is Henrietta Lacks, a poor black woman who died in 1951 of cervical cancer, but the cells from the deadly tumor that were taken without her knowledge or consent live on. "HeLa," the term scientists used to name her miraculously productive cell line, would propel to fame numerous laboratories, scientists and scholars creating a multi-billion dollar industry.

2 Rebecca Skloot, an award-winning science journalist plunges the reader into the wonders medical research can perform and how easily and ruthlessly it can exploit society's most vulnerable patients. Her book contributes to the area of medical advances that has been documented in the Golden Gate Award winning documentary, *The Way of All Flesh* produced by Adam Curtis while affiliated with BBC, London. This riveting documentary was created following visits and interviews with the Lackses, some relatives and community members who knew Henrietta. Skloot, who had a chance to view the documentary, acknowledges Curtis' effort to give Henrietta recognition. Moreover, Skloot addresses issues about the history of medical research and practice and ethics that other researchers such as Harriet Washington covers in *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical Experimentation on Black America from Colonial to the Present*, 2008, a shocking revelation of medical experimentation on African Americans that won a National Book Critics Circle Award. Also, in her 2011 book *Deadly Monopolies: The Shocking Corporate Takeover of Life Itself--And the Consequences for Your Health and Our Medical Future,* Washington has penned a spellbinding story of how corporatization of scientific research has developed a tendency to place priority on high profit margins regardless of the consequences to human health needs.

3 Skloot's odyssey into the bloodline of Henrietta Lacks whose cells are etched in a web of medical breakthroughs led her to trace, excavate and record an astonishing story of a less well-known heroine of modern science. A large corpus of data partly consisting of Skloot's documentary-like look of Lack's hometown of Clover in Virginia allows us to see its remnants that are suggestive of a place frozen in the era of the Great Depression. Moreover, her research draws on thousands of interviews with Henrietta Lack's kin, lawyers, ethicists, journalists, scientists at and beyond Johns Hopkins. Part of the data also includes journals of Henrietta's daughter, Debora and a vast range of archival photographs, journal and newspaper articles, legal documents, and reports.

4 Skloot captures a mosaic of voices dealing with real life situations in the language of each speaker, some of whom, had been hitherto overlooked. Her writing combines journalism with literary nonfiction and includes valuable updates on the major characters, an afterword and notes on chapters. Deep scars of racism are woven in the family's voices that are beleaguered by a variety of issues. These range from their anger about little knowledge about how Henrietta's cells have been used and resentment of their betrayal, to mistrust of researchers, and thrill about the cells' contribution to modern science.

5 The book's strength includes the honesty that permeates its numerous pages with respect to the research process. The candid manner in which Skloot has pieced up the information exposes contradictions in medical advances and an era of racism that impacted how Henrietta was treated and what became her husband and children's legacy. Skloot's interactions with Henrietta's family reveal their vulnerability, trials, fortitude and generous spirit among others. Their religious faith fond and painful memories of Henrietta seem to hold them together.

6 Also, Skloot unearths vital information about Henrietta and HeLa cells that arouse different emotions in the reader. These range from awe- inspiring revelations about the miracle cells with an estimated weight and height of over 50 million metric tons and 350 million feet respectively that have enjoyed more fame than the five feet tall woman who contributed them. Skloot's revelation that by time the Lackses were trying to absorb the shock that HeLa had been used to advance medical science, the cells had been launched in the outer space to test human cells in zero gravity, used to study lactose digestion, appendicitis, and longevity and had been instrumental in supporting myriad medical advances including genetic mapping, cloning,

fertility, polio vaccines, and a host of drugs to treat diseases such as herpes, leukemia, influenza, hemophilia, Parkinson's and to suppress cancer, among others.

7 Skloots makes us aware that amidst these breakthroughs lie a family that has had its unfair share of health problems. Besides being targeted preys of scientists' investigating HeLa, Skloot reveals that Henrietta's husband Day was battling prostate cancer, Zakariyya the son was declared deaf and legally blind, her daughter Debora was partially deaf and dependent on costly prescription medication and all seem to be scathed by economic poverty and psychologically scarred. These sentiments are partially but tellingly captured in Debora's words:

> But I always have thought it was strange, if our mother cells done so much for medicine, how come her family can't afford to see no doctors? Don't make no sense. People got rich off my mother without us even knowin about them takin her cells, now we don't get a dime. (Skloot 9)

8 Additionally, the chapters have captivating titles such as "Too Young to Remember"…1951-1965 and "Illegal, Immoral, and Deplorable" …1954-1966 that capture the sentiments related to family members and those of scientists, journalists in chapters 15 and 17 respectively. Skloot sheds light on the genesis of informed consent that was triggered by a 1957 court case involving Martin Salgo who became paralyzed from the waist down after a routine procedure when his doctor withheld information about possible risks. "And it would be decades before anyone thought to ask whether informed consent should apply to cases like Henrietta's, where scientists conduct research on tissues no longer attached to a person's body" (132). The book has complex technical vocabularies and medical procedures explained in layperson's terms and in specific contexts.

9 Reading about Henrietta's life is both rewarding and disturbing but Skloot's account enable us to catch a glimpse of her humanity including her love for her family, hospitality and generosity juxtaposed with the excruciating pain she endured during treatment at Hopkins whose medical units of the 1950s were divided by race. Henrietta's human side contrasts sharply with the insensitivity of doctors, researchers and laboratories that seemed immune to being held accountable.

10 Close family members some of whose photographs are included discover a void of information that they must strive to fill. Many times the researcher becomes a "participant" as Henrietta's kin ask several questions about the cause and nature of her cancer. Her daughter

Debra in particular seemed to have an insatiable longing and desire to separate fact from fiction and myth from reality about the uses to which her mother's cells have been and can be put (cloning, curing blindness etc). Several times Skloot explains to family members what has been done with HeLa cells and helps to ignite Henrietta's daughter's passion about her mother's cells and the mystery surrounding her sister's death, the two people she barely knew. Debora states, "I want to go to centers and colleges and all that. Learning places. And I want to get the medical record and autopsy report on my sister" (252). This transient reversal of roles in research has far reaching consequences that open up emotional scars and initiate positive actions. Skloot contributes to enlightening Henrietta's family and assists them in gaining access to the cells, and medical details and records that had hitherto not made available to them. The effects on Debora include taking pictures at the graveside, planning to set up a webpage, and her dream to build a museum that will help to immortalize memories about her mother.

11 By including the story about John Moore, a white man diagnosed with leukemia whose cells doctor, Golde had developed and marketed, Skloot indicates that exploitation of patients was not necessarily restricted to blacks and to women. Like Henrietta, Moore was slated to be a victim of medical abuse had his lawyer not uncovered that his cells had fetched over 3 million dollars. Conversely, Ted Slavin case challenges the perception that one begins to have about doctors' greed during this era. After his doctor's disclosure that his body was producing substances that were valuable for researchers, he willingly offered to sell them. Skloot reminds us that despite heavy media publicity the Lackses were not aware of Moore's lawsuit and that Henrietta herself remained relatively unknown and less spoken about by her surviving family members. Buried in unmarked grave, her cells would generate a flurry of research activities, build careers and benefit millions of patients. As Deborah confirms: "You know what's weird? The world got more pictures of my mother cells than it do of her" (235).

12 It is not easy to pinpoint weaknesses in a book of this depth and magnitude. Skloot appears to have a personal stake in this research and thrusts her effort, time and resources into it. However, Day's limited participation in the study of his wife's life and in relation to HeLa leaves some gaps in the narrative of this family's history and its link with issues in medical science. Also, the process of gathering data plunges her into issues poverty, sexism, racism about which her predisposition and sensitivity appear elusive. For instance, her discovery that the black and

white Lackses do not mix although they live about a mile apart elicits no reaction from her. Also, when Skloot visits Debora and learns that she sleeps in her office because of the tension with her husband, Pullum, Skloot does not document her thoughts on this but proceeds to describe the room and the décor. If Skloot's detachment is for the purpose of lending objectivity to her research, it has also prevented readers from gaining deeper insights.

13 Also, Skloot indicates that for more than a decade prior to writing the book she harbored the curiosity about the life and children of "The Woman in the Photograph" and what her thoughts about her cells would be yet, the reader gets the impression that other than revealing the story of Henrietta, her cells and family, she scarcely expresses the extent to which she quenched her curiosity.

14 Overall, Skloot's research that spans a long period and inspiration cast a ray of light in the life of the Lackses. Through telling the story of Henrietta's life, we witness a resurrection of sorts. The book account of the secrets of, and spotlights on modern medicine stirs recognition of medical ethics. It is an invaluable resource to be read and discussed by a diverse audience.

Works Cited

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