

Matthew Leo

Dr. Jalalzai

Coll-202

12 December 2012

Henrietta Lacks: Copyright 2010

There's a photo on my wall of a woman I've never met, its left corner torn and patched together with tape. She looks straight into the camera and smiles, hands on hips, dress suit neatly pressed, lips painted deep red [...] oblivious to the tumor growing inside her—a tumor that would leave her five children motherless and change the future of medicine.” (Skloot 1).

So begins *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, a book that follows the journey of reporter and science writer Rebecca Skloot as she attempts to track down the life story of Henrietta Lacks. As Skloot goes on to explain, before the novel was published,

No one [knew] who took that picture, but [it had] appeared hundreds of times in magazines and science textbooks, on blogs and laboratory walls. [She was] usually identified as Helen Lane, but often she [had] no name at all. [She was] simply called HeLa, the code name given to the world's first immortal human cells—her cells, cut from her cervix just months before she died. (Skloot 1)

But her name, Henrietta Lacks, is known widely now, as is her story. It was Skloot's book that brought about what appears to be a reversal of fortunes for Lacks's memory, but is it really?

Henrietta Lacks's story is compelling because it is one that forces readers to look at themselves and their worldviews, and use them to weigh in on controversial issues, issues where there is really no right answer that can be agreed upon. Was it right for doctors to take her cells

without her permission? How does the fact that her cells launched a medical industry and made a lot of people extremely rich influence that? How about the fact that many of her family are too poor to be able to afford health insurance? And yet, one cannot forget that from Henrietta's cells, or rather, from HeLa Cells, mankind has, on the whole, flourished. If her cells had not been taken, there would be no "polio vaccine, cloning, gene mapping, in vitro fertilization, and more" (About).

But it is a common view that what happened to Henrietta Lacks was wrong. Many believe that she was exploited, and that the fact that people are making a profit off of her cells, off of part of her, is abhorrent. If that is so, then one must look at *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* a different way. Because from that text, a new age in exploitation began. Now it is not her cells, but her name, and her story, which have become tradable commodities. All that was left unexploited, her identity and the tale of how she was taken advantage of, have now been seized by a new sub-industry in the HeLa Empire. She is not a household name, and her true identity has been forced to take on a number of personas: she is an avatar for a concept, a figure-head for a civil rights struggle, an illustration of policy, a healer, a destroyer, a woman both victimized and triumphant, an immortal, a force of nature, a person, a cell, and now, most chillingly, a marketable icon.

When Rebecca Skloot's book was published in February of 2010, it received immediate and universal praise. It was "Chosen as a Best Book of the Year by more than 60 publications, including *New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, *People*, *USA Today*, *O, The Oprah Magazine*, *NPR*, *Boston Globe*, *Financial Times*, *Los Angeles Times*" and more (Selected). The best-selling book brought Henrietta into the homes of many people, and gave not only an illustration, but a voice to a group of people that had long been mute, people who have been taken advantage of by

arguably unethical procedure. But, as a side-effect, it formed a nucleus around which others could form a new entity, a being that could make a profit on the story of one who had already been used to profit.

One of the first, and yet also one of the most seemingly understanding of these profit-securing adaptations of Henrietta's story is an episode of the hit show *Law and Order*. During its last season, an episode called *Immortal* aired, which was inspired by the story of Henrietta Lacks, HeLa Cells, and the treatment and condition of her family. Premiering in May of 2010, just around three months after Skloot's book arrived on the shelves of book stores nationwide, *Immortal* told a fictionalized version of Henrietta's story.

In the episode, Henrietta has been transformed into a man, but the storyline remains virtually identical otherwise. Nathan Robinson (as Henrietta's fictional alter-ego is called in this version) dies of cancer over fifty years beforehand, and had some of his cancer cells harvested (called NaRo cells here). They were the first cells to remain alive in culture, and are considered to be immortal (Wolf).

One of Nathan Robinson's descendants, who is desperate for money so he can support his wife and son, is found dead, and clues point to not only his cousin as a possible suspect, but to a large pharmaceutical company whose first product was packaged cancer cells for use in scientific study. The story of Nathan Robinson is considered to be so inflammatory, that it is even used as the basis of the cousin's defense when he is put on trial for killing his cousin (Wolf).

And while in the end, he may take a deal for a manslaughter charge, and the company agrees to pay 10 million dollars to Nathan Robinsons' heirs, even this somewhat happy story does not manage to erase some of the implications of the tale (Wolf).

Though the people who make *Law and Order* did obviously try to respect the memory of Henrietta Lacks, the very fact that there was an episode of a primetime cable drama based on Henrietta's story could be viewed as making those in charge of creating and airing it no better than the scientists who took her cells. They were using her to make a profit, and whether they intended it to be so or no, it ended up being disrespectful for her memory to turn a profit off of her being used to make a profit. All they did was do the same thing the doctors and businessmen did to her, except this time it was in the open on national television, rather than in labs and hospitals.

And, in the same month as the *Law and Order* episode premiered, Harpo Films and producer Alan Ball announced that they had purchased the film rights to *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, and intend to create a film version to show on HBO.

Once again, the fact that the tragedy surrounding Henrietta's story is that she was exploited for the profit of others is completely lost on the members of the new media wing of the HeLa Empire. Once again, the insensitivity goes to prove that even now, over five decades since the first cells were taken from Henrietta's cervix, she continues to be used by forces out of her control. In this case, a producer and a media mogul are teaming up to bring her story to a network that will make money off of subscriptions. The only one not making any money off of this deal is Henrietta herself, whose name and story will now be molded into whatever the filmmakers decide is appropriate to wrangle an audience into watching it.

Here we have the almost all forms of the media unified in their desire to join the club that lines their pocketbooks with Henrietta Lacks. A bestselling book, an episode of an award-winning primetime drama, and soon a film.. And to think, it all started decades ago when a girl

sat in a biology class and heard a teacher speak. And that opened the floodgates, and allowed the story to spread and multiply just like the HeLa cells themselves do.

So, the year 2010 was not a time when Henrietta Lacks emerged triumphant, but a year when her transformation from person to exploited resource was completed. It was when Henrietta lost the last of the scraps of dignity and privacy she had left, and became just another historical character for people to read about in text books, to watch on television and in the movies, and to hear about in passing conversation, and then promptly forget. Henrietta did gain fame; but she also lost any meaningful identity she had besides as the source of the HeLa cells that permeate science so deeply. Because, when it comes down to it, Henrietta Lacks was virtually copyrighted in 2010.

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