Richard Welter

SC180H

February 20, 2012

Dr. Lockyear

E-Journal: *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*

Discussions during class:

**February 22, 2012 (Chapters 1-13):**

Whilst reading *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks,* I noticed how race played a vital role in how these cells were portrayed. When author, Rebecca Skloot, discusses the setting of this selection, which was during the Civil Rights movement, or more specifically, the time when the Jim Crow Laws were implemented upon the colored folks, we have to take into consideration that our current ethical system differs than those back in the 1950’s. I strongly believe if Henrietta would have been Caucasian, her cell line would not have contributed to the certain degree to the overall medical advancement of the 20-21st century. The reason why I strongly believe this is because of the reports from the doctors who were taking care of Henrietta when she had cervical cancer; Doctors like George Gey did not fully explain her conditions. The doctors kept feeding Henrietta mammoth doses of radium, and it consequently destroyed her body from the inside out. These doctors did not care for her as they began to snatch her cells. Furthermore, Doctor Richard TeLinde extracted Henrietta’s cells for experimentation without consent or did he notify her.

What I find fascinating about this story of the HeLa cells is that it has a strong correlation with the Tuskegee study during the 1930’s. During this time, the majority of colored individuals were not treated like humans—in simplest terms. According to Skloot’s research, researchers at the Tuskegee Institute “…watched them [African-American men who were diagnosed with syphilis] die slow, painful, and preventable deaths” (50).

Another aspect in this book I found real interesting was Henrietta herself. Coming from a lifestyle where education was not necessarily on the top of the totem pole, she was able to recognize the cancer in her body before ultimately going to Johns Hopkins Hospital. In addition, Henrietta’s devotion towards her family was also something I admired. Last semester in the Honor’s Human Nature course, we discussed how family played a mammoth role on how one interacts with one another. When Henrietta died, her last words were for Day to take care of the children. To me, it shows how family bond alleviate pain and suffering, as read through Toni Morrison’s *Beloved.* Considering the family aspect, I believe Deborah—Henrietta’s youngest daughter—will be the biggest help towards Skloot’s investigation on the immortal HeLa cells.

Right now, I do not understand the format of Skloot’s book; one chapter she is discussing Henrietta and her cancerous cells, then the following chapter discusses Skloot visiting Henrietta’s family members to answer the plethora of questions she has in store. Other than this minor setback, I think this book is very self-driven, not only towards the readers, but for the author as well. I can tell by how devoted she truly is to find the “real” story of Henrietta Lacks.

**February 29, 2012 (Chapter 14-26)**

This section primarily focuses on how the cells were finally publicized and more extent on Rebecca Skloot’s drive towards finding an answer about this cell line. After discussing about Gey’s motivation towards the cells, I concluded that he was not being selfish overall. Throughout his scientific career, he wanted to make “immortal” cells. Through trial and error, he finally found a culture that was sustainable and was able to duplicate rather quickly—Henrietta’s. Although I find it unethical he did not inform Henrietta or her family about this, he wanted to expand the medical field, meaning finding ways to cure diseases during the time. There were no profit gains or business schemes as I suspected overall.

The reader also gets a better understanding of Henrietta’s ancestral background. It was surprising to read that members of the family were both black and white. Furthermore, I thought it was wrong on how the white members of the Lacks family did not accept the black Lacks. But once again, we have to take into consideration the socialism during this period, which is in the late 19th century.

We began to understand the background of Deborah. This is important to the reader because without knowing what she went through, not only Skloot, but the reader wouldn’t be able to understand Henrietta. To me, Deborah went through a similar lifestyle of Henrietta’s; she was abused multiple times, got married at a young age, had children at a young age; however, she did not die as early as Henrietta did. To add more on Deborah, and her involvement into this book, I concur that because Henrietta died when Deborah was only two years old, she was also investigating—in a way—her mother. That’s why I think Rebecca and Deborah gained a close relationship, as well as Deborah finally trusting someone for once.

Further into this part of the book, the reader gets a better understanding on why the Lacks family did not go to see doctors. In the beginning, I assumed the reason why they “feared” seeing the doctor was because they were economically unstable and were not educated enough to understand what the doctors were saying. However, in chapter 21, there’s a whole different reason behind it. I would understand why they were scared to see doctors if there were “night” doctors who kidnap and/or abduct children to experiment on them. It’s just horrific to imagine!

Another important part in the section is that Henrietta’s real name began to appear in print. This is vital because now, the Lacks family will soon know about this (which they do in chapter 23). At this point, we are traveling through the 1970’s, and Gey is dead.

**March 7, 2012 (Chapter 27-Afterward)**

In the final stretch of the book, the Lacks family meets the notorious Sir Lord Keenan Kester Cofield. Initially, he seems like a pretty swell individual; I was clearly mistaken. The reader learns that he was an imposter after all. He wasn’t a doctor or a lawyer. He was infamous for suing major corporations with a weak alibi and/or motive. I am presuming he wanted Henrietta’s medical files for profit gain. In the end, he is an absent-minded fool who lost another attempt of taking advantage of a malnourished family. Deborah learns more about her family, Elsie—her sister—specifically. In the earlier section of this book, we are told Elsie had some psychological disorder and was sent to the Hospital for the Negro Insane. We are told she was diagnosed with epilepsy, however, like Deborah and Skloot, I believe she was abused in this institution which caused her to die at an early age. All this pain and suffering caused Deborah to nearly having a stroke.

This is the point in which Rebecca finally meets with Deborah, on July 9, 2000. Knowing Deborah’s life and what she had to go through, I fully understand why she was hesitant and sketchy about telling Rebecca things about her family. I think initially, Deborah thought Rebecca was just like the rest of them: asking the Lacks family questions about her mother and the cells for some form of profit gain. However, Deborah slowly begins to gain her trust. Rebecca also had to talk to Deborah’s brother Zakariyya. We read earlier that he was a troubled kid; he went to the army—didn’t do so well there—and was sent back, he killed someone out of hostility, changed his name whilst in prison, and had this hatred bottled in him for countless years. If I were Rebecca at this point, I would be trembling in fear to go talk to him (who knows how irate he will get).

Deborah can get pretty feisty. We know that she has a hard time trusting others, but in chapter 34, she goes haywire. Towards the end of the book, it would seem to me that the Lacks family (clinically) is falling apart. Deborah dies shortly having a stroke, Gary dies from a heart attack, Sonny had a quintuple bypass; it just seems like the ending of this book wasn’t so positive.

The videos Dr. Lockyear posted on eSwede helped me understand the ethicalness during Henrietta’s lifetime. Due to “separate but equal” attitude, it seems that we cannot understand what these people had to go through, however, we have to accept it. The truth can be ugly, which we had to endure by these videos. This book was very essential to this course. Not only did I get to learn something new that played a mammoth role in the 1900-2000’s, this also got me more into our Autism section of the course which we will soon be tackling down.

**March 15, 2012**

Today in class, Dr. McDonald came to our class and discussed about the biological aspect of *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks.* He made the HeLa process, in my opinion, easier to understand by focusing on the molecular aspect of it. He then compares the cancerous cells to the proteins that bind together in drug making. Through transformation by fusion, Dr. McDonald stated that’s most likely the reason to how one HeLa cell was able to create an entire culture with normal cells. Immortal cell lines are relatively easy to culture and the name behind it is why it is used so frequently. Cell cultures: primary (cells that you can see in the body, however it won’t stay alive long), secondary (tumors inside the body, easy to culture, generated from stem cells), and immortal. For the most part, all immortal cell lines derive from HeLa’s cell line, however, there are others but aren’t as recognized. The Human Genome Project correlates with the HeLa cells, as read through this book.

Dr. McDonald’s discussion about the biology aspect of HeLa cells helped quite a bit whilst understanding what the cells were technically going through. With his elaborate background on how a cell functions, I get a better feel to the HeLa’s transformation throughout the 20-21st century.

Timeline:

**Henrietta and HeLa Cells:**

* Albert Lacks, Henrietta’s maternal great grandfather inherits part of the Lacks Plantation in 1885
* Albert died on February 26, 1889
* Johns Hopkins Hospital opened in 1889
* Alexis Carrel’s “immortal chicken heart” in 1912
* Born on August 18, 1920, in Roanoke, Virginia
* Tuskegee study during the 1930’s
* Birthed Lawrence shortly after 14th birthday (1934)
* Daughter Lucile Elsie born around 1938
* Officially married her cousin Day Lacks on April 10, 1941
* George Papanicolaou develops Pap smear in 1941
* Nuremberg Code addressed on August 20, 1947
* Son David “Sonny” Jr. was born in 1947
* Daughter Deborah was born in 1949
* Son Joseph (Zakariyya) was born in 1950
* Noticed the knot in her uterus in 1951
* Creation of HeLa cells were born in 1951
* Henrietta died at 12:15 am on October 4, 1951
* Polio Vaccine created by HeLa cells 1951-1952
* Lawrence came home from military in 1953
* Texas geneticist mixed HeLa cells incorrectly, thus beginning the HeLa mutation in 1953
* Name behind HeLa announced by *Minneapolis Star* on November 2, 1953 “Henrietta Lakes”
* *Collier*’s publication of tissue culture in 1954
* Chester Southam used cancer patients to see with saline solution mixed with HeLa cells in February 1954
* Elsie died in 1955
* Southam’s official experiment in May 1956
* Southam injected prisoners in June 1956
* “*Informed concent”* first appearance in court documents in 1957
* Lawrence moved into house with girlfriend Bobbette Cooper in 1959, where rest of his siblings also moved in
* Russian space program launched HeLa cells into orbit in 1960
* British scientists Henry Harris and John Watkins, fused HeLa cells with mouse cells in 1965
* Stanley Gartler announced the HeLa cells come from some form of Caucasian in September of 1966
* Deborah gave birth to Alfred Jr. on November 10, 1966
* Joe turned himself in for killing Ivy on September 29, 1970
* Gey’s crew began taking samples of his tumor, calling them GeGe cells on August 8, 1970
* George Gey died on November 8, 1970
* Joe pleaded guilty second degree murder on April 6, 1971
* *Obstetrics and Gynecology* published-which was the first time Henrietta’s real name appeared in print on December 1971
* Richard Nixon signed National Cancer Act in 1972
* Nixon wanted American and Russian scientists to work together to find virus in May of 1972
* Lacks family finding out about HeLa cells in 1973 by Gardenia’s brother-in-law
* First International Workshop on Human Gene Mapping (step towards Human Genome Project) in June 1973
* Deborah gave blood in Dr. McKusick’s office on June 26, 1974
* Mike Roger’s *Rolling Stone*: first time anyone had told the true story of Henrietta Lacks and her family on March 25, 1976
* Lacks family finding out HeLa cells were being purchased later in 1976
* Deborah divorces Cheetah in 1976
* Deborah marries James Pullum in 1981
* Zakariyya got out of prison in 1981
* Genman virologist Harald zue Hausen discovered new strain of virus called Human Papilloma Virus 18 (HPV-18) in 1984
* Moore sued Golde and UCLA for stealing his tissues in 1984
* *A Conspiracy of Cells: One Woman’s Immortal Legacy and the Medical Scandal it Caused*, by Michael Gold, was published in 1985
* Jeremy Rifkin filed a lawsuit against Richard Axel because he violated 1975 National Environmental Policy in 1987
* California Court of Appeals ruled Moore’s favor in 1988
* Offical HeLa name was introduced: *Helacyton gartleri* in early 1990’s
* Scientist at Yale used HeLa cells to discover enzyme called Telomerasev in early 1990’s
* Court of California unfortunately ruled against Moore in 1995, stating, “When tissues are removed from your body, with or without consent, any claim you might have had to owning them vanishes” (205).
* First annual HeLa Cancer Control Symposium at Morehouse School of Medicine on October 11, 1996
* Skloot visits Turner Station and Clover in 1999
* Rebecca Skloot meets Deborah on July 9, 2000
* Deborah invited to speak at the National Foundation for Cancer Research in April 2001
* Deborah and Zakariyya saw Henrietta’s for the first time on May 11, 2001
* Deborah and Skloot saw Elsie’s medical records on Mother’s day of 2001
* Gary died from a heart attack in 2002 at age 52
* Sonny had quintuple bypass in 2003 at age 56
* Deborah divorced Pullum in 2006
* Deborah died on May 21, 2009

\*Timeline consists of Henrietta’s life, the medical advancement throughout the book, Deborah’s life, and a little bit of the Lacks family in general.