[PERSPECTIVE]

Henrietta Lacks: Living on across Multiple Disciplines

■ **JESSE NEIKRIE,** first-year student at Connecticut College

Henrietta Lacks. The first time I heard the name, it meant nothing to me. I was in the car, listening to National Public Radio's (NPR's) *All Things Considered*. Journalist Guy Raz was interviewing Rebecca Skloot, the author of a then-new book, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (2010). It was the beginning of summer, and I was taking full advantage of it, enjoying the luxury of having the time to read what I wanted.

The NPR story grabbed me from the start. Before beginning the interview, Guy Raz gave a brief teaser of the plot:

> Henrietta Lacks, a poor African American woman and mother of five, never knew that she revolutionized medicine. Shortly before she died of cancer in 1951, doctors took a tissue sample from her—without her permission. Those cells became the first human cells to gain "immortality"—replicating themselves in laboratories long after Henrietta Lacks died. (2010)

By the end of the interview, I had mentally added *Henrietta Lacks* to my summer reading list. But the book might have stayed there for several summers if not for the First-Year Summer Reading Program at Connecticut College, where I would enroll in the fall.

First-Year Reading

Since 1989, Connecticut College has required incoming first-year students to read a book chosen by a panel of faculty members from multiple departments. The panel selects something that they feel is engaging to a wide audience, conducive to discussion, and relevant to many disciplines. This year's panel (which consisted of Marc Zimmer from the chemistry department; Carol Akai from the human development department; Amanda Watson, a library liaison with specialties in film, English, and French; and Andrea Rossi-Reder, an English professor and dean of freshmen and sophomores) also hoped to bring Rebecca Skloot to campus to give a lecture and answer questions. "Little did we know the book would soon be picked up by Oprah," joked Dean Rossi-Reder, in reference to Skloot's skyrocketing speaker's fees.

Even without Skloot (who never made it to Connecticut College), *Henrietta Lacks* captivated much of the campus. Unlike the stereotypical reading assignment that too often catalyzes students to bond over mutual dislike, this choice appealed to people with diverse interests, including literature, science, history, philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology, medicine, and social justice. As Morgane Amat, a French-born first-year physics major and potential art and math double minor, explained, "I liked the biographical components combined with the scientific knowledge." Opinions about the book were as diverse as the first-year class, who used it as a tool to get to know each other. Inside and outside of classes as well as in student- and faculty-run discussions, which took place almost every other week during the first semester, students gathered to discuss the topics and dilemmas the book posed.

Different Disciplinary Angles

In Professor Derek Turner's bioethics class, students debated the difference between legality and ethicality. "The two do not always align," explained Professor Turner. "If the family had sued, they would not have had much of a legal claim; but justice is totally different." In the 1950s, doctors commonly took tissue samples and tested them in an effort to cure a patient's disease. Because their intent was to help the individual being tested, they rarely sought the patient's formal permission to take these samples. In Henrietta Lacks's case, doctors discovered shortly before she died that her cells could multiply exponentially—an extraordinarily rare and medically significant ability—and they never informed her of this fact. Thus the cells that would transform modern medicine were taken without her knowledge or permission. Since then, Henrietta's cells have provided a basis for medical research that has saved countless lives, making some doctors, researchers, and pharmaceutical companies unbelievably wealthy in the process. But Henrietta herself was a poor black woman, and her family remains so deeply in poverty they can't even afford the medicines her cells helped create. While the doctors who took her cells technically did nothing illegal, the fact that there were no consent forms and no related concept of patient rights at the time poses an ethical dilemma about who has rights to her cells.

On the other hand, if Henrietta had been better informed and had not allowed doctors to take the tissue sample, modern

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medicine would be radically different. In some science classes, professors like Martha Grossel helped illustrate this lesson from the book by showing students HeLa cells (as Henrietta Lacks's cells are called) that had been chemically treated to freeze them in the process of division (mitosis). Students could thus observe the stages of mitosis under a microscope. "It was really cool!" said freshman Anastasia Elliot, a music and education major and biology minor who plans to be a veterinarian. "We compared the size of the HeLa cells to our own cheek cells. The HeLa cells were tiny compared to ours, and with some of them you could see the chromosomes being pulled apart!" By examining and discussing HeLa cells, first-year science students were already learning to think about the origins of the samples they were studying.

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Immortal Legacies

Despite the book's misleading title, when Henrietta Lacks died on October 4, 1951, she truly died. Her cells—or at least the cells produced from her cells, which may have changed and evolved—exist all over the world. But Henrietta does not live on in them, just as we do not live on in the millions of skin cells we lose every day. In fact, before Skloot's book, despite widespread knowledge of HeLa cells, Henrietta Lacks herself was nearly totally forgotten. But Skloot's book immortalized Henrietta, and scientists will now know the origin of the cells they handle regularly. Just as everyone who receives a polio vaccine can thank Jonas Salk for his research, they can thank Henrietta Lacks for providing the cells he used.

It has now been more than six months since I first heard the name Henrietta Lacks. The person behind the name has now taken shape in my mind. Henrietta was a woman, a mother, a wife, and a cancer patient—in short, a human being who is too often remembered, if at all, as nothing more than an acronym. She is the source of the precious HeLa cells that defined modern medicine, an unsung hero who did not volunteer for the job. And now she is also at the heart of the introduction to my first year in college. Through Rebecca Skloot's book, Henrietta Lacks has set a very high standard for what I hope my college experience will be like. So far, I have not been disappointed. My classmates and I will never forget the life, death, and incredibly busy afterlife of Henrietta Lacks and her unique cells.

REFERENCES

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