

## Tragic Biography: Resurrecting Henrietta Lacks

In the first book I wrote and published more than twenty years ago, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*, I included a chapter entitled "Continued Devaluation of Black Womanhood," in which I declared that "a devaluation of black womanhood occurred as a result of the sexual exploitation of black women during slavery that has not altered in the course of hundreds of years." Emphasizing the reality that unenlightened black females often embrace stereotypes that depict us as strong matriarchs I contended: "Once black women are deluded and imagine that we have power we don't really possess, the possibility that we might organize collectively to fight against sexist-racist oppression is reduced." At the time of this early feminist writing, I interviewed a black woman usually employed as a clerk who was living in near poverty, yet she continually emphasized the fact that the black woman was "matriarchal, powerful, in control of her life." Actually, she was on the edge of a nervous breakdown, daily struggling

just to make ends meet. I wrote then: “Without a doubt, the false sense of power Black women are encouraged to feel allows us to think that we are not in need of social movements that would liberate us from sexist oppression.” Since I first wrote these words individual and collective groups of black women have struggled to be self-defining, to invent identities for ourselves that are acts of resistance challenging negative stereotypes—those racialized sexist projections imposed upon us—while simultaneously working to create foundations for self-actualization and self-determination.

Despite tremendous efforts to change the overall way black women are regarded in imperialist white supremacist patriarchal capitalist culture, there is no black woman, no matter how liberated, who does not encounter on some level in daily life efforts on the part of dominator culture to restrict her freedom, to force her into an identity of submission. In *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, law professor Dorothy Roberts continually emphasizes that it is essential for black women to participate fully in critical discussions of liberty. Urging us not to abandon the discussion, she insists that “affirming the constitutional claim to personhood is particularly important to Black women because they have historically been denied the dignity of their full humanity and identity.” Furthermore, Roberts explains: “The concept of personhood embodied in liberty can be used to affirm the role of will and creativity in Black women’s construction of their own identities. Relying on the concept of self-definition celebrates the legacy of Black women who have survived and transcended conditions of oppression. The process of defining one’s self and declaring one’s personhood defies the denial of self-ownership inherent in slavery.” Visionary feminist theory and practice focusing on the interconnect-edness of race, class, and gender in conjunction with black liberation struggles have promoted black female self-determination. Yet all our progressive changes have not eliminated the continued devaluation of black womanhood.

Ironically, we now face a more formidable obstacle: the women and men of all races who exploit issues of race and gender for self-centered opportunistic concerns. Had there been no movements of black liberation, had there been no feminist movement, it is not likely that much of the academic work focusing on race and gender would have gained a hearing. These movements created the cultural climate both in the academy and elsewhere where work of this nature could and can have a voice and be received. Increasingly, more often than not, producers of such work discount any relation to either political movements for social justice or to the unlearning of racism and sexism that provide everyone the opportunity to create work that is not biased, that no longer upholds and perpetuates the tenets of racism and sexism. More often than not when works focused on race and gender are created with no attention given to whether the perspective of the writer is anti-racist or anti-sexist, familiar negative stereotypes are simply reproduced and reinscribed.

Although there are many works that exemplify this trend, one of the most recent is science journalist Rebecca Skloot's exploration of the HeLa cells and the black woman from whose body the cells were taken. Skloot titles her work *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. On the cover readers find this caption: "Doctors took her cells without asking. Those cells never died. They launched a medical revolution and a multimillion-dollar industry. More than twenty years later, her children found out. *Their lives would never be the same.*" Marketed as a sensational discovery, this work purports to tell the story of Henrietta Lacks. Yet it is less a true story of Lacks's life and more a work of sensational creative nonfiction. Truthfully, Skloot's work cannot offer a complete portrait, for far too little of the true story of Lacks's life is known. Despite Skloot's extensive investigation she was not even able to uncover the reasons a young black female born Loretta Pleasant became known as Henrietta Lacks.

Conjuring images of Henrietta Lacks, Skloot employs a novelistic style that mimics the work of black women fiction writers (for example,

Zora Neale Hurston) though nowhere in her work does she refer to any writing by black females. While she shares with readers the fact that Henrietta was raised with her cousin David Lacks, she assumes a folksy novelistic persona as the means by which she offers her fictive interpretation of their lives. Her accounts of their childhood bonding reads “Henrietta and Day had been sharing a bedroom since she was four, so what happened next didn’t surprise anyone: they started having children together.” As readers we do not know where this information comes from or why inappropriate sexual behavior is reported nonchalantly as though it is a mere accepted fact of black people’s lives. Skloot consistently portrays the black folks she interviews in a sentimental manner, one that tends to evoke a folksy image of down-home black folks with no cares in the world, what I call “the happy darky syndrome.” Paradoxically, she merely states that Henrietta Lacks suffered from venereal disease yet she in no way places the exploitation of Lacks’s black female body in the context of child abuse, racism, sexism, and class exploitation.

By failing to offer a more complex interpretation, she falls into the trap of reinscribing simplistic notions of black identity. We learn from Skloot that Lacks liked to have fun, to dance, to paint her nails (much is made of her nails). Rather than creating a humanized portrait of Lacks, Skloot frames Lacks in the usual racist and sexist ways of “seeing” black females—flirtatious and loose, lacking knowledge about her own body, and with little concern for what it takes to be a responsible mother. After portraying Lacks as a kind of modern child-like primitive, Skloot also projects onto Lacks the stereotypical strong black woman image. Offering this account of Lacks receiving the news that she has cancer, Skloot writes, “On February 5, 1951, after Jones got Henrietta’s biopsy report back from the lab, he called and told her it was malignant. Henrietta didn’t tell anyone what Jones said, and no one asked. She simply went on with her day as if nothing had happened, which was just like her—no sense upsetting anyone over something she could deal with herself.” Skloot narrates what Lacks does after telling her husband and children that she needed to see the

doctor again: "The next morning she climbed from the Buick outside Hopkins again, telling Day and the children not to worry." The words Skloot puts in Lacks's mouth read: "Ain't nothin serious wrong...Doctor's gonna fix me right up." This stereotypically super-mama portrait nicely fits with the suggestion throughout the book that there was and is an almost "supernatural" power in Lacks's cells, which white medical professionals had named HeLa. Skloot declares: "HeLa cells grew much faster than normal cells, and therefore produced results faster. HeLa was a workhorse: it was hardy, it was inexpensive, and it was everywhere." This language is not unlike that used by plantation owners to describe hardworking black slaves: it dehumanizes.

There are three narratives contained within the book *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. One is the short simplistic biographical portrait of Henrietta Lacks; it resides in the background because there is simply not much information about her adult life, what she actually thought, what her values were, what motivated her actions. The second narrative is the biographical story of her daughter Deborah, which is more complete and provides more of the human interest in the narrative both because of her testimony about the family (everything she shares about her mother comes from other sources) and also because she is a fount of information when talking about everyone's responses to the revelation that Lacks's cells were taken without her consent and then used for much medical good. The most complex and compelling narrative in the book is the story of the HeLa. That story is the only heartfelt narrative in the book.

Skloot's passion and compassion clearly lie with the medical and science community. And like many other commentators, she is both willing to acknowledge that ethical questions were and are raised by the appropriation of Lacks's body and later the bodies of Lacks's family members without full disclosure, yet she continually suggests by her approach that what is most important is the benefit to medical science that came from the use of Lacks's cells. Skloot is basically silent when it comes to addressing issues of racism and sexism as systems

that allowed experimentation with Henrietta's body. Indeed, Skloot paints a portrait of Lacks's family as simply wanting money, as simply unwilling to recognize the extent to which they were all complicit in making agreements without fully understanding the implications of their actions. On those rare occasions when family members raise the issue of racism, Skloot distances her work from this discussion using phrases like "they say," which imply that there is no real basis for the charge of racism.

Constantly, she frames any discussion of the issue of racism alongside exaggerated stories and myths about medical experiments on black bodies. Significantly, a discussion among the family she transcribes and reports is placed in a chapter called "Night Doctors," which emphasizes exaggerated fears and myths about the use of black bodies. Paragraphs like the following, which concern the author's attempts to meet with family members expose Skloot's biases: "All I knew about Sonny's brothers was that they were angry and one of them had murdered someone—I wasn't sure which one, or why." She then reports that Deborah tells her, "Brother gets mad when white folks come askin about our mother." Yet there is no suggestion ever on the part of the author that a legitimate reason for anger exists.

More often than not Skloot is condescending and patronizing in her treatment of family members. And while Deborah is Skloot's key informant—the voice she uses to legitimize her own ruthless excavation of the black female body—Skloot continually portrays Deborah as a crazy black woman bitch who must be put in her place. Significantly, after one "crazed" encounter where she is being interrogated about her positionality by Deborah, Skloot does not give an account of her project by offering meaningful explanations, but instead she informs readers about all the ways Deborah is out of control and violent. Reporting on one of their encounters she acknowledges: "Then, for the first time since we met, I lost my patience with Deborah. I jerked free of her grip and told her to get the fuck off me and chill the fuck out. She stood inches from me, staring wild-eyed again and for what felt like minutes.

Then, suddenly, she grinned and reached up to smooth my hair.” This scenario evokes standard negative racialized sexist stereotypes of black womanhood.

Deborah becomes in this moment both the embodiment of the angry black bitch and the caring black mammy. Note that Deborah’s violence is deemed “crazy” whereas Skloot’s verbal abuse is portrayed as simply a form of self-protection. No doubt she includes a description of this encounter to let readers know that she is a tough white woman not willing to take any shit from the black folks she is mining to produce the treasure that will be her book and lead to her fame. By the time the book ends, Deborah and her words are evoked giving both permission and validation for Skloot’s project. Readers are told that in response to Skloot’s insistence that her mother will be immortal Deborah says: “But I tell you one thing, I don’t want to be immortal if it mean living forever....But maybe I’ll come back as some HeLa cells like my mother, that way we can do good together out there in the world.” This statement acts as a symbolic exoneration of all the violation visited upon black female bodies in this book: prevailing narratives of rape, incest, abuse.

Even though we learn that Deborah is a sexual abuse survivor, no link is made by the author between this experience and the irrational emotional responses that erupt from Deborah’s troubled consciousness. Aspects of her story are deeply tragic, including the longing of a child for her mother that cannot be satisfied. Her inner child is in a constant state of unresolved mourning. And while Skloot does a fairly decent job of telling the facts of Deborah’s life story, she does not bring any psychological depth to her interpretation. To recognize fully the impact of repeated trauma in Deborah’s life Skloot would have had to relinquish the colorful darky aspects of her sensationalized thriller.

Significantly, readers never hear a harsh interrogation of the medical professionals involved in the exploitation of Lacks’s body. In regards to her discussion with Susan Hsu, a doctor who had worked

on the HeLa cells, she shares: “When I explained to her that the Lackses thought she was testing them for cancer, and that they were upset about scientists using the cells without their knowledge, she was shocked.” Further on she reports this response from Hsu: “I feel very bad. People should have told them. You know, we never thought at that time they did not understand.” Consistent with the seemingly “neutral” reporting voice Skloot uses in discussion with medical and science professions, she does not ask Hsu who would have been responsible for fully informing both Lacks and then later her family. While Skloot expresses sympathy now and then for this family, her allegiance is firmly with science, with the huge lasting benefits that came from the harvesting and sharing of the HeLa cells.

Indeed, the story of the HeLa cells is fascinating. And it is obvious to anyone who knows Michael Rogers’s 1976 article in *Rolling Stone* magazine that Skloot has appropriated this early work and made it popular by sensationalizing the issues of the cells. Rogers was the first investigative reporter to bring, as Skloot acknowledges, “the true story of Henrietta Lacks and her family” to the public. As she says, his story was “the first time the mainstream media had reported that the woman behind HeLa was black.” Unlike Skloot, Rogers endeavored to be explicit in calling out the ways racism had informed the erasure of Lacks’s identity. However his article did not reach the mass audience that Skloot’s book has, with its clever framing and marketing of the story as a sensational true-life mystery thriller. No one can argue that Skloot works hard to bring to light facts about the life of Henrietta Lacks and her family. Her hard work is evident and worthy of praise. Sadly, however, this work is biased. The true stories interspersed throughout this narrative are merely a sensational backdrop and are overshadowed by the story of scientific experimentation on human bodies—dead and alive.

Much of the human interest story shared in Skloot’s work is written in a melodramatic sentimental vein. James Baldwin hit the mark when he defined sentimentality as “the ostentatious parading of

excessive and spurious emotion ...the mark of dishonesty, the inability to feel.” Ironically, the cover of Skloot’s book reveals the primary agenda behind this work; it exposes the extent to which the purported intent of the book to bring Henrietta Lacks into greater visibility is false. The photographic image of Henrietta Lacks does not have center stage. Her image, in the upper left-hand corner of the book, is practically disappearing from the page. The cover has a collage-like quality and the black-and-white image appears as if it is cut out and pasted onto the more colorful all-encompassing image of cells. This cover reveals to anyone who studies it that Henrietta Lacks is not immortal, that she may or may not be remembered, but that her cells will always have presence; they will always receive attention and recognition.

In fact, given the power of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy to erase black history (think of all the years that Lacks’s presence was erased, her experience buried and forgotten) it is still possible that Lacks will recede into invisibility. And while the author attempts to suggest that this kind of undisclosed experimentation is an aberrant occurrence, the many violations of black female bodies by medical experimentation has not ended. Even though it serves Skloot’s purpose to present this story as rare and uncommon, it is not. Of course the story of the HeLa cells is an awesome rare occurrence, one that can easily fascinate readers. There is nothing sensational about the exploitation and violation of black female bodies; it is such a common occurrence that it does not shock. And now that her identity is fully uncovered Lacks enters the community of a collective body of black females whom the medical industrial complex has violated and disowned. Perhaps one day we will hear the story of Henrietta Lacks told from the perspective of an aware observer willing to examine fully, boldly, and honestly the way racism, sexism, and class exploitation together informed and shaped the true life story of Henrietta Lacks and her kin.

When any woman’s history (especially a woman of color) that has been buried and forgotten comes to light, there is cause for

celebration. Many readers celebrate the uncovering of Lacks's role in a medical revolution even as we lament the myriad ways she is written into history via sexist and racist defined personas. Just as she entered medical history naked with aspects of her personhood denied, bits of her body taken, and her name (therewith her story) buried, parts of her being are again violated when she is called a "thing" by Skloot, when what is written on her long dead body is another story of someone else's desire and passion—the science journalist who wants to reveal a story to the world that will bring her fame and glory. No one who is unable to assume an unbiased perspective informed by keen understanding of the way systems of imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy have worked together—historically in Africa and in the United States from slavery to the present day—to deny life to the black female body can offer readers Lacks's true story.

Taught by these very systems that the black female body exists as a vessel to feed and aid the growth of others and not to nurture the self, one cannot find in Skloot's narrative of Henrietta Lacks a story where she is the subject of her longings and not othered or dehumanized by outsiders who long to make her body carry their hopes and dreams. It is both the world of sexism in black communities and racism in white communities that condones and supports the violation of Lacks's black female body. That this violation is passed on is evident by the traumas visited upon the body of her daughter, the motherless child Deborah.

Until we (and everyone) recognize the suffering of black women as a more important marker of identity than the ways that pain is manipulated and exploited to serve the needs of others, black females will not be empowered to cultivate a resiliency of mind, spirit, body, and heart that requires no cover-ups, no false personas. As Kevin Quashie declares in his study *Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory*, "To be loved, to be held, to remember...are each metaphors of selfhood; they mark a subject and articulate [a black woman's] function but also imagine and suggest an other who is engaged in the act of

be-ing.” What we hope for Henrietta Lacks is that she be remembered for her unrequited martyrdom.

The tragic aspects of her life and death are rendered no less painful and traumatic by the heroic medical revolution engendered by the HeLa cells. To honor Henrietta Lacks rightly we must allow her body and being a subjectivity that both stands apart, even as it enhances the story of HeLa. To allow this tragic biography to become mere colorful backdrop, subordinated to the story of HeLa, is to reinscribe the notion that what is most vital in the lives of black subjects is not how we live but how we influence and change the lives of white folks. To humanize fully Henrietta Lacks she must come back to center stage.

We must return to her the dignity that the forces of hatred and greed have stripped away. We must not allow the racism, sexism, and class exploitation which over-determined her fate to be ignored. As enlightened visionary feminist women who recognize the importance of feminist thought and practice, we read her story and weep. Let us celebrate and let us mourn. Let us remember and let us resist. We reclaim your humanity Henrietta Lacks. For us you will never be immortal; we do not require immortality to value you rightly. As we reclaim your story as our story, we make certain that you will not be forgotten.