

Skloot, Rebecca, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, New York: Random House, 2010, Print.
Reviewed by Claire Cafritz

Overview: If there were ever a piece of scholarship that encapsulated the interdisciplinary ideals and methods of American Studies, Rebecca Skloot's book *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* would be it. The poignant story of Henrietta Lacks, an African American woman whose cervical cells created the first immortal cell line, provides a revealing account of the ways in which prevailing issues of race and class have shaped, and continue to influence, the various institutions that govern American society. Skloot's efforts to reveal the human story behind one of the most significant discoveries in the history of medicine provides invaluable insight into many of the issues and disciplines that are integral to understanding American studies.

In 1951 Henrietta Lacks died of cervical cancer. Prior to Lack's death, doctors secretly extracted cells from her cervix and when she died these cells were preserved outside of her body. Henrietta Lack's cells became the first-ever immortal cell line. "HeLa" cells, as they came to be known, can reproduce indefinitely outside of the body, provided material for endless amounts of scientific research and facilitated thousands of landmark medical discoveries. Scientists created vaccines, discovered gene maps, and even sent her cells into space; HeLa cells undeniably changed the course of medicine and its relation to human life. Despite the amount of fame Lacks' cells were generating in the medical world, Lack's children were sparsely aware of their late mother's contribution to science. As Skloot notes, doctors had taken Henrietta's cells without the permission of her and her family. In fact, prior to the publication of this book, Henrietta's name was often misreported, if documented at all in the medical records.

Skloot spent over a decade conducting research and gathering an extensive amount of information to piece together Henrietta's story. Her interdisciplinary, and often unconventional, approach to uncovering sources allowed Skloot to paint a complete picture of how Henrietta Lacks unwittingly became a part of a medical phenomenon. Skloot's research methods included

conducting thousands of hours of interviews, engaging in extensive scientific and historical research, and examining archival photos, videos, medical documents, legal documents, and personal journals. She also engaged in participant observation and spent years trying to get to know the Lacks family.

The book is just as much about the process of uncovering Henrietta's story as it is about Henrietta herself. Skloot organizes a wide array of sources into an exceptionally readable story by contextualizing the information in a way that makes it easy for her readers to understand. Throughout the book, however, Skloot alludes to the obstacles she faced when researching the topic of Henrietta Lack and her immortal cells. Skloot reveals the struggles she encountered in her attempt to gain the trust of the Lacks family, who had been consistently left out of the narrative.

It would be impossible to place *The Immortal Life* into one specific genre. The book serves almost as an encyclopedic resource on topics including, but not limited to, science, medicine, American history, world history, law, ethics, religion, culture, psychology, geography, anthropology, sociology, journalism, and politics. The book can just as easily be read as a detective novel as a history of science.

How this work can be applied to American Studies: The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks should be a required book on an Introduction to American Studies syllabus. Its overarching themes of race, class and transnational history makes *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* an appropriate book to assign in any American Studies course. In an abstract way, Henrietta's cells are like the American Studies department- their story is relevant across many topics, deals with many pertinent societal and cultural issues and has achieved a transnational presence.