All Praise the Queen!

Upon reading *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, I found that there is an underscore of medical and gender issues that gives pronounced dynamics to the unknown legacy of the HeLa cell. Each category of the dynamics is astounding in its revelation, from Henrietta Lack’s struggles living in the rural South, to her battle with overly aggressive cervical cancer (Skloot 1). Though she lost the battle, her cells have become one of the most important tools in medicine. The book focused mainly on the social effects that resulted from our trusted medical industry performing research with questionable ethics, and perhaps more importantly, without Henrietta’s consent. In the 1950s, discussions of scientific investigations, secret experiments, and legal disputes, all allude to the previous generation’s oppressive nature toward African-Americans. However, what most profoundly struck me, were the deplorable accounts of how black women raised in poverty were treated in society during those times. Civil rights has always been a battle for many minority groups growing up in American society, but I feel it’s been a double-edged sword for many African-American living under such extreme levels of destitution. Gender conflicts, socio-economic class, marital status, maternal status and employment status of female role models in the black community provide a scope of continued indifference that I can strongly relate to.
My case here is not to argue that African-American women are the only women to suffer injustices due to race, class, cultural, and gender reasons. I am not trying to generalize from my own experiences or to register a complaint for my race. However, it is no surprise to me that this happened to a black woman during a time of racial segregation in America. It is also no surprise to me that her misfortune benefitted mankind by providing the world with the first immortal human cells. What does leave me a bit bewildered is that, after more than sixty years following her death, the truth was finally uncovered. What does that show me about this modern society of equality and democracy? What does that say for our economical advanced country as we struggle with the unacceptable level of Americans living in poverty? As a Muslim African-American military veteran, it only leads me to say, “As brothers and sisters in this struggling world economy, we still have a long way to go.” It irks me to know in this glorious democracy, our medical physicians, who have taken an oath to preserve our lives, can still hold back information and deceive us. It upsets me on so many levels that for so long, no one knew that one woman, from an oppressed society of women, was monumentally instrumental in advancing medical science and curing dangerous viral diseases facing humanity. Of more importance to me is that a moral or legal decision should have be made to help Henrietta Lack’s family with some source of restitution for the gains her cells produced in modern medicine.
Now I agree there were many factors that prevented the Lacks family from standing up for themselves and yes, poverty playing a major factor. I agree that during her adolescent years, the most problematic period of being raised in an adoptive family, Henrietta Lacks was unable to secure her identity. Still, there is an undeniable fact that she was a strong black woman. Coming from a low economy housing development in South Jamaica Queens, New York; my mother raised my two brothers and me as a single parent. So I know first-hand what sacrifices she took to provide for her three sons. Unlike the poverty I’ve witnessed in California, poverty stricken areas of the northeast and southeast coast can be more noticeable or visual. There are no palm trees, clear water beaches, or vista viewed warm weather days back east. More often during the cold winter months you can pass down the roads or streets to see large amounts of project housing tenants, homeless constructed shelters and abandoned buildings where you can tell on sight that you’re in a poor neighborhood. The characteristic of Lacks family’s miserable living condition of hunger, domestic violence, no education, no healthcare, and impoverished community is something I’m very familiar with. But what I find in this case as in my case is that what defines poverty does not ultimately define the individual.

My mother was known as a political activist in our community, so she raised us to always stand up for our beliefs and to stay focus on our future, not the past. As a single father myself, I always fought to give my daughters the future they deserved and teach them a strong sense of family pride. Fighting against indifference in this society may have seemed like a hopeless cause for the Lack family, even after it was uncovered that her family was experimented on and left without compensation. However, I believe there is an invested potential to this story that benefits more than science or profit.
As I finished reading *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, I began to wonder what would have happened if Michael Rogers never published the Rolling Stone article about Henrietta’s cells. What if the BBC documentary never aired? What if John Moore and Ted Slavin never challenged the laboratories that sold their cells? How would we know about this breach of privacy? Whatever the case, the importance of the HeLa cell contribution to science is living proof that we should hold minority women of African-American descent to a higher degree of respect and admiration. Without Henrietta Lacks’s immortal sacrifice, where would we be? Henrietta Lacks and her family’s story gives living proof that in many cases poverty is non-voluntary but the struggle to reach out of poverty can prove to be its own reward. But in any case the welfare rate of Americans living in poverty is an obligation that needs to address not only by our government but to us as United States citizens. At a bare minimum we should vote to help build better programs to cure this social injustice. We have the means and the will. God Bless us all.