

"The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks: An Introduction to Jim Crow and the Great Migrations"

A Commentary on the ELA curriculum unit by unit co-author Ric Nudell, June 2020

I was introduced to *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* when my wife, Aliza Ansell (one of the co-authors of this unit, along with Kristi Kaepfel) talked to me about reading it with her ABE students. When I became an ABE teacher, I borrowed Aliza's work to teach parts of the book with my students.

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks, by Rebecca Skloot, tells the story of a poor, undereducated black woman whose "...cells became the first human cell line that could grow and divide endlessly in a laboratory." (<https://osp.od.nih.gov/scientific-sharing/hela-cells-timeline/>). Research using her cells contributed to development of the polio vaccine, and many other medical advances. Around the world, research using her cells continues today.

The book details the process by which Henrietta's cells were taken, without explanation or consent. It narrates the extended, largely unthinking interactions between a mostly white medical establishment and Henrietta's black family. It lays bare a conflict of cultures and the consequences for the unequal partner in that conflict.

In this unit we examine the historical context for the Henrietta Lacks story—the Jim Crow south of Clover, Virginia, and the family's migration (as part of the Great Migration) to Turner Station, Maryland.

When my students study a historical text, I like to ask if they can identify whose story we are hearing. Take the Thanksgiving story. In elementary school, I learned a version with grateful Pilgrims and generous Indians (Native Americans) coming together to celebrate a successful harvest. However, the Wampanoag—the Native Americans of the story—relate the Thanksgiving events with a number of differences from the version I learned. I ask my students to identify those differences, and ask what we might infer from them. Why have different narrators included different details? What might that tell us about the narrators, or about the story? I close the exercise by asking how what we just discussed might encourage us to do more critical thinking when we study history.

US history begins with a convergence of three peoples—European explorers and colonists, indigenous peoples (Native Americans), and Africans. Only one of those groups came to that convergence voluntarily. The consequences of that convergence continue to manifest themselves today. Differences among those three groups across categories like health outcomes, economic achievement, educational opportunity, incarceration, and voting rights, are rooted in the course of that convergence.

The work to deliver inclusive civil rights and social justice matters. The outcome is not predetermined. Even the best actors in that work need broad support. In an 1862 letter to Horace Greeley President Lincoln wrote:

As to the policy I "seem to be pursuing" as you say, I have not meant to leave any one in doubt.

I would save the Union. I would save it the shortest way under the Constitution. . . . If there be those who would not save the Union, unless they could at the same time *save* slavery, I do not agree with them. If there be those who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time *destroy* slavery, I do not agree with them. My paramount object in this struggle *is* to save the Union, and is *not* either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing *any* slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing *all* the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that. What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union. . . .

I have here stated my purpose according to my view of *official* duty; and I intend no modification of my oft-expressed *personal* wish that all men every where could be free.

Lincoln eventually concluded that the path to saving the Union accorded with his personal wish to eliminate slavery. But, that choice was not inevitable. This unit hopes to foster the type of support Lincoln needed when making his choice.

The story of Henrietta Lacks introduces students to some of the historical context for the Black Lives Matter movement. It personalizes labels like *Jim Crow* and *discrimination*. The unit provides a ready platform for looking both forward and back, and considering many of the signposts that got us to where we are today.

This unit is based on a complex, non-fiction text. It is designed to be challenging for learners at GLE 6-8. EBRI vocabulary and comprehension exercises are included. The lessons can be adapted or extended to accompany other teaching about the topics that are covered.

Find this unit on the SABES ELA website at

<https://www.sabes.org/content/ela-curriculum-example-henrietta-lacks-jim-crow>