

Totalism and Thought Reform in America's Universities  
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The university where I teach required all 2011 first-year students, 2400 in number, to read *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot.<sup>1</sup> The announcement of the requirement included this description of the book:

The book chronicles the life of Henrietta Lacks, a poor African American migrant worker from the tobacco farms of Virginia, whose cells were taken without her knowledge sixty years ago. Henrietta Lacks' cells became one of the most important tools in medicine, including breakthroughs leading to polio vaccine, cloning, gene mapping, and more. Her cells have been bought and sold countless times over while she has remained unknown and neither she nor her family have benefitted in any way. As Rebecca Skloot's website states, "*The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* tells a riveting story of the collision between ethics, race, and medicine; of scientific discovery and faith healing; and of a daughter consumed with questions about the mother she never knew. It's a story inextricably connected to the dark history of experimentation on African Americans, the birth of bioethics, and the legal battles over whether we control the stuff we're made of.

Faculty from a variety of academic disciplines committed to using *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* in their classes, and all members of the university community were encouraged to read the book and explore ways to engage in discussions around it, whether inside or outside the classroom.

Rebecca Skloot is a freelance writer for magazines and newspapers specializing in science and medicine. She has been a contributing editor of *Popular Science* magazine, a correspondent for NPR and PBS, and has taught creative writing classes at the University of Pittsburgh and the University of Memphis. Her academic credentials are a bachelor's degree in biological sciences and a master of fine arts in creative nonfiction. *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, published in 2010, her only book, was a best seller and has been optioned for a film by Oprah Winfrey.

The obvious question is why *The Immortal Life of Henrietta*

*Lacks* was selected for this assignment over every other book that might have been chosen--imagine the possibilities, all of the literary and scholarly writing over the span of recorded time. And it is not that *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* is one of several, or a number of, possibilities. It is not that incoming students are different and come with different knowledge backgrounds and learning needs and interests, and that one book might be right for one person and another book right for someone else. They were considered alike enough, interchangeable enough, enough of an undifferentiated collectivity, that it seemed warranted to decide that very single one of them needed to read this book. This book is it, the one, the only one. Every entering student had to, literally, be on the same Skloot page. Why?

You can't explain the requirement of *The Immoral Life of Henrietta Lacks* by tapping the time-honored conceptions, or purposes, ascribed to a university education. Historically, one justification for a university education is that it hones students' intellects; it enhances their powers of discernment and critical judgment and choice; it develops their minds. Another rationale, the university is a context for the advanced study of the academic subjects or disciplines--philosophy, art, literature, science, mathematics, social science, history, and foreign language--their domains of concerns, their central creations and findings and assertions, their theories and constructs, their methods of inquiry, their most distinguished personages and major organizations. Another conception, the university is where one comes to know that which marks the educated person, a good part of which is familiarity with the finest and most influential creations and thoughts of humankind over the course of its history.

In all of these orientations, the university is a place of free and open inquiry and expression and debate, for both students and faculty; academic freedom and individual autonomy and integrity are cherished ideals. The university is a marketplace of ideas, as it were, a setting in which competing visions and perspectives and explanations are encouraged, acknowledged, explored, discussed, and debated. Philosophical and ideological pluralism, or diversity, and personal autonomy and integrity are guiding principles. Exemplary excellence, exceptionality--groundbreaking insight, creativity, freshness of analysis and discovery, and advocacy--is a supreme value. A university is a where people don't have to think

alike or be alike or feel compelled to subordinate themselves to some larger cause or mission. Rather, it is a context in which to push with all that's in you to be top-of-the-line academically in your own unique way and to express the outcomes of that and be heard and respectfully taken into account by others. The university is not in the business of stamping out cookie-cutter people, students or faculty.

Simply, you are not going to flow from any of these frames of reference to the across-the-board requirement of *The Immoral Life of Henrietta Lacks* by Rebecca Skloot. It is not that the university is requiring a book written by a member of the academy as a way of saying to students this is what we do, this is world you will be entering. While Skloot has taught university courses, she is not an academic, not a member of a university faculty, not a professor. What work she has done in a university has been in the area of creative writing. She is not a recognized scholar in the field of medical research, bioethics, anything of that sort. While this book was well received by mainstream reviewers (I don't know of any academic reviews of the book) and clearly Oprah likes it, no one is saying that it is a major work of science or social science or philosophy. *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* is a good popular book, no more than that. So why this book?

Here is where Robert Jay Lifton is useful. Robert Jay Lifton is an American psychiatrist, scholar, and writer, still active in his mid-eighties, and the author of a recently published memoir.<sup>2</sup> Lifton first became known to a general audience as a young man for his studies of mind control during the Korean War--the coercive practices used with American prisoners of war by the Chinese with embarrassing effectiveness, methods that came to be known popularly as brainwashing.<sup>3</sup>

Lifton coined the term *totalism* to describe ideologies and orientations that justify gaining control over the thoughts and behaviors of masses, or at least large numbers, of people. Totalism rings of totalitarianism, but Lifton uses totalism to get across that it is not just governments that are involved with this kind of thing. So don't just think of Hitler and Stalin and Mao; think also about non-governmental organizations, the person down the street or at the next desk at work, and, well, your local university. Totalism involves the fervent commitment to get everybody working

harmoniously together in alignment with your vision and in service to your ends. A totalist outlook goes beyond simply arguing for your position and agenda, trying to persuade people, making your case to them, selling them on your ideas and ways, that kind of thing, and accepting the idea that individuals and groups might not buy your product. Totalism supports arranging people's lives, managing and controlling their circumstances and experiences and rewards and punishments so that they *will* see the light, *your* light, and enthusiastically get with the program, *your* program. Part of this is making sure competing "products" to yours are demonized or silenced to the point that you can in effect operate a monopoly.

Lifton called the process totalists use to condition the hearts and minds of people *thought reform*. He identified eight thought reform strategies: milieu control; mystical manipulation; confession; self-sanctification through purity; aura of sacred science; loaded language; doctrine over person; and dispensed existence. Space doesn't allow examination of these eight with reference to the contemporary university; enough to say that the Chinese in Korea would be able to relate to what is going on.

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks makes sense when viewed as an instrument of thought reform within the frame of totalism. Until recent times, the idea of the university taking it upon itself to shape the thinking of students on social matters in a particular direction would have been viewed as inappropriately politicizing the university and antithetical to the university's scholarly mission, and as violating the academic freedom and personal integrity of both students and faculty, and as simply presumptuous--who are we to tell people what to think or how to live; and even more fundamentally, it would have been considered un-American. That kind of thing goes on some other place, Eastern Germany or somewhere, so it was thought, not in this country. That's no longer the case. The university in our time is heavily in the business of reforming the thoughts of students with the aim of achieving total conformity among them. As well, totalism justifies rigorously promoting commonality of outlook and predilection among faculty and administrators through hiring, reward, and retention practices and control of scholarly discourse (what is allowed expression in scholarly journals and books and in faculty meetings and conference presentations).

Thought reform in the American university in our time is in

the direction of the left-of-center concept of *social justice*. In brief, the idea is to de-Europeanize (which includes de-Christianize) this country, de-nationalize it, collectivize it (make the group, not the individual, the salient reality), equalize it, and democratize it (empower the group, especially the government, over the individual--constitutional republics, we pledge allegiance to one, don't go far enough in that direction). This involves bringing minorities up a peg and white people, especially their men, who have been on the wrong side of history, down a peg, and using the government to confiscate resources from people who have too much and redistribute them to people who have too little. And while that's going on, cleaning up the environment (there is a movement in my university to replace a graduation requirement framed in terms of academic subjects with one organized around "sustainability"). Social justice doesn't stand apart from everything else as a separate topic or concern but rather permeates the academic areas--especially literature, sociology, political science, education, social work, and higher education--to the point that in good measure these fields are subordinated to and in service of social justice. *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* serves this agenda well.

Privacy and free will are by definition not big with totalists. Within the university's thought reform agenda, everything about your life is its business. As an incoming student, you aren't free to say something like, "You don't even know me and you are telling me I have to read an Oprah book over the summer. If I want to read that kind of book I'll do that on my own. I don't need a university for that. I'm in the middle of reading Dostoyevsky and Proust. How about if you butt out of my personal beliefs and take care of yourself and leave me alone." That wouldn't play at all.

And why this particular book? *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* reflects the contemporary university's near-obsession with race in general and in particular with African Americans from within a certain narrative: a series of abuses at the hands of white racist capitalist America. A critical mass of university faculty and administrators see racism and racial injustice in every nook and cranny of American life, and it seems that they can't get enough of going on about it, to the point that if a university is going to pick a single book for students to read you can bet the farm that it is going

to be about race and from this perspective. The Skloot book or something like it, a book that imparts this basic message, is indicative of the remarkable unanimity of perspective on university campuses--another term for it: groupthink. The university marketplace of ideas these years is a marketplace of an idea, singular: one product is packaged and sold. Anything else is shut down and shut out.

I find it no coincidence that Rebecca Skloot is white. This sort of depiction of innocent, helpless, downtrodden blacks invariably comes from whites. Black writers--I'm thinking of people like Thomas Sowell, John McWhorter, Shelby Steele, Walter Williams, and Juan Williams--are much more prone to talk about African American personal responsibility and self-determination. This book is the product of a middle class white liberal, and it plays to middle class white liberals, including those now entrenched in universities.

Historically, doctors have routinely kept tissue samples without informing their patients. In their eyes they weren't doing anything wrong; it wasn't as if they were taking vital organs, anything like that. A Rand corporation report noted that tissue samples from more than 179 million people (!) have been stored in the United States alone. They have been used to combat hepatitis, AIDS, Parkinson's disease, and breast cancer. It is not as if Henrietta Lacks is an isolated case and that she was singled out because she was black. It can be argued that keeping tissue samples without patient approval is a bad practice, but to view this issue within the lens of race as the Skloot book does is misleading if not disingenuous.

I'm especially taken by how Skloot in this book propagates the most negative, child-like, Stepin Fetchit racial stereotypes of African Americans. A few quotes and a description to illustrate my point:

"Now I don't know for sure if a spirit got Henrietta or if a doctor did it," Cootie [a relative] said, "but I know her cancer wasn't no regular cancer, 'cause regular cancer don't keep going after a person die."

"I know your mother and father and all the cousins all mingled together in their own way, but don't you ever do it, Dale [Henrietta's daughter Deborah]. Cousins aren't supposed to be having sex with each other. That's uncalled for."

Deborah: "You been doing things to my body you ain't supposed to do. I don't want to be nowhere with you by myself no more. Lord give me enough sense to know that."

A year before going to a doctor about it, Henrietta told her girlfriend: "I got a knot inside me. A knot. It hurt somethin' awful --when that man want to get with me, Sweet Jesus aren't them but some pains."

Deborah, the daughter, five feet tall, two hundred pounds, a single mother of six, lived on Social Security Disability and food stamps.

What image of African Americans are first-year university students supposed to come away with after reading this? What do Deborah Skloot and white university academics get out of portraying black people in such, well, racist terms? What needs of theirs are propped up by doing this kind of thing? I wouldn't expect them to engage these questions. Self-analysis and self-criticism are not hallmark characteristics of these people. Rather, with them there is the idea that they know the truth—there's no doubt about that. Their task is to get others to see things their way, the right way. Thomas Sowell, an African American intellectual, says that to white liberals blacks are trophies or mascots put on display as symbols of their own significance and virtue. African American intellectual Shelby Steele was asked by a good-willed white person, "What can we do for blacks?" Steele answered, "Leave us alone." Black nationalist Marcus Garvey back in 1921 said to his people, "Up you mighty race of kings. You can accomplish what you will." Between the two of them, I vote for Marcus Garvey over Rebecca Skloot.

I've asked students whether they had ever studied the status and interests and destiny of white people in their courses. Do they know of any white analysts or advocates, any white leaders or organizations? No student has said yes. I have never had a chance to go to my follow-up question: if any of the students had said they had studied or knew about such white individuals and organizations, I would have asked whether they could name any that have not been characterized by their teachers and professors as racist, neo-Nazi, bigoted, ignorant, violence-prone, conspiratorial, and to be avoided like the bogeyman. One student said the idea of

whiteness came up briefly in a class, and that it had been presented as a bad thing that needed to be stamped out. When I heard that, I wondered how it would go over if blackness were portrayed in this same way. There'd be hell to pay, and rightly.

Nothing I'm saying here should be taken to mean that I believe the African American, or black, circumstance shouldn't be studied (studied, not preached, not pontificated). It should be. But from the perspective of multiple narratives, and by tapping the thinking of the full ideological and political and theoretical spectrum, and with scholarly intent and intellectual sophistication, and along with the respectful and objective study of other races, including whites.

If students read something like the Skloot book, or sections of it, they should do it concurrently with another writing that presents a very different take on this same material. This would underscore to students that there isn't just one, definitive, for-all-time answer to what is true and just in human affairs. People differ on what deserves attention and what is factual and moral and preferable. Students need to investigate these differences and come to understand them, deeply and on the presenters' own terms, and analyze and gain insight into them, including their philosophical and ideological and historical underpinnings, and explore and assess the merits and implications of these positions; and students need to create and share their own unique scholarly contributions with reference to them. Approaching it this way is education worthy of a university, and worthy of this country. I would hope that this kind of education encourages students to welcome, and seek out, alternative ideas and points of view, and discourages smugly ignoring, or demonizing, marginalizing, silencing, and attacking anyone that dares introduce intellectual, philosophical, or ideological diversity and complexity into the academic marketplace, arena. The university shouldn't reform students' thinking; it should liberate it.

#### Endnotes

1. Rebecca Skloot, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (New York: Broadway Books, 2010).
2. Robert Jay Lifton, *Witness to an Extreme Century: A Memoir* (New York: Free Press, 2011).

3. Robert Jay Lifton, *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961. See especially, chapter 22.