

Race, Racism, and Science

C. RICHARD KING: So I think that the book *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* might give us the impression that Henrietta Lacks is a particularly unique individual. Very few people have the opportunity to live on, to live forever, to have their cells reproduced, and I would venture to guess that there's probably no African American woman who lived before 1950 who's had three songs made about her in the last 10 years, which says something pretty powerful about her as a person.

But what I want to talk about tonight are those features of Henrietta Lacks' life, and the social world in which she lived which are more common, or more mundane, so that we can truly understand what life would have been like for her, and how we might interpret her uniqueness. And I'm going to talk about three different topics. One is the contradictions in the American dream that are revealed by looking at her life and time and place, what we need to know about racism in the United States around the time that she lived, and how scientific racism shaped, I think, the kind and quality of treatment that she received. And I'll conclude with some thoughts about why all this might matter more than 50 years after she passed away.

But, for me, one of the most striking things about Henrietta Lacks' life is, actually, when it began. She's born on the same day that suffrage just passed, that grants women in the United States the right to vote. And to me, this is really telling, because Henrietta Lacks would have been, really, the first generation of women to be fully emancipated to have suffered. Yet, we know that most African Americans and African American women in 1920, and 1930, and 1950-- when she was alive-- probably didn't have the opportunity yet to exercise their right to vote.

So she tells us that, really, at the heart of the American experience is a fundamental contradiction, which is that freedom is promised to many-- actually, as we're told, all people are equal-- and it's also simultaneously denied to a few. So Henrietta Lacks tells us, or reminds us, that African Americans were always outside of the American dream-- outside of the American ideal. And in many ways, also enabled that ideal. So that when we see suffragettes walking on the streets, they're really not walking on the streets to enable African American, or African American women, to vote. This is a movement to encourage, or allow, white American women, particularly middle class, upper class women, to vote.

And this contradiction runs very deep. It's really the founding contradiction of the American experience. And we think of our founding principles-- all men are created equal, everyone has the same rights granted under the Constitution-- and yet, we think about who wrote many of these documents. We think about, for example, Thomas Jefferson, and we don't think about him as a slave owner, perhaps. We don't think about how, while he was writing his inspiring works that we remember, he was also writing ads for runaway slaves, as you'll see in the slide, in which he said, hey, I've lost some of my property. Can someone help me get it back?

And that contradiction and how we do, or don't, remember it, is really important for us to think about when we think about the kind of life that Henrietta Lacks could live, and the constraints that were placed upon it. And I think it's really still important for us to think about today, when we tell ourselves that race doesn't matter. If it's really at the core of who we are as a nation, I would argue that it's fundamental for us to understand even today.

One of the reasons it's fundamental for us to understand is that that contradiction undergirds, or provides, a foundation for the elaboration of a very complex system that's rooted in race. A system that says that white is over black, that blacks are born into slavery, and in many ways blacks are destined, always, to be slaves-- always to be property, always to be less than people.

And I would suggest that, certainly by the time of Jefferson in the United States, something like the racial status quo has developed in the United States. And really up until the Civil War, this status quo reigns supreme. This is a systematic racism that values certain kinds of peoples over others, that grants citizenship only to whites-- to white Europeans. And importantly, I suppose [? given what I just ?] said in the previous section to white men. It's a system that encourages a pervasive racial hierarchy, that grants the right to own property, the right to vote-- in some states, the right to read, the right to go to school-- to one set of people, and denies it to others.

And over time, this system tells everyone who's involved with it that whites are better. It's a system of white supremacy. And it's a system that encourages or depends upon, perhaps, even race-based slavery for the economic engine to work. At the same time, this racial status quo isn't just black and white. It's also a status quo that says Native Americans are outside of the nation, that Native Americans can be dispossessed. Native Americans can be removed against their will. So this is, perhaps, the idea-- or what we think of when we think of race and racism-- most commonly is this kind of status quo that develops.

And it's important to note that the Civil War offers up a real sort of opportunity, or a real moment in which that status comes under assault. It has really opened up to a set of challenging questions. And we can see these questions being posed and these challenges being posed in legislation that's passed during and after the Civil War. When President Lincoln issues the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, he's saying race-based slavery should no longer exist. He's saying freedom actually should be something that all Americans-- all people who are born within the boundaries of the nation-- should enjoy.

He goes a step further-- Congress goes a step further-- passing the 13th Amendment, which actually abolishes slavery, which makes his presidential edict the law of the land. A few years later, after the Civil War, the 14th Amendment actually grants citizenship to African Americans. And then the 15th Amendment extends those protections, and the protections of the law, to former slaves in the period of Reconstruction. I would argue that all of these legislative changes represent a really important or profound break, in which people are saying, hey, this old system of one group over another, of denying and excluding-- that's not working. We would like to imagine a social world and a national culture that's different.

So for about 10 years from the mid-1860s to the mid 1870s, there's really a grand kind of experiment that says, how might we re-imagine the nation? And how might we rethink who we are as a people? And we know, unfortunately, that this experiment failed. And it fails for lots of reasons that I won't go into tonight, but it does fail. And what happens in its place is a number of forces push for a return to the status quo, for a revaluing of race and a return of white supremacy.

So there's this 10 year break, and subsequently we have a period that is often called Jim Crow, in which white supremacy reasserts itself. And it reasserts itself-- as I want to briefly touch on-- in a number of ways. It reasserts itself in terms of legislation. It reasserts itself in the practices of popular culture. It reasserts itself on the streets of towns across the United States.

So both in small ways and in big ways, in formal ways and informal ways, right supremacy returns. And I want to work through some of those with you briefly here. And the first real glimpse that we have that the racial break is going to fail might be in the passage of what we call today Black Codes, which were laws that were directed at regulating social life based on race, and particularly regulating and limiting what African Americans could do. So these were laws that were passed to take away freedoms, to take away rights that had been granted to slaves, and, really, to ensure that inequality was perpetuated.

And in a sense, we might say that while slavery, in terms of ownership ends, that we have a system of quasi slavery that emerges, in which no longer were African Americans in bondage as property, but African Americans-- since they, in some cases, couldn't own property, or they couldn't have a fair wage granted to them, as sharecroppers, for example-- were in a kind of economic bondage, which kept them down.

And the Black Codes really paved the way for what we see in the coming decades for really formal segregation. So these are laws that say that there could be a school for whites, an a school for blacks. Or there could be different public accommodations for blacks and whites, or blacks and whites can't be in same hotel. These things begin to emerge and articulated in these initial laws we call Black Codes.

At the same time, the norms that previously had dictated the interactions of whites and blacks continue to really dictate how people interact-- the kinds of ways that they spoke to each other, when and how they might defer to each other, how they might assert themselves, how they might look each other. So the racial etiquette became a very small, everyday way in which white supremacy is re-asserting itself.

In many ways racial etiquette said whites are over blacks, and blacks need to stay in their place. And if blacks stepped out of their places, we'll see bad things often were visited upon them. And you'll see on the next slide that this system of racial etiquette was so clear that outsiders could come in and map out the behavior that many, perhaps, people in the Jim Crow South didn't see.

A journalist by the name of Stetson Kennedy, in fact, wrote a satirical guidebook to the South called *The Guide To The Jim Crow South*, in which he was, essentially, giving tourists a sort of mock tour guide of what the South was like and how one should act in the South. And he enumerates, as I do here, at a number of rules and behaviors, such as why you should never contradict blacks. They should never question the honor-- excuse me-- blacks should never question the honor of whites in public. They should never look at a woman. They shouldn't demonstrate that they're more knowledgeable or smarter than a white person in public.

All of these rules that he's able to transcribe are ways that white supremacy is reasserting itself in the years after the Civil War. We have these initial Black Codes that get passed. We have everyday behavior. And we might think that Northerners who were opposed to slavery-- that thought racial inequality was a bad thing-- might prevail in the long run, and say, hey, that's not good. Let's get rid of segregation. As we know, that's not actually what happens, because the Supreme Court says that those things, in fact, are constitutional in its holding in *Plessy versus Ferguson* in 1896, which says the Constitution doesn't have a problem with inequality, and separate but equal is OK.

So *Plessy versus Ferguson* really authorizes the elaboration of inequality and legally justifies segregation. *Plessy versus Ferguson* was specifically about train cars, in which an African American man said, I shouldn't have to sit in this kind of accommodation. I should be allowed to be in first class cabin if I pay the price. And the Supreme Court said, no black car and white car-- both of those are acceptable, as long as they are "equal."

So subsequently, schooling could be different. Where one lived could be different. Even public facilities could be different. And the next few slides illustrate, I think, our common image of what segregation after *Plessy versus Ferguson* looks like. Signs in public that say, for example, "we serve only whites," or "this is a white only area." This fountain is for whites, this restroom is for blacks. This waiting area is for a particular race.

And one of the unintended consequences of segregation is that within black communities, thriving institutions and economies develop. And so you don't simply have separate waiting rooms or separate schools. You have completely separate economies that develop. So the *Rex Theater For Colored People*-- that's an example of an institution that develops in the black community that has particular importance over time in that community. Or perhaps, more familiarly, something like the *Negro Leagues* becomes an important cultural institution in the black community during the Jim Crow era.

Now, I suggested a bit ago that if one crossed the boundaries of racial etiquette, or one stepped out of their place, that bad things happened. And perhaps the most violent and visceral bad thing that happened was violence directed at individuals. And so after the Civil War, the *Ku Klux Klan* emerges. *Night Riders* ride around and terrorize African American families. Sometimes taking individual African Americans from their homes, sometimes burning homes In an effort to say, don't step out of line.

More broadly, and beyond the Klan, lynchings became a very common way in which African Americans were reminded of white supremacy, and in which whites really reminded themselves of the racial code. Race-based lynchings were, really, I would say, a fairly common feature of daily life in the South. Between roughly 1880 and 1950, there are over 3,400 lynchings, with one year-- 1892-- having 161 cases in which an African American is taken by a group of people, beaten up and tortured and killed, often in public, and often in a very brutal, public display.

And the reasons for lynchings vary, but often have to do with slights to the honor or integrity of white citizens, in particular concerns about white women that African American men had crossed particular kinds of boundaries-- had made eyes, had flirted, had sexually assaulted young women. Often these assertions have no basis in fact, but that didn't matter for the punishment that was dealt. And the next damage is particularly troubling, but, I think, particularly common during this period this. This is an image of a lynching in the 1930s, in which, really, the community comes out for the event.

If we look at these faces in the crowd-- these aren't people that are horrified by this violence. This isn't something that is somehow beyond the pale. This is really a communal kind of event. These people-- many of them are laughing. The one gentleman that's prominent in the foreground is pointing to the bodies that are hanging from the trees, as if to say, this is the right thing to do. These people had this coming. Don't cross the boundaries. Don't step out of line.

And when we think of Jim Crow-- when we think of its extremities-- we do think of lynchings as being, really, I think, the most common response. We think of it as being a rural, southern kind of phenomenon. But that's not the only way that violence erupted, or manifested, itself in the period from 1888 to 1950. In fact, throughout the United States, a number of race riots occurred.

In contrast with lynchings, which occur in small communities in the rural South, race riots tend to take place in the North. They tend to take place in urban communities. And, in contrast with our current vision of a race riot, which is that the community of color rises up in opposition to a particular event, or a particular action by the State, race riots during this period are typically white groups of whites attacking groups of African Americans or African American communities. And, in some cases, actually randomly victimizing African Americans. So if lynchings target people that were purported to do bad things, race riots target a generic blackness and victimize people that really have nothing to do with what's going on.

So for example, the Springfield riot of 1908. There was a report of a sexual assault, which had the white community up in arms. And since they couldn't identify a perpetrator, or perhaps, weren't interested in identifying a perpetrator, every black man became a target. And there are reports of whites literally just pulling people off of moving street cars and beating people up, or beating black people up because of their, I think, because of their rage and the kind of fear and transgression that that report evoked in them. And race riots-- not as common as lynchings.

We do have years in which more than 25 race riots occur in a calendar year. During that year, that made it an almost every other week occurrence, by the numbers, which is a pretty startling thing to think about. Probably the largest race riot occurs in Tulsa. I want to dwell on the race riot in Tulsa, not just because it was particularly large, but because it occurs in the first year of Henrietta Lacks' life.

So we think of lynchings being something that happens way back in the day. We think of race riots as being a terrible thing that happened in something like ancient history. But for Henrietta Lacks, and for her family there living in Baltimore, this would be something that they would be reading about in the paper. This might be something that their friends and family members in other communities are living through.

And if you recall the Rex Theater that the slide-- that I showed you a few moments ago-- that was a theater in Tulsa. And Tulsa's black community was the most prosperous black community in the United States. It was sort of a financial powerhouse. And it was referred to as having a Black Wall Street, for example. So there's a great deal of wealth and prosperity in this community. And Tulsa, like most cities in 1921, through Washington DC to Atlanta in the Great South, are segregated cities. So it doesn't make it particularly unique.

But there's a report that an African American elevator operator either makes a pass at, or does something inappropriate, with a young single white woman. The police investigate it and determine nothing happened, it was just a false rumor. Their reports to the contrary did little to quell the public outrage. And for two days, from the 31st of May to the 1st of June, in 1921, groups of white men go into the African American community in Tulsa, which was called Greenwood, and attacked people, opened fire on groups of people, burned buildings down, and caused massive damage and massive loss of life.

At least 39 people were killed, although some reports suggest that perhaps several hundred people died. More than 800 people were injured, or treated at hospitals. And 10,000 people were left homeless, because upwards of 1,200 houses were burned. So this is a terribly devastating attack that undermines this community-- that kills a large number of people. Why? Because of a report of a racial transgression, a rumor of crossing of a racial boundary. That was-- like most of these reports-- false.

Now, when we think about race riots and we think about racial boundaries, we might think about the South. We might think about, or be reminded of, Tulsa. We might think about this being a white, black issue. But we shouldn't just think about this as a white, black issue. Because, in fact, there are a number of riots that occur in the late 19th century on the West Coast. Well, white Southerners are particularly concerned about white, black, and the threat of blacks and the need to shore up white supremacy. Whites on the West Coast in the Pacific Northwest are concerned about migrants from China and Japan. They were concerned about what we call the Yellow Peril.

And this leads to efforts to exclude, or remove, Asian immigrants from local communities. So the Los Angeles Massacre of 1871 might be the first example of this, in which whites go into what is Chinatown, beat up and actually hang a number of immigrants from China as a result. And this initial phase of Yellow Peril begins to have formal articulation in the Chinese Exclusion Act 1882, in which Americans said, we don't want Asian immigrants to be let into the country anymore.

Subsequently, in communities like Issaquah, Tacoma, Seattle-- members of the community, and, in fact, community leaders, often marched whatever individuals in Chinatown, or Japantown, they could find to the docks. And they actually would often force them to leave. Or they would go into the communities and loot and burn, as I suggested happened in Tulsa.

Now, this entire period from roughly 1880 to 1950, which encompasses the last 30 years of which encompass Henrietta Lacks' life-- and I've suggested as a period of the racial status quo, in which white supremacy's working to reassert itself-- it's a period of exclusion, and a period really of great violence and terror. I'm going to focus on one year during this period because I think it's particularly important to this period-- particularly important to the early years in which Henrietta Lacks lives. And that year is 1915.

And there are a couple things that happen in 1915 that are fundamentally important. The first is Leo Frank is lynched. And the lynching of Leo Frank is noteworthy for a couple of reasons. One, Leo Frank is, I believe, the only white American who's lynched during this period from 1880 to 1950, because of questions of the colorblind. He was a southern born Jew who managed a pencil factory in the Atlanta area.

One of his former employees is found dead. He becomes the scapegoat for that killing. There's a big trial. Great public spectacle. Initially, despite the lack of eye witnesses or physical evidence, he is convicted-- sent to prison for that killing. Over time, it's clear that he didn't actually do the crime, or that it's questionable whether he did the crime. And the governor moves to begin to pardon, or stay, his sentence.

This angers local citizens in the community. And I'm not talking about our image of people that do lynchings-- of uneducated, backward groups. I'm talking about people who would be future senators, future governors of the state of Georgia-- really, community leaders. They orchestrate a plan to break him out of prison-- a state prison-- after which they drive him to an undisclosed location, torture him, and hang him, as the graphic image in the slides demonstrate.

This was such a popular cause that there are folk songs that are circulating in 1915 that praise the young woman, her innocence, her sacrificing her life for her race, and demonize the Jewish perpetrator who took her life in such a terrible and barbaric fashion. Now, this case in and of itself is very noteworthy, but it's particularly noteworthy because the core members of the party that lynched her refer to themselves as the Knights of Mary Phagan, who was the young woman who was killed.

A few months after the lynching, the Ku Klux Klan-- the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan-- are reborn outside of Atlanta. And the core members of that group are the Knights of Mary Phagan. And we see in 1915, really, a rebirth of the Klan, and a real powerful public statement about white supremacy, and that being American is being white. And this is really the context into which Henrietta Lacks is born-- is the context in which whiteness and Americanness are parallel, in which African Americans are being excluded.

I don't want you to think of the Klan as being a marginal group in 1915. Because the same year the Klan is reborn, D. W. Griffith releases his film, Birth of a Nation. And Birth of a Nation, for the next roughly 30 years, is the most profitable movie released in the United States. It's a box office success. And it suggests a number of things, but in particular, it says essentially says, reconstruction was a failure. Blacks are childlike buffoons and they were ruining the South, and the Klan came in and saved the day, which is a perfect context in which for the Klan to be reborn.

And the film's also important because it's the first movie that's shown in the White House. So it's a really noteworthy film. So the Klan is reborn, and becomes instrumental in pushing pro-family, pro-American, patriotic policies and platforms. And it's actually, probably, one of the leading forces behind the 1924 immigration restrictions that keep immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe-- keep Catholics and Jews-- from immigrating to the US in great numbers for the next roughly 50 years.

Again, we think of the Klan being a Southern thing. But I want to just briefly dispel us of that idea. The Klan is-- it's really popular throughout the United States. The largest membership of the Klan during this second phase is Indiana. And the next few slides I'm going to show you, I will show you that the Klan is actually pretty popular in the Pacific Northwest.

So this first slide is a wedding party-- a Klan wedding party in Sedro-Woolley on the west side. And so we're not just talking about burning crosses here. The Klan is a family institution that people would want to be married in their regalia. The Klan holds rallies in the next slide in the upper right-- excuse me-- upper left, in large assembly hall in the Seattle area. Has floats and parades, again, in communities on the west side. And even sponsors events that members of the US Navy attend on the [? west side ?].

So whiteness and Americanness are tightly tied together. This deep-seated notion of white supremacy expresses itself through violence in the South, both rural and urban, but also has its expressions in Pacific Northwest, and is really given endorsements from the Supreme Court through Hollywood through the presidency during this period. And so this is, in many ways, the context into which Henrietta Lacks is born-- one in which white and black are thought of in very distinct terms, and very distinct opportunities. And I think it accounts, in large part, for how she lives her life, and the kind of treatment she has, and probably how she ends her life.

Given that so much of her afterlife really is about science and the course of science, I think it's important also for us to speak of how science and race fit together. Because really, for most of

the 19th century up to about 1950, science and racism were very good partners. In fact, much scientific work on human variation and human diversity was directed at determining an order, or a ranking, to racial groups-- to what made groups distinct, and how and why it was that non-whites were not as smart, not as successful, not as capable as whites were.

And science allowed, or created, a language in which these differences could be talked about in a natural kind of way, and in which generalizations could be made-- not simply about observable features, but about character and culture, about what a black person was like, what Native American culture did or did not allow individual people to do. So race and culture, biology, and psychology were deeply entwined.

We should be very happy that scientific racism was ceded, but one of its central legacies is it really has provided us a common language, or a common way, to think about difference. It's how most of us, when we walk down the street, appraise people. We put them into categories. And often by putting them into categories, we then make other kinds of assumptions about what they're going to do, who they are, and what they're like. This is really the fundamental legacy of scientific racism.

Scientific racism is, I would say, elaborating or martialing an idea about human variation and about what the races are like. So in a way, it's collecting and mapping data so that it can make arguments that it already knows the conclusions to be. It already knows that whites are superior-- at the top of the evolutionary ladder, shall we say-- further from nature. And it begins to fill in the gaps for this story.

And so some of the ways it does this, and some of these illustrations demonstrate, is by looking at skulls-- the capacity of skulls, the shape of skulls, the angles of bones, and making particular kinds of conclusions. So to take just the one example, on the left under the comparison slide. You have a skull of a white man that's associated-- what's it linked up to here? It's a Greek statue of a Greek god. As if that's the typical white person, whereas the slide in the middle is an African skull, wherever that would be, since it's a large continent. But look at the image that's presented of the African, compared to the Greek god.

And then the next step over is skull of a primate, an ape. So we go from white Greek god to distorted simoleon African to a primate in the natural world. And these comparisons entail a great deal of measurement and observation. So here we have doctors in Germany measuring the width of a nose to determine if this individual is any Aryan, for example-- what the variation might be in Germany.

And on the right, we have skulls that are collected in Southwest Africa, which at the time was a colony of Germany, so that they could be studied for their morphology so they so could figure out racial type. Figuring out racial type allows for a classification of difference, which the first slide demonstrates. But also this one demonstrates, in which it's not just that you have different human types, but you have different kinds of animals, different mammals, different sea creatures, all of which can be linked to geographic regions.

And we have a very seamless kind of connection between natural area and what develops in that area. Science, also during this period-- latter half of the 19th, early 20th century-- is actively collecting human remains so that they can study those remains-- very often digging up graves, or collecting bodies from battlefields so that they can figure out the typology, so they can figure out, what's a native skull like? And if we figure out that skull, the next step is, can we figure out how smart indigenous people can be? How sophisticated their culture is or is not?

And this kind of collection, this obsession with difference, often led to exhibitions. We would find, commonly-- in just the decades before Henrietta Lacks is born, you would find human zoos, where you could actually go to a World's Fair and you could see people "living in their natural habitats." You could watch them cook and eat, as if they were more animal than human. And you could often see, or the presenters of these displays would often try to demonstrate to you, how societies evolved. These people are simpler than these people. And they culminate here at the fair with civilization.

This particular image I have here under exhibition is noteworthy for a couple of reasons. This is the early 19th century. And this is a woman named Sarah Barton. She was a hot and tot, you might know it better as a [INAUDIBLE] or a Bush person. And Europeans were fascinated with her physique. And she was displayed in Paris and London, and the educated elite classes paid good money to come out and see her, and to see her displayed naked. And they walked around, they touched her, they talked about her body. They talked about our differences-- something that, of course, would not happen to the average white person, and particularly not a fine, upstanding white woman from London or Paris in these days.

So one of the important features of scientific racism is how it opens up particular bodies to be seen-- what kinds of questions can be asked about bodies? And what kind of capacities are associated with bodies? So for example, Africans and African Americans are thought to have a higher threshold for pain, to have different diseases that they're susceptible to. All of these kinds of features will play into the treatment that Henrietta Lacks does or doesn't receive.

Now, what's important about scientific racism is really, not just that people thought races are different, or thought some people are more superior, but that scientific racism provides a natural language. It naturalizes those differences. It provides you both some humorous examples, and some perhaps disturbing examples of this process of naturalization.

The first is an image from an election before, really close to the Civil War, that articulates who the different parties are for. And in this case, the inversion is noteworthy. It says the Democratic platform is for whites. And you have this fine, upstanding white man, whereas the Republican platform is for the Negro, and you have this buffoonish, exaggerated figure. And we think about who's platform is supposed to be for what today. Things have flipped in a very interesting kind of fashion.

Or if we think about the associations that the next slide demonstrates. And we go back and we think about the comparisons I showed you previously, in which blackness is associated with

apes. This scientific language slips into popular culture. So that King Kong is a threat, this British figure that-- what's he threatening? What's he after? He's after white women. Or we look on the right side of this image, we see LeBron James being very aggressive, animalistic in this image. And he has a white model on his arm, not unlike the King Kong image on the left. So that even today these kind of naturalized differences and associations have really filtered into our everyday ways of thinking about race.

Science may have initially been devoted to observation, to comparison, to collection. Eventually, scientific racism encourages a whole series of experiments, in which-- in the United States, African Americans in particular-- are subjected to procedures because they're black, because their bodies are available and can be studied in ways that would not be deemed appropriate in other contexts. Particularly for white bodies. And the most graphic example of this is the Tuskegee experiment, which study, really, the life cycle of syphilis.

Once someone gets infected with syphilis, how does the disease run its course? We know what happens at the end of syphilis, which is people die. And we know, generally, what happens during syphilis, which is they get disfigured, they go insane. It's not a very pretty picture. But a group of scientists at the Tuskegee Institute received a grant in the early 1930s, initially to study how syphilis was transmitted, how it manifested itself in a particular population in the American South amongst black sharecroppers.

And they identified 600 sharecroppers in Mississippi and found that 400 of the group that they decided to sample had syphilis. They didn't tell the men they had syphilis. They didn't offer to treat the men. They didn't do anything other than bring them in for check ups, record the symptoms that they were manifesting, and send them on their way. Even after penicillin was determined to be an effective treatment for syphilis in 1947, they continued their observations, their recordings, until 1972, when a whistleblower came forward and said, hey, for the last 40 years, the federal government's been funding research that, in many ways, is inhumane.

So this might be one of the hallmarks, or one of the end points of scientific racism-- is that African Americans became subject to tests and procedures and life-threatening observations that they wouldn't have been subject to if they weren't black. We might say that this experiment is one of the key reasons that African Americans don't trust health care in the United States, that they don't want to go to the doctors, that they think things like AIDS are intentionally brought into the community. Because it's happened before. Why might it not be happening again today?

The other very scary end point of scientific racism is the decision that certain people were less fit than others. And this led in the early 20th century up till the end of the Second World War, in certain kinds of people-- criminals, mentally ill, people who had developed disabilities-- to be sterilized. The poor, in some cases. Because the thought was, they're bad people. They shouldn't have offspring, because it will create more bad people. In the context of Nazi Germany, scientific racism didn't just lead to sterilization, it actually lead to euthanasia-- the

intentional killing of certain populations. And what we call the Holocaust, or the final solution, because anti-Semitism-- scientific and racial anti-Semitism led the Jews to be taken.

Now, the good side of this story is that scientific racism retreats, and science plays a key role in changing contemporary understandings about race. We now know that race is not biological-- that race is, in fact, a social construction. We know that much of the work that was done in science about human variation is better thought of pseudo science. Now, this all raises an important question. So around the time Henrietta Lacks dies, science begins saying race is not a biological thing. And we've had the Civil Rights Act, the Voting Rights Act, a variety of features in the 1960s that were directed at equality, inclusion, and breaking down segregation and Jim Crow.

So we would think that if we looked out at the world today, that we would see a world of equal access to health care, equal life expectancy, and so on, and so forth. In fact, what we see are persistent inequalities that should raise-- or that I would raise to you-- as a departing set of questions, which is, how is it that 50 years after the Civil Rights movement, and more than 50 years after end of scientific racism, these inequalities occur? Why do African Americans have less access to health care? Why do they have lower quality health care?

Why are they less likely to receive the same kinds of tests-- life-saving tests that white Americans receive for cancer, heart disease, hypertension in the contemporary US? How do patterns of regional etiquette influence the interactions and the assumptions that doctors and patients bring to their interactions? Because it's clear when we look at Henrietta Lacks' life, that both her doctor and herself-- they guarded their behaviors and changed them because one was white and one was black.

African Americans have less trust towards health care. They have higher rates of chronic diseases. And they have lower life expectancies. In some cases, the life expectancies of African Americans are at the rate, or the level of, third world countries. And so we may want to say, scientific racism's gone, Jim Crow's gone, therefore we don't need to deal with it. But I think Henrietta Lacks provides us an opportunity to say, wait a second. Why isn't it gone in the field of health care? And why haven't we made the differences that we need to make?