

HIS101 (Histories of Violence)

**Racial Institutional Oppression in 19<sup>th</sup> Century America: Celia's Perspective**

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2022.03.31

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Research Question: *How does the Antebellum Judicial and Political Institution Manipulate Celia's Murder to Reinforce the Vilification and the Scare of Black Communities?*

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Slavery represents a dark chapter in human history, a chapter that revealed a great deal about how we function and what we are capable of. The United States is reminded by slavery of the grim realities of life in the founding era for the nation, and of the ideas that American society battled over to reach the current norm. The American vilification of Black communities initiated by the slave trade stemmed from the fear of eventual Black independence; of an end to the highly-lucrative slave regime. This essay will explore the vilification and alienation of slaves purposefully reproduced by the antebellum American political institution. Specifically, I will overview Celia's homicide charge described in Melton McLaurin's *Celia, A Slave* to outline three fundamental mechanisms through which the judicial and political establishments reproduced such status quo. The absence of women's legal autonomy, the hostility of the mass media toward slaves, and the judicial bias toward Whites are the three mechanisms I will cover in dedicated sections.

The first mechanism behind the scare of slave communities in antebellum America was the alienation of crimes on women; the absence of their legal autonomy depicted in *Celia, A Slave* displays the centralization of the 19<sup>th</sup> century American legal system around (White) men. This is a crucial factor that blinded antebellum American society, not only developing the image of the innocent slave master but creating a reputation of blame around slave victims of abuse. McLaurin recalls that, by definition, rape related to white women: “for no such crime as rape of a black woman existed at law”<sup>1</sup>. This not only downplayed slave victims’ experiences but created an aura of immunity around men responsible for offences similar to Newsom’s – not one legal case involving white owners’ rape of their slave was recorded in antebellum

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<sup>1</sup> Melton Alonza McLaurin, *Celia, A Slave* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), 93.

America<sup>2</sup>. The prospect of granting Black women legal autonomy and control over their sexuality frightened Southern White society, because it risked 'undercutting the power of the male master to a degree that would threaten the very survival of the institution'<sup>3</sup>.

Though White women possessed more hypothetical legal autonomy than Black women, the patriarchal dominance over them really becomes visible when Newsom's daughters refuse to assist Celia: the fear of repercussions from their father is enough to influence their perception of Celia as a "dark, sensual temptress"<sup>4</sup>. A hideous label considering her gross abuse. This episode reveals a system whereby White women reproduced the scare of slaves solely out of their powerlessness relative to men, men whose interest was to prolong the slave state. White women would also occasionally lash out at slave women for the impression of 'threats to the stability of the white family' that their husbands' sexual relations with slaves caused<sup>5</sup>. McLaurin observed that "the sexual politics of slavery presented an exact paradigm of the power relationships within the larger society"<sup>6</sup>; of the vast inequalities in authority. It is important to note that legal injustice in antebellum America did not occur via the absolute erosion of ethics, rather the purposive misallocation of those ethics away from groups of interest; women and slaves. This is evidenced e.g. through Harry Newsom's fear that rape would be attributed to his father and his insistence on "justice to the family"<sup>7</sup>; evidently, there was a degree of subservience to some pseudo-morality and there was a desire to paint a benign, lawful image of the slave master. The partiality of antebellum legal systems as they related to gender and race made benign images of slave masters easily achievable despite their horrid cruelties, whereas a benign connotation for any slave was virtually impossible.

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<sup>2</sup> McLaurin, *Celia, A Slave*, 96.

<sup>3</sup> McLaurin, *Celia, A Slave*, 117.

<sup>4</sup> McLaurin, *Celia, A Slave*, 28.

<sup>5</sup> McLaurin, *Celia, A Slave*, 99.

<sup>6</sup> McLaurin, *Celia, A Slave*, 95.

<sup>7</sup> McLaurin, *Celia, A Slave*, 52.

*Celia, A Slave* exposes the role that Southern mass media, the second mechanism, played in promoting the cycle of oppression through distributing narratives that discredited, vilified, and dehumanized slaves. Following Celia's incarceration, Missouri newspapers created vastly distorted descriptions of the murder: Newsom was characterized as a weak, old man who got remorselessly killed by a rogue slave in cold blood and without cause<sup>8</sup>. Gruesome details of Celia's removal of Newsom's body were given. Local newspapers amplified the significance of Newsom's murder to allude to a portrayed wider threat of slave betrayal – this was evidently a tool to further radicalize pro-slavery ideologies and create an absolutely negative image of the slave. The in-group benefits of externalizing categorical enemies is a lesson frequently provided by case studies in dictatorships and authoritarian regimes, examples of which include Nazi Germany and Stalinist Russia.

Not only does spreading hateful news bolster the support for radical movements, but it increases audiences for media outlets<sup>9</sup>, amplifying their determination to spread propaganda. In her review for John Hopkin's University, Elizabeth R. Varon outlines that antebellum mass media engaged in 'pervasive and corrosive stereotypes to galvanize dichotomies between good (White) and evil (Black)' extremes<sup>10</sup>. Varon further notes that although the misrepresentation of Blacks brought short-term political gain to the interests of conservatist politics, in the long term it hurt sectional relations, i.e. between Whites and Blacks<sup>11</sup>. *Celia, A Slave* also displays how Missouri newspapers provided platforms for advocates of slavery; James Shannon actively attacked his critics in the press and used it to spread his anti-abolitionist ideas<sup>12</sup>. Northern newspapers were by and large behind the provision of abolitionist philosophy, since Southern

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<sup>8</sup> McLaurin, *Celia, A Slave*, 44.

<sup>9</sup> Tom Stafford, "Psychology: Why Bad News Dominates the Headlines," BBC Future (British Broadcasting Corporation, July 28, 2014), <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20140728-why-is-all-the-news-bad>.

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth R Varon, "Reading Kansas: Media Bias and the Territorial Struggle over Slavery," *Reviews in American History* 38, no. 1 (March 2010): pp. 93-98, <https://doi.org/10.1353/rah.0.0174>, 93.

<sup>11</sup> Varon, "Reading Kansas: Media Bias and the Territorial Struggle over Slavery," 94.

<sup>12</sup> McLaurin, *Celia, A Slave*, 59.

sources of such ideas were mutilated and their writers often threatened or killed (such was the case of *Parkville Industrial Luminary*)<sup>13</sup>.

The antebellum justice system was the third mechanism inherently purposed to act in the interest of slavery. Political scientist Keir Nash outlined that “[Legal] cases are particularly useful tools with which [the public] can obtain leverage on problems of ideology, because judicial opinions are public documents designed to convince”<sup>14</sup>. Celia's trial displays numerous examples of how the court acted to prevent the recognition of the unjust abuse that she was victim of, instead prioritizing her condemnation. John Jameson is forced to obey “Victorian sexual mores” and abstain from asking Virginia Newsome about her father's sexual activity, preventing him from laying witness evidence for Celia's rape<sup>15</sup>. Later, Dr. James Martin's testimony proves to be a valuable asset for Celia's defence – in recognition of this, the “state” objects and Jameson is forced to withdraw the witness<sup>16</sup>. Similarly, Thomas Shoatman's testimony that Celia acted in self-defence was stricken from record, effectively omitting the primary motive behind Celia's action from the jury's consideration. The details of Celia's trial show the court's utter disregard for motive behind her actions; the court adopts a strictly consequentialist approach that fails to, at the very least, consider the context behind the slave's offence. Hall's rejection of the majority of Jameson's defence upheld existing interpretations of Missouri Law and used the method of vilifying Celia to contend for the final verdict of conviction<sup>17</sup>. Celia's incarceration, conviction, and, ultimately, execution were processes orchestrated by an American judicial institution laden with the interests of the White patriarchy that intended to use Celia's case as an addition to the popular rationale of slave inferiority. The bias against slaves can also be noticed in judicial conflicts between slaves' human rights and

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<sup>13</sup> McLaurin, *Celia, A Slave*, 57.

<sup>14</sup> Keir Nash, “Reason of Slavery: Understanding the Judicial Role in the Peculiar Institution,” *Vanderbilt Law Review* 32, no.1 (1979): 7.

<sup>15</sup> McLaurin, *Celia, A Slave*, 83.

<sup>16</sup> McLaurin, *Celia, A Slave*, 85.

<sup>17</sup> McLaurin, *Celia, A Slave*, 118.

masters' property rights – the judicial institution almost always favoured the masters, criminalizing oppressed slaves with rare reference to their rights<sup>18</sup>. The effects of pro-slavery bias of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Southern justice system have repercussions even today; states dependent on slavery in the 1860s are currently bedevilled with greater pro-White bias<sup>19</sup>, hinting at the default setbacks Black communities face today.

As normative as freedom is today, in the days of antebellum America the independence of non-White populations was “a spectre that haunted” the numerous conservatist circles<sup>20</sup>. *Celia, A Slave* speaks of the “unspeakable horrors of slave rebellion” exported to the U.S.A. from post-revolution Haiti. This fear of eventual slave independence was what gave rise to the vast scare of slaves permeating Southern gender norms, media stories, and legal institutions. During his lecture, Professor Meyerson reminds that even after the Reconstruction Era, the prospect of increasing Blacks' human capital terrified many that wished to repel the process of modernization<sup>21</sup>. This essay analyses the aspects of gender norms, media disinformation, and judicial bias as three mechanisms of the antebellum American establishment that kept slavery in motion. For those committed to ending slavery, or at least preventing its spread to western territories, the matter of how to oppose the political establishment was paramount. Thus the abolishment of slavery offers implications for many crucial political debates today; Celia's story shows that we should promote intersectional public political discourse, strive for impartiality in the administration of justice, and always keep in mind the interests and perspectives of those disadvantaged.

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<sup>18</sup> McLaurin, Celia, *A Slave*, 118.

<sup>19</sup> B. Keith Payne, Heidi A. Vuletich, and Jazmin L. Brown-Iannuzzi, “Historical Roots of Implicit Bias in Slavery,” *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 116, no. 24 (June 11, 2019): pp. 11693-11698, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1818816116>, 1.

<sup>20</sup> McLaurin, Celia, *A Slave*, 118.

<sup>21</sup> Mark Meyerson, “Civil War, Reconstruction and Reaction in the US,” *MyMedia* (University of Toronto, 2022), <https://play.library.utoronto.ca/watch/675ce69da2eab9b908ed5b5ce33f950f>.

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