Handout on Celia, A Slave

The Basics

- On 4/2 there will be a class-discussion of Celia, A Slave. You should have read the entire book by that date. You should come to class with your copy of the book and prepared to discuss the book. To ensure that we have a good discussion, there will be a short (10 point) quiz on 4/2. There is also an extra credit assignment, based on the discussion questions; it is worth 10 points and is due on 4/2.
- The class will be divided into groups. Each group will re-create an episode from Celia’s life or trial. The presentations are on 4/16 and are worth 50 points.
- On 4/23, a short writing assignment, based on Celia, A Slave and the class-presentations, is due. It is worth 25 points. (See below for the wording of the assignment.)

The Class Discussion on 4/2

At the beginning of class on 4/2 there will be a short quiz on Celia, A Slave. It is worth 10 points. The quiz is open-note and open-book, but you may not use any electronic devices.

In class on 4/2 we will discuss the following questions, and any other questions you have about the book.

1. Who are the main historical figures in the book? Choose three to discuss.
2. Compile a detailed chronology for events described in the book, including important events in Celia’s life as well as important events that took place outside of Calloway County.
3. Some historians have argued that an equality of powerlessness existed between male and female slaves. This phrase should not merely be taken to mean that men and women suffered equally under slavery, but rather that slavery reduced black men and women to a relative equality that had no comparison in the free population. Compare, for instance, relationships between enslaved men and women in the antebellum South, on the one hand, and free white men and women in the antebellum South, on the other hand. Based on your reading of Celia, A Slave, do you think that an equality of powerlessness existed among slaves?
4. Slave owners sought to create a culture of fear in order to control their slaves. What evidence of a culture of fear do you see in Celia, A Slave?
5. One concept that McLaurin discusses in his book is the “sexual politics of slavery” based on the sexual exploitation of black female slaves by white men. (See p. 113 of Celia, A Slave.) Drawing on evidence from multiple parts of the book, explain what is meant by the term “sexual politics of slavery” and illustrate your explanation with reference to events in Celia’s life.
6. What was the attitude of white women, like Virginia Wanyescot, towards slavery? What did free white women and enslaved black women in the antebellum South have in common? What prevented them from banding together?
7. Why does McLaurin spend so much time discussing events outside of Calloway County? (Events in Kansas, for example.) What impact did these events have on Celia’s fate?
8. McLaurin compares Celia’s case with the much more famous *Dred Scott* case. What are the fundamental differences between the two cases? And if, as McLaurin argues, Celia’s case raised more fundamental questions about the institution of slavery itself, why do you think the *Dred Scott* case, but not Celia’s case, has made its way into the pages of the standard American history textbooks?

**Extra Credit Assignment (10 points; due 4/2):** Answer one of the above discussion questions. Your answer should be at least 1.5 pages typed and 1.5 spaced (or 3 pages hand-written, front and back, and double-spaced).

**The Group Presentations**
The class will be divided into 3–4 groups. Each group will present a re-creation of a scene in Celia’s life based on an interpretation of the sources that McLaurin presents in his book. Here are your choices:

- **The murder of Robert Newsom.** Present re-creations of some of the following:
  - conversation between Celia and Newsom leading up to her picking up the stick
  - the murder itself
  - how Celia felt about what she had done
  - whether Celia disposed of the body herself or had help
  - whether Celia’s kids woke up and, if so, what she might have said to them
  - what, if any, conversations Celia had with George about the murder

- **The interrogations of Celia and other witnesses by William Powell and/or Jefferson Jones or scenes from the trial itself.** (Choose one or the other.) You may choose to recreate the interrogation or questioning of one person (if presented in detail) or more than one person. Scenes and topics to consider are:
  - Powell and/or Jones’ interrogation of Celia, including how she presented herself, any clues to her personal views on justice and slavery; how the attitudes and questions of Powell and/or Jones might have reflected their own attitudes towards slavery in general and Celia and Robert Newsom in particular
  - Powell’s questioning of other figures, like George, Virginia Wanyescot and young Coffee Waynescot
  - how the questioning of witnesses at the trial by prosecutor Prewitt and defense attorney Jameson were meant to persuade the jury of one interpretation of events over another; you may also think about how Judge Hall tried to accomplish his own goals for the trial during the questioning of witnesses
  - what the members of the jury might have said during their closed-door deliberations

- **What might have been said during interviews between Celia and her lawyers.** Consider some of the following:
  - what Celia told her lawyers about what happened the night Newsom was murdered
  - what Celia hoped the for the outcome of the trial
  - what Celia thought about the wider issues the trial raised
  - how, as a result of conversation with Celia, Celia’s lawyers came up with the defense that they used during the trial
Your re-creation of events from Celia’s life should be supported by the sources, as McLaurin outlines them, or reasonable interpretations of the sources. In other words, do not present what you want to have happened, present what you think happened, based on an evaluation of the facts of the case, the people involved, and the time and place in which Celia lived. Your group should be prepared to defend your interpretation of events both to your classmates and to me. Here are some examples of what I mean:

- We do not the extent to which George was involved in Newsom’s murder or the attempt to cover up Newsom’s murder so, based on the information McLaurin provides, you can decide for yourselves the extent to which you think George was likely to have been involved.
- If re-creating a scene in which Celia discusses her own views on women’s rights, do not have her argue that all women should have the right to vote. (1) We have no indication of what Celia’s views on voting might have been. (2) At the time Celia lived suffrage for white women was a radical and new idea; the chances that an enslaved black woman would have devoted much thought or energy to the subject amidst caring for her master’s family and her own family, is small.

Presentations should be 5–10 minutes long. Practice your presentation. Several times. Your re-creation of events should be smooth, and your interpretations should be clear; you will only be able to do this if you practice your presentation as a group. Very short presentations and very long, rambling presentations will not earn high grades.

All group-members must contribute to putting together your re-creation and all group-members must participate in the re-creation itself. (If you are absent on 4/16 you will receive zero points for the presentation.)

After the presentation I may ask you some questions about your presentation and I will invite the rest of the class to ask questions about your presentation. I expect all group-members to be able to address those questions.

Ideally, all group members will receive the same grade on the presentation. I do, however, realize that sometimes not everyone does their fair share when working in a group. If that becomes the case with your group please talk to me as soon as the problem becomes apparent.

The Short Writing Assignment (25 points; due 4/23): McLaurin notes that one witness to Celia’s execution stated “with unintended irony, that … “Thus closed one of the most horrible tragedies ever enacted in our country”” (Celia, A Slave, p. 135.) The irony, for McLaurin, is that Celia’s story was tragic to whites in Missouri in 1855 for very different reasons than it is tragic for us, today. What are those different reasons?

Draw on both McLaurin’s book and your classmates’ presentations in your answer. Your answer should be at least 2 full pages, typed and 1.5 spaced (or 4 full pages handwritten, front and back, and double-spaced).