

All Our Trials:
Prisons, Policing,
and the Feminist
Fight Against
Violence



by Emily L. Thuma
A zine adaptation
Cover art by Corey Arthur

Today, "justice" for survivors of rape, domestic violence, and sexual abuse is often framed in carceral terms. Women's freedom from patriarchal control and sexual violence is most commonly measured through the number of people apprehended by police, aggressively prosecuted by the state, sentenced harshly by judges, and placed in cages. When in 2018 Judge Rosemarie Aquilina sentenced Larry Nassar the USA Gymnastics physician convicted of sexually assaulting 265 young women and girls, she remarked that she "signed his death warrant" by sentencing him to up to 175 years in prison. Her statement and sentencing decision were widely heralded as a win for the survivors and a mark of progress for women -- as evidence that the state finally recognized and was meaningfully responding to women's suffering from systemic sexual violence. One journalist called it "transformative justice," stating that Aquilina had "offer[ed] renewed faith and hope to the hundreds of thousands of people sexually assaulted each year."

But others see the Nassar sentencing as a false flag, arguing that subjecting Nassar to life in prison couldn't be further from the transformative justice that so many have claimed it represents. As Mariame Kaba and Kelly Hayes write, "a truly transformative justice would mean that a single survivor coming forward to tell their tale of harm years ago would actually have been believed (the first time)."

They also note that the US criminal punishment system, "grounded in genocide and slavery" can never offer justice because these systems are structured on the anti-Black and anti-Indigenous premise that for "some people [should be] treated as less than human," an ideology that intensifies rather than reduces harm.

Further, as Dean Spade has repeatedly argued, prisons only worsen the power imbalances, trauma, and deprivation that lead to sexual violence, such that sentencing people to prison effectively green-lights "judicial rape." If "the prison is the rapist," as Spade puts it, how does caging Nasser and bolstering the legitimacy of criminal punishment institutions aid the broader project of eliminating sexual harm?

Spade, Kaba, and Hayes are expressing a politics of **anti-carceral feminism**. Anti-carceral feminism refers to a feminist politics that understands sexual harm and violence against women as the result not only of behaviors or actions made by men but as the product of unequal social structures and of intentional state action (or inaction). Taking an intersectional approach to antiviolence work that recognizes that racial, gender, economic, and sexual inequality all shape women's experiences with and recourse for sexual violence, anti-carceral feminists view the state itself, and especially law

enforcement, as complicit in women's oppression and domination. They reject mainstream calls for women to turn to police and prisons as "protection" when they are being harmed or abused, citing the numerous ways that the carceral state escalates rather than reduces sexist violence, especially for women of color, immigrant women, and trans women and gender non-conforming people.

Anti-carceral feminism may seem novel. But it is far from a new politics. This zine will take the reader through a chapter of historian Emily Thuma's *All Our Trials: Prisons, Policing, and the Feminist Fight Against Violence*, which tells this often-overlooked history of anti-carceral feminist organizing, an activism "by, for, and about incarcerated domestic violence survivors, criminalized rape resisters, and dissident women prisoners in the 1970s and early 1980s." Primarily composed of radical Black, brown and Indigenous women and antiracist white women, this pathbreaking anti-violence feminism rejected the popular "tough-on-crime" common sense of the time—common even among some otherwise left-leaning white feminists—that the answer to violence against women was more policing and prisons.

One of the main tactics for anti-carceral feminists during this era was to organize prisoner defense campaigns for Black, brown, and Indigenous women who committed violence as self-defense against male sexual violence. In

their fight to free these women, multiracial coalitions of anti-carceral feminists helped educate the wider feminist movement and public broadly about how the criminal punishment system was not, in fact, a protector of racialized women, but a core generator of violence against them. They urged feminists involved in antirape and antiviolence campaigns to resist partnering with law enforcement in their work, citing the carceral state's criminalization of women of color as proof. Although they were not successful in preventing mainstream (white) feminism's alliance with law enforcement, we can learn much from the history of their anti-carceral organizing. Especially as the Supreme Court has explicitly sanctioned the state's power to socially control women and pregnant people's bodies, and as the number of women behind bars continues to skyrocket, building upon the legacy of these bold anti-carceral feminists is more urgent than ever.



Chapter 1: Lessons in Self-Defense: From "Free Joan Little" to "Free Them All"

On Saturday morning, November 16, 1974, a crowd of people assembled outside the gates of the North Carolina Correctional Center for Women (NCCCW) in southeast Raleigh. Activists from throughout North Carolina's Triangle area and beyond joined the demonstration that morning to support Joan (pronounced Jo-Ann and

sometimes spelled JoAnne and Joann) Little and to denounce the deplorable conditions at the prison. The twenty-year-old Black woman had recently been charged with the murder of a white jail guard. At NCCCW, the incarcerated women's grievances included involuntary and unpaid labor, overcrowding, an abysmal health care system, scant educational and vocational training opportunities, and a library nearly empty of books. Activists inside and outside also condemned the institutional violence of routine vaginal and rectal searches. The protestors, mostly Black and white women, held handmade signs that read "Free Joan Little!" and "Abolish Women's Prisons!"

Little had begun serving a seven-to-ten-year sentence for burglary and larceny in the Beaufort County jail that summer. In the early morning of August 27, sixty-year-old Clarence Alligood was found dead in Little's cell. Little would later testify in court that Alligood had held an icepick to her head as he forced her into oral sex. She managed to gain control of the tool he was wielding as a weapon and stabbed him with it multiple times. A grand jury swiftly handed down an indictment for murder in the first degree, which could carry the death penalty.

Joan Little's murder trial was one of several cause célèbres in the 1970s that involved a Black, Brown, or Indigenous woman who killed her or her child's sexual assailant. The cases

of Inez García, Dessie Woods, and Yvonne Wanrow inspired significant numbers of activists to work together to raise funds for legal costs and to engage in direct action and education to raise public consciousness about women's right to resist sexual violence. The Wanrow and García decisions set legal precedents, allowing the courts to consider the history of a battering relationship in cases where women killed abusive partners. All four defense campaigns brought diverse social-movement actors, ideologies, and agendas into contact, exchange, and at times contention with one other.

More than a legal strategy, "self-defense" was a shared and galvanizing rhetoric that cut across the radical social movements of the era. This chapter demonstrates the catalytic role that defense organizing played in the emergence of **an expressly anti-carceral feminist agenda** in the 1970s. The intellectual and organizing work of activists who connected these coalition campaigns produced an understanding of the four cases as a collective symbol of the intersecting race, gender, class, and colonial politics of using self-defensive violence. Activists also saw these cases as a cautionary tale for feminist antirape activists about the dangers and costs of aligning with the state.

First, I begin with the Free Joan Little campaign, which played a critical role in

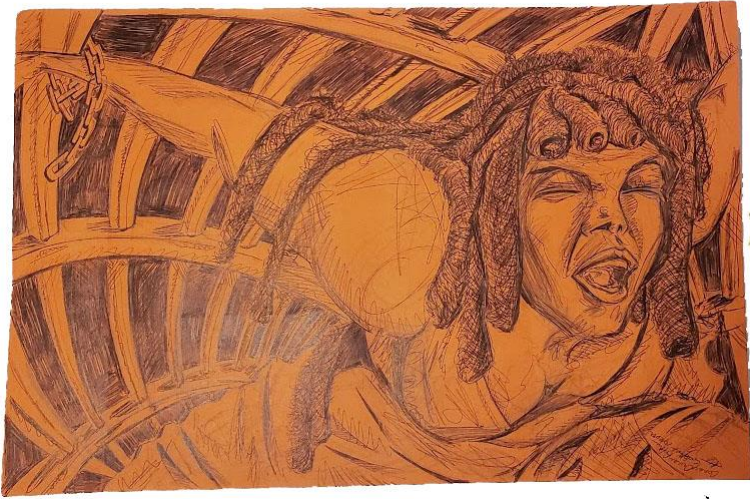
generating political momentum for the other three mobilizations.

Second, I turn to the other three defense campaigns, focusing on the ways they overlapped in time, context, and participants, as well as in the new perspectives they generated.

Finally, I explore how these four cases figured in debates about whether, in what ways, or to what ends feminist antiviolence activists should accept criminal justice funding and prioritize criminal legal reform.

Radical women of color and antiracist white women in multiple locales engaged with these cases and developed and circulated arguments against a criminal justice-centered approach. In the process, they produced an intersectional account of the sources of violence in women's lives as well as a feminist politics of prison abolitionism.





Art by Corey Arthur

The Crossroads of the Free Joan Little Movement

Upon Joan Little's indictment for murder, her newly assembled legal team quickly realized that an activist groundswell would be necessary to save her from a death sentence. Her attorneys anticipated that the prosecution would construct a narrative of "a sexually deviant delinquent who murdered Alligood in cold blood." They feared Little's biography provided ample fodder for the state's ploy. Because she had not earned a high school diploma or GED, she had great difficulty finding steady and decently paying work. By nineteen, she had a reputation as a "bad girl" and had been arrested several times for shoplifting, though none of the charges stuck due to lack of evidence. The young woman's

nonconforming behavior not only earned the condemnation of local whites but also violated the standards of Black middle-class respectability.

Little's case must also be situated within the context of unfinished struggles for racial and economic justice in North Carolina. By 1980, the state incarcerated more people per capita than any other in the country. Like Little, the majority of prisoners were Black, indigent, and had not graduated high school. Black women also disproportionately comprised two-thirds of the women's prison population.

In September 1974, Little's legal team joined with several local and seasoned activists to establish the Joan Little Defense Fund, anchoring what soon became a national campaign. Defense Fund members argued that the case raised and connected several critical issues, including:

- "The right of a woman to defend herself against sexual attack;
- Prison conditions for women, including misuse of prison guard authority;
- Discriminatory use of the death penalty against poor and Black people;
- The selection process which fails to produce juries of true peers; and
- The right of a poor person to adequate defense."

Soon, defense committees sprouted up in Atlanta, Boston, New York City, Oakland, Pittsburgh, and Washington, DC. They were encouraged to "follow their own initiative" while keeping Durham headquarters apprised so that their strategies could be shared through the growing communication network. The decidedly decentralized character of the mobilization meant that these campaigners created and circulated different narratives of Joan Little as they wrote fund-raising appeals, convened teach-ins, and staged rallies: she was a target of a racist, classist, and draconian southern criminal justice system, a victim of male violence, a militant rape resister, a political prisoner. To some activists, she was indivisibly all of these things.

The defense movement drew upon and extended a long history of Black women's antirape activism, and veteran organizers from previous struggles participated directly in the Little campaign. For example, the renowned civil rights organizer Rosa Parks helped to found a Joan Little Defense Committee in her new home city of Detroit.

To read more on about the rich history of antirape activism by Black women, see, among others:

- Danielle McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance – A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Doubleday, 2010)
- Dayo Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War* (New York: NYU Press, 2011)
- Jeanne Theoharis, *The Rebellious Life of Mrs. Rosa Parks* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014)

As part of Little's defense team's investigation, her lawyers interviewed dozens of women, the vast majority of whom were African American, who had previously been held in the women's section of the Beaufort County Jail. Their stories cohered into a collective account of chronic verbal and physical sexual abuse. An Atlanta attorney emphasized,

there were "a thousand Joan Littles all over the South."

Over the course of a yearlong mobilization, many local defense committees sponsored events that linked Little's case to the cases of other activists imprisoned for their political organizing and those facing reprisals for participating in prison strikes. The defense

campaign refigured the political prisoner as a Black woman with no previous history of participation in the era's social justice struggles who engaged in armed resistance against state-sponsored sexual assault. Although not all leftists understood Little as a political prisoner, she was, undisputedly, a *politicized* prisoner. While Little was out on bail in the months leading up to her trial, she told audiences about the squalid medical, hygiene, and housing conditions at the North Carolina Correctional Center for Women. The NCCCW even became a center of gravity for the campaign in its own right.

Just weeks before the trial, roughly half of the more than 400 women imprisoned at NCCCW participated in a spontaneous sit-in. They had filed numerous grievances about paltry health facilities, unsafe working conditions, and lack of educational and occupational training programs. They also alleged that many women had been subjected to unnecessary and compulsory pelvic examinations and complained that the infirmary staff frequently made racist comments. Over the next several days, the protest evolved into a full-fledged strike, forcing the laundry to close. State troopers guarded the prison's main gate, where reporters, people from the surrounding predominantly Black working-class neighborhood, and activists from throughout the Triangle area gathered each day.

The imprisoned activists sought to capitalize on the media attention Little's trial brought. Journalists helped to disseminate images of imprisoned women "just like Joan" objecting to their conditions of confinement through individual and collective acts of resistance. Prisoners who spoke to reporters critique the structural violence of the institution from exploitative working conditions to medical neglect, as well as expressing their concern about welfare and return of those transferred off site or put in solitary confinement as a result of the June uprising.

Framing the Joan Little case as paramount to a women's rights agenda was a key rhetorical strategy on the part of the Defense Fund, which generally encouraged a capacious, multiracial and cross-class understanding of the Little case as "symbolic of the struggle of all women." While clearly a strategy of expediency in order to save her life, such expressions of what sociologist Beth Richie has called the "everywoman analysis" also drew criticism for obscuring the particular social, political, and historical conditions of her case. The most widely circulated refutation - which reached *Ms.* magazine's 3 million readers - was Angela Davis's essay: **"JoAnne Little: The Dialectics of Rape"** (June 1975).

"JoAnne Little: The Dialectics of Rape"

by Angela Davis

No one—not even the men in the mob—had bothered to accuse Cordella Stevenson of committing a crime. She was black and that was reason enough. She was black and a woman, trapped in a society pervaded with myths of white superiority and male supremacy. She could be raped and murdered with absolute impunity. The white mob simply claimed that, a few months earlier, Cordella Stevenson's son had burned down a white man's barn.

It was 60 years ago when this black woman was raped and strung up on a tree. There are many who believe that incidents such as these belong to an era of racist terror now forever buried under the historical progress of the intervening years. But history itself allows only the naive to honestly claim these last 60 years as a time of unequivocal progress—especially when the elimination of racism and male supremacy is used as the yardstick.

Twenty-year-old Joan Little, one of the most recent victims in this racist and sexist tradition, is the cultural grandchild of Cordella Stevenson. She says that she resisted when she was sexually assaulted, but as a result she is currently being tried on charges of first-degree murder. In the event of a conviction, she will automatically get a death sentence and will be placed on North

Carolina's death row-the result of a "legal" process, but still too close to the lynch law of the past.

The story begins last August 27, when a guard at the jail in Beaufort County, North Carolina, was found dead in the cell of a missing prisoner. He had been stabbed eleven times with an ice pick, the same ice pick that he had kept in his own desk drawer. The jailer, Clarence Alligood, was white. The missing prisoner was black, and the only woman in the entire jail. Because of a conviction on charges of breaking and entering, larceny, and receiving stolen property, Joan Little was serving a sentence of seven to ten years and had already been kept in the Beaufort County jail for three months at the time of her disappearance.

When the autopsy report was released, it contained this evidence of recent sexual activity on the part of Alligood: "His shoes were in the corridor, his socks on his feet. He was otherwise naked from the waist down. . . . The left arm was under the body and clutching his pants. . . . His right hand contained an icepick. There was blood on the sheet, cell floor, corridor. . . . Beneath his buttocks was a decorated, partially torn woman's kerchief. On the floor was a night gown and on the cell door was a brassiere and night jacket. . . . Extending from his penis to his thigh skin was a stream of what

appeared to be seminal fluid. . . . The urethral fluid was loaded with spermatozoa."

After a week of evading police—who conducted their search with riot weapons and helicopters—Joan Little turned herself in, stating nothing publicly about the case except that she did what she had to do in self-defense. At her own insistence, Jerry Paul, the lawyer she contacted, received assurances that she would be incarcerated in the women's prison in Raleigh—not in the jail where the incident took place, and where she feared that she would be subjected to further sexual assault and perhaps even that her life would be in danger. Shortly thereafter, Joan Little was charged with murder in the first degree.

The circumstances surrounding this case deserve careful attention, for they raise fundamental questions about the bringing of murder charges against her. Moreover, they expose conditions and situations many women prisoners must confront, especially in the small-town jails of this country.

1. Joan Little was being detained in a jail in which she was the only woman—among prisoners and guards alike.
2. Like any other prisoner, Sister Joan was being held under lock and key. Only her jailer, Clarence Alligood, had access to the key to her cell that night. Therefore, how could he have been present there against his

will? A part of an escape attempt on the part of Joan Little, as the authorities then charged?

3. Alligood was apparently killed by stab wounds inflicted by the same ice pick which he was known to keep in his desk. What was a jail guard doing with an ice pick in the first place? And for what legitimate purpose could he have taken it into a prisoner's cell?

4. Alligood was discovered naked from the waist down. According to Karen Galloway and Jerry Paul, Joan Little's attorneys, the authorities maintained for a full three weeks that Alligood's pants were nowhere to be found. Were they afraid that the public would discover that, although he had been stabbed in the legs, there were no such holes in his pants? Were they afraid people would therefore realize that Alligood had removed his pants before the struggle began? In any case, how could such crucial evidence be allowed to disappear?

In fact, the reality of Joan Little's life as a prisoner, even before the rape, may have been one of sexual exploitation; a fate she consistently resisted. Jerry Paul has said, "One possibility is that she was being kept in Beaufort County Jail for openly sexual purposes."

She should have been moved to the women's prison in Raleigh shortly after her original conviction, but she was never transferred.

According to Paul, a TV camera was focused on her cell at all times, leaving her no privacy whatever even when she changed clothes or took a shower. When she used her sheets to block the view, they were taken from her. Joan Little's lawyers have said that on one occasion a highway patrolman visiting the jail on business unrelated to Joan, came into her cell and urinated on the floor.

Essential to a clear perspective on the Joan Little case is an analysis of what might have happened if the situation had been reversed. What if Alligood had overpowered her? What if he had stabbed her with the ice pick-as he may have intended to do if she could not otherwise be raped? What if the sexually violated body of Joan Little had been discovered in that cell on the night of August 27?

There can be little speculation about the turn events would have taken had Joan Little been killed by Alligood. A verdict of "justifiable homicide" would have probably closed the books on such a case. But she had the courage to fend off her assailant. The price of her resistance was a new threat of death, this time issuing from the government of North Carolina. And so she is being tried-by the same state whose Supreme Court decided, in the 19th century, that no white man could be convicted of fornication with a slave woman.

Joan Little stands accused by a court system which, proportionate to its population, has sentenced more political activists to prison than any other state in the country. The number of state prison units in North Carolina is staggering-more than five times greater than in California, the most populous state in the country. In fact, North Carolina, along with Georgia, can claim more prisoners per capita than any other state-and they include, of course, an enormously disproportionate number of black men and women.

As this article is being written, there are 71 prisoners on death row in North Carolina, making that state Number One in the nation in condemning people to legal death. In the event of a conviction, the state's present sentencing policy could make Sister Joan Little the third woman in the country to be sentenced to death since the Supreme Court ruled in 1972 that the death penalty imposed at the discretion of judges and juries was cruel and unusual punishment. North Carolina subsequently mandated that a conviction on a first-degree murder charge automatically carried the death penalty. This procedure was appealed to the Supreme Court in late April. The other two women presently on death row are also in North Carolina-a black and a Native American.

Joan Little's attorneys relate numerous possibilities of judicial bias against her. In

Beaufort County, for instance, where families are generations old, virtually everyone knows everyone else. Living in the area are numerous Alligoods. One of these Alligoods sat on the Grand Jury which returned the indictment against Joan Little.

Without exception, every pretrial motion filed, as of this writing, has been flatly denied. Despite inflammatory publicity about Joan Little-including unfounded and malicious charges that she was a prostitute-and in spite of the unconcealed public sympathy for Alligood, the courts have refused to grant a change of venue for the trial.

Although Joan Little is indigent, her motion to have the court assume the costs of expert witnesses has been denied. It was denied even though the court does not have to pay her attorneys' fees, since the lawyers are donating their services.

Efforts to gain access to the evidence, in the form of discovery motions, have also been thwarted. The sheriff at first refused to release a list of female prisoners previously incarcerated in the jail, leading to a belief that the authorities feared the exposure of other sexual assaults by Alligood and his colleagues. Later, after the State Bureau of Investigation had questioned 65 former prisoners, their names were released to Joan

Little's lawyers but even this SBI report stated that some of these inmates claimed Alligood and other jailers made sexual advances toward them.

After the difficulty in locating Alligood's pants, the defense attempted to have all the evidence assembled and placed in protective custody. This was denied.

Although Sister Joan seemed clearly eligible to be released on bail, District Attorney William Griffin employed every trick of his trade to prevent her release. When the defense attorneys attempted to post bail, for instance, Griffin, relying on a technicality, ordered the clerk not to accept the bond. Finally, as a result of a nationwide outcry, she was released in February on bail of \$115,000: an amount that is itself clearly exorbitant.

Over the last few years, widespread concern about the increasing incidence of sexual assaults on women has crystallized into a militant campaign against rape. In the Joan Little case, as well as in all other instances of sexual assault, it is essential to place the specific incident in its sociohistorical context. For rape is not one-dimensional and homogeneous-but one feature that does remain constant is the overt and flagrant treatment of women, through rape, as property. Particular rape cases will then express

different modes in which women are handled as property.

Thus when a white man rapes a black woman, the underlying meaning of this crime remains inaccessible if one is blind to the historical dimensions of the act. One must consider, for example, that a little more than a hundred years ago, there were few black women who did not have to endure humiliating and violent sexual attacks as an integral feature of their daily lives. Rape was the rule; immunity from rape the exception. On the one hand the slave master made use of his tyrannical possession of slave women as chattel in order to violate their bodies with impunity. On the other hand, rape itself was an essential weapon utilized by the white master to reinforce the authority of his ownership of black women.

Although the immediate victim of rape was the black woman-and it was she who endured its pain and anguish rape served not only to further her oppression, but also as a means of terrorizing the entire black community. It placed brutal emphasis on the fact that black slaves were indeed the property of the white master.

In conjunction with the sexual exploitation of black women, the stereotypical image of the black woman branded her as a creature motivated by base, animal-like sexual instincts. It was therefore no sin to rape

her. This bestial notion of the black woman, incidentally, played and continues to play a significant role in justifying the overexploitation of her labor. For such a woman would hardly be distinguishable from a beast of burden. Again, she is openly defined as property. If rape was, in effect, institutionalized during slavery, essentially the same institutionalized form of rape is present today in such vestiges of slavery as domestic work. How many black women working in the homes of white people have not had to confront the "man of the house" as an actual or potential rapist?

The rape of the black woman and its ideological justification are integrally linked to the portrayal of the black man as a bestial rapist of white women-and, of course, the castration and lynching of black men on the basis of such accusations. Struggle against the sexual abuse of black women has demanded at the same time struggle against the cruel manipulation of sexual accusations against black men. Black women, therefore, have played a vanguard role, not only in the fight against rape, but also in the movement to end lynching.

For black women, rape perpetrated by white men, like the social stereotype of black men as rapists, must be classed among the brutal paraphernalia of racism.

Whenever a campaign is erected around a black woman who has been raped by a white man, therefore, the content of the campaign must be explicitly antiracist. And, as incorrect as it would be to fail to attack racism, it would be equally incorrect to make light of the antisexist content of the movement. Racism and male supremacy have to be projected in their dialectical unity. In the case of the raped black woman, they are mutually reinforcing.

Joan Little's assailant had probably been exposed to all the racist myths about black women, and was aware of the lack of redress available to victims of white rapists. In the aftermath of the incident, in fact, vicious accusations were hurled at Joan Little: she was called a prostitute and it was claimed that she engaged in sexual activities with jailers.

Of course, the conviction rate for rape is the lowest of all violent crimes -regardless of the victim's ethnic group. Only in those instances where the accused rapist is black and the alleged victim is white can a long prison term or death penalty be anticipated. From 1930 to 1967, 455 men were executed as a result of rape convictions: 405 of them were black, 48 of them were white, and two were of other ethnic groups. This means that almost 90 percent of all rape executions during this period involved black men.

Courts have established the pattern of either acquitting or not trying the majority of white men who are charged with rape. In New York, for instance, in 1967, 30 percent of all felony indictments ended in convictions, but in only 13 percent of all rape indictments were there convictions. There must be a reason behind this social and judicial encouragement given to rape. This reason, in turn, must be related to the social and political function of male supremacy in general.

The oppression of women is a vital and integral component of a larger network of oppression which claims as its foremost victims black people, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Asians, Indians, and all poor and working-class people. Just as class exploitation, racism, and imperialist subjugation of peoples abroad serve to nourish this larger system and keep it functioning, so male supremacy is likewise essential to its smooth operation. The larger system, of course, is monopoly capitalism and its overall driving motive is profit.

It is in the interests of the ruling class to cultivate the archaic patriarchal domination of women-based on male ownership of females as property-that flourished during the feudal era. As long as women are oppressed, enormous benefits accrue to the ruling class. Female labor can be even more flagrantly exploited than male labor. (White women's median wages

are even lower than black men's and, of course, women of color receive the lowest wages of all workers.)

The social definition of women as housewives provides, as Alva Buxenbaum states, the most effective "rationale for failing to make housework and child care a social responsibility." A list of examples could go on and on. The social incentive given to rape is woven into the logic of the institutions of this society. It is an extremely efficient means of keeping women in a state of fear of rape or of the possibility of it. It is, as Susan Griffin wrote, "a form of mass terrorism." This, in turn, buttresses the general sense of powerlessness and passivity socially inflicted upon women, thus rendering them more easily exploitable. Yet, just as working class and poor white people who exhibit racist attitudes toward people of color are unconscious agents of a higher power, so rapists (though they may be individually unaware of this) are performing deeds that give sustenance, not to them, but to the existing system.

Joan Little may not only have been the victim of a rape attempt by a white racist jailer; she has truly been raped and wronged many times over by the exploitative and discriminatory institutions of this society. All people who see themselves as members of the existing community of struggle for

justice, equality, and progress have a responsibility to fulfill toward Joan Little. Those of us - women and men - who are black or people of color must understand the connection between racism and sexism that is so strikingly manifested in her case. Those of us who are white and women must grasp the issue of male supremacy in relationship to the racism and class bias which complicate and exacerbate it.

Let us be sure that the leitmotif running through every aspect of the campaign is unity. Our ability to achieve unity may mean the difference between life and death for Sister Joan. Let us then forge among ourselves and our movements an indivisible strength and with it, let us halt and then crush the conspiracy against Joan Little's life.

The Defense Campaigns Coalesce

On the other side of the country, a month after Joan Little fled from the Beaufort County jail after killing Clarence Alligood in self-defense, a California jury found a 31-year-old Latinx woman guilty of murdering her rapist. **Inez García** was beaten and raped outside her home in Soledad by Miguel Jimenez and Luis Castillo. Twenty minutes after they threatened to kill her if she told anyone, she took a rifle and found them beating her roommate. When Jimenez threw a knife at her, she shot and killed him. . . The judge

instructed the jury to disregard the question of her rape, ruling out self-defense. She was sentenced to serve five years to life at the California Institution for Women.

The Free Inez campaign was anchored in the San Francisco Bay Area. Campaigners increasingly drew links between García and Joan Little, making a platform to address gendered imprisonment in California more broadly. In Washington, D.C., Black and white women formed the D.C. Coalition for Joan Little and Inez García, which raised funds, collected petitions, and sponsored teach-ins that placed the two women's stories in dialogue. "Inez will be free because Joan is free" became a popular refrain after Little was acquitted in August 1975.

Immediately following Little's trial in July 1975, the State of Georgia charged **Dessie Woods**, a 39-year-old Black, working class, Muslim woman with first-degree murder and armed robbery. Woods and a friend were traveling to visit her friend's brother in prison who needed medical care. They were hitchhiking in Atlanta when a white insurance salesman impersonating a detective gave them a ride and tried to sexually assault them at gunpoint. Woods shot him with his gun and the women took money from his wallet to get back to Atlanta. Woods was found guilty of manslaughter and robbery, and sentenced to 22 years.

For six years, until her release in 1981, the National Committee to Defend Dessie Woods (NCDDW) coordinated local, regional, and national fundraising, educational, and direct action efforts. The group was formed and led by those affiliated with the African People's Socialist Party, a revolutionary Black nationalist organization that advocated a Black Power politics of community self-defense and Pan-African solidarity. The NCDDW used a framework of *colonial violence* against Black women and emphasized racial capitalism as the primary contradiction. Woods also stressed the specificity of gendered anti-Black racism in her case: "It's not just that a woman defended herself against a man, it's that a Black woman defended herself against a white man. This is a racial issue. By convicting me, the U.S. government said that a Black woman does not have the right to self defense."

The unwavering revolutionary Black nationalism of Woods' committee resonated with **Yvonne Wanrow**, who claimed self-defense against white settler-colonial patriarchy. Although Wanrow was arrested before any of the other three women, her legal appeals extended through 1979 and her case attracted growing notoriety through its connection to the others. Wanrow, a member of the Sinixt/Arrow Lakes Nation of the Colville Federated Tribes, fatally shot a white man who broke into her friend's home. In crutches and in a leg cast at the time of the

break-in, Wanrow insisted that she was protecting the children in the house when she fired her registered gun at the intruder and his friend. She was convicted of first-degree assault and second-degree murder by an all-white jury and sentenced to 25 years.

Over the next several years a growing number of Native American, feminist, and civil rights activists joined the effort to defend Wanrow. Out on bond throughout the six-year appeals process, she headed her own defense campaign, traveling around the country to meet with activists and participating in solidarity events for García and Woods, as well as other lesser-known Black and Indigenous criminalized survivors. Wanrow and her supporters achieved a victory in 1977 when the Washington State Supreme Court affirmed her right to claim self-defense. After the prosecutor brought new charges, Wanrow decided to accept a plea bargain that reduced her crime to manslaughter in self-defense and was sentenced to five years of probation.

As in the other three defense campaigns, activists pressed for a rethinking of violence to include the structural and institutional forces that produced the moment in which Wanrow killed Wesler. For many campaigners, Wanrow's struggle for her freedom symbolized Indigenous resistance to the institutional racism and sexism of the criminal legal

system, as well as the gendered structural violence of settler colonialism.



Conclusion

In the mid-1970s, the cases of Joan Little, Inez García, Dessie Woods, and Yvonne Wanrow produced powerful grassroots campaigns that showed the connections between gendered violence and racial criminalization. The four defense campaigns unfolded alongside the burgeoning rape crisis movement and quickly generated contentious debates about the future of “feminist-controlled” antiviolence programs. Nkenge Touré, a former Black Panther and organizer with the Rape Crisis Center in Washington, D.C. later recalled that these mobilizations became a sustained classroom that “brought out a lot of the contradictions, the conflict” around the intersection of race and gender, and interpersonal and state violence within the broader antirape movement.

Despite the meaningful differences between Little’s case and the others, activists insisted that the four – and the multiple forms of violence they represented – should be linked together. The organizing and thinking that emerged from these campaigns helped feminists consider alternatives to the coercive power of the state as mechanisms for protecting women against violence. In doing

so, they also deepened efforts to confront the institutionalized gendered violence of imprisonment itself.



From the Epilogue

My interest in this history began in 2000 when I joined an emerging organization in Seattle called Communities Against Rape and Abuse (CARA). The new member-led organization prioritized marginalized groups that were least likely to access Seattle's sexual assault services embedded in local hospitals, the sheriff's department, and the prosecuting attorney's office and experimented with creative prevention and intervention strategies. It was in this context that I became interested in the interconnection between feminist social movements and the carceral state. I was eager to learn how racial criminalization and state violence were addressed by feminist antiviolence activists on the road to mass incarceration. I wanted to understand:

- Why and how had a carceral feminist agenda won out over other alternatives?
- What kinds of work directly opposed both state and feminist carceral turns?
- How did prison activists, on both sides of the walls, engage the language of "violence against women"?

- In what ways did these activists also shape the larger radical prison movement?
- How was this work part of an *ongoing* feminist antiviolenace movement centering criminalized, incarcerated, and other marginalized women and trans people?

Discussion questions:

Where do you see carceral feminism showing up in our politics and movements today? What about anti-carceral feminism?

What do Joan Little, Inez Garcia, Dessie Woods and Yvonne Wanrow's cases teach us about the relationship between patriarchy and the carceral state? Between patriarchy and white supremacy and poverty?

What was successful about Joan Little's defense campaign? What new knowledge did the organizers create, and how did they create it?

Why is the history of prisoner defense movements for women who fought back against domestic and sexual violence important to the history of criminalization and punishment?

How can we build an abolitionist approach to interrupting gender-based violence? What kinds of tools, programs, or resources would we need?

Resources:

Survived and Punished:

Survived & Punished (S&P) is a coalition of defense campaigns and grassroots groups committed to eradicating the criminalization of survivors of domestic and sexual violence and the culture of violence that contributes to it. The all-volunteer organization includes community organizers, survivor advocates, legal experts, and policy advocates including currently and formerly incarcerated survivors.

survivedandpunished@gmail.com

survivepunishnyc@gmail.com

survivedandpunishedny.org

Love and Protect (Chicago):

Love & Protect supports those who identify as women and gender non-conforming persons of color who are criminalized or harmed by state and interpersonal violence. Through love, we work towards healing and transformation with these individuals and their families. Through resistance, we seek to protect their right to defend themselves.

LOVE & PROTECT

4850 N BROADWAY

PO BOX 409155

CHICAGO, IL 60640

Email: CONTACT@LOVEPROTECT.ORG

<https://loveprotect.org/>

INCITE!:

INCITE! is a network of radical feminists of color organizing to end state violence and violence in our homes and communities.

Email: incite.natl@gmail.com

<https://incite-national.org/contact/>

Notes