

# ALL OUR TRIALS

PRISONS, POLICING,  
AND THE FEMINIST FIGHT  
TO END VIOLENCE

FAMILY L. THUMA



WOMEN, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY  
IN AMERICAN HISTORY

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# All Our Trials

## *Prisons, Policing, and the Feminist Fight to End Violence*

EMILY L. THUMA



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ILLINOIS PRESS**  
Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield

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## Introduction

Washington, D.C.'s first-ever March to Stop Violence Against Women kicked off just after dusk on April 29, 1978. A boisterous crowd of roughly eight hundred people—diverse in age, race, class, gender, and sexual identity—snaked through the city's adjacent neighborhoods of Adams-Morgan and Dupont Circle. The marchers carried flashlights, whistles, and hand-made signs, and their chants articulated the event's central message of "self-determination for women, power for women, [and] self-defense for women." An extensive list of principles and demands drawn up by the organizers advocated "community sanction" for rape and abuse and solutions "involving empowerment of women, education of men, and community action" rather than "criminal justice."<sup>1</sup> The demonstration represented a coalitional effort between three organizations: the D.C. Rape Crisis Center; the Task Force on Abused Women of the Women's Legal Defense Fund; and the "open-membership, action-oriented" D.C. Area Feminist Alliance. More than sixty other local groups endorsed the statement of principles and demands. The march was the culmination of the city's first annual Anti-Rape Week, a community education project organized by the black feminist leadership of the Rape Crisis Center.<sup>2</sup>

Once gathered at Dupont Circle Park, the demonstrators listened to an array of speakers and musicians. Among them was Linda Leaks, who delivered "revolutionary greetings" from Dessie Woods, a black woman serving a twenty-two-year prison sentence in the State of Georgia for killing an armed white man who had attempted to rape her and her friend. Leaks, a local member of Woods's national defense committee, told the crowd that the incarcerated woman's story belonged to a long legacy of white men's sexual

violence against black women that was rooted in chattel slavery.<sup>3</sup> Just a month earlier, Rape Crisis Center staff members Deirdre Wright and Nkenge Touré had traveled to the Georgia Women's Institute of Corrections to interview Woods as part of the center's work to help disseminate her story and urge feminists and other progressive people to take action on her behalf.<sup>4</sup> To the organizers of the march, Woods's case, and others like it, exemplified the need for a feminist antiviolence agenda that took seriously the perilous entwinement of racism, classism, and sexism in the criminal legal system.

*All Our Trials: Prisons, Policing, and the Feminist Fight to End Violence* is a history of activism by, for, and about incarcerated domestic violence survivors, criminalized rape resisters, and dissident women prisoners in the 1970s and early 1980s. Across the United States, in and outside of prisons, grassroots women activists participated in collective actions that illuminated the interconnections between interpersonal violence against women and the racial and gender violence of policing and imprisonment. These mobilizations were spearheaded by radical women of color and antiracist white women, many of them lesbian-identified. They cultivated a distinctive left antiviolence politics that was defined by a critique of state violence; an understanding of race, gender, class, and sexuality as mutually constructed systems of power and meaning; and a practice of coalition-based organizing.<sup>5</sup> This book traces the political activities and ideas that constituted this anticarceral feminism and demonstrates that it shaped broader debates about the root causes of and remedies for violence against women. It also reveals the important role of this activist current in the making of a prison abolition movement in the 1970s.

Anticarceral feminist politics grew in the cracks of prison walls and at the interfaces between numerous social movements, including those for racial and economic justice, prisoners' and psychiatric patients' rights, and gender and sexual liberation.<sup>6</sup> Through the process of building coalitions that transected these social justice struggles, the activists at the center of this study produced a broad and layered understanding of "violence against women" that encompassed the structural violence of social inequalities, the violence of state institutions and agents, and interpersonal forms of violence, including rape, battering, and sexual coercion. This expansive analysis directly clashed with the "tough-on-crime" ethos of the 1970s and the mainstream women's movement's increasing embrace of criminalization as a frontline solution to interpersonal violence.<sup>7</sup> As this history demonstrates, violence against women was—as it still is—a highly charged political claim rather than a transparent descriptor, and the ascendancy of a law-and-order feminism was a deeply contested process.

*All Our Trials* tells a story of resistance to violent policing and state repression of gender and sexual deviance and nonconformity. The chapters chronicle a series of organizing efforts forged by, and in alliance with, women whose social locations and practices placed them beyond the pale of dominant notions of feminine respectability and state protection and in the way of state harm: those who were black, indigenous, Latina, immigrant, poor, gender and sexual outsiders, labeled crazy or mad, or involved in the sex trade. Feminist coalitions that foregrounded criminalized and incarcerated women produced new knowledges. They analyzed the interrelationship of state abandonment and state violence in communities of color, the entanglements of carceral and psychiatric power, and the racial constitution of gender and sexual norms and their brutal modes of enforcement in locked institutions. As the veteran black feminist organizer Linda Burnham reminds us, "the struggle for social transformation [is] a powerful generator of theoretical insight," as it affords opportunities for "collective, mass-based inquiry."<sup>8</sup> Although this book focuses on activist formations and the theoretical understandings they engendered, it also documents numerous examples of individual marginalized women's—particularly black women's—bodily confrontations with institutional and interpersonal violence. From fighting back against a sexual attacker, to refusing to comply with a dehumanizing prison policy, to inscribing a testimony of personal violation in a radical prison newspaper, these everyday acts of survival helped constitute anticarceral feminist thought and practice.

This book, then, aims to offer a history of the carceral state from below. It recovers the political and theoretical contributions of grassroots activists who enacted solidarities across prison walls and seemingly discrete trials and struggles in their attempts to envision and create a violence-free world.<sup>9</sup> As the following chapters convey, this work was often arduous, and its results were uneven and messy. With varying degrees of success, activists strove to build coalitions that recognized rather than obscured differences of social power among women and centered those most vulnerable to the brutal, and sometimes lethal, nexus of interpersonal and state violence. In doing so, they put an intersectional analysis of structures of inequality and domination into practice. Critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term *intersectionality* in the late 1980s to theorize the imbrication of racial and gender inequality in black women's lives and the incapacity of antidiscrimination law to address their multidimensional claims of employment discrimination.<sup>10</sup> Yet, as scholars and activists have pointed out, the larger theoretical insight that systems of racial, gender, economic, and sexual oppression are inextricably linked or "interlocking" has a long and collective history that

includes black feminist and women of color feminist political organizing in the 1960s and 1970s. *All Our Trials* demonstrates how antiviolen­ce mobiliza­tions that focused on the lives of marginalized women were generative of an interwoven analysis of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and capitalism that pointed to the carceral state as a source of further harm rather than safety and redress.<sup>11</sup>

\* \* \*

Over the last five decades, the U.S. carceral state has expanded dramatically. As is increasingly common knowledge, the country incarcerates a greater proportion of its populace than any other nation in the world. As of 2018, it confines nearly 2.3 million people in federal, state, military, and territorial prisons; local jails, juvenile jails, and reservation jails; immigrant detention centers; and state-run psychiatric hospitals and civil commitment centers, and it exerts control over the itineraries and behaviors of another five million people on parole or probation. While the number of people in women's prisons and jails continues to represent only a fraction of the incarcerated population, the rate of women's incarceration has more than octupled since the overall rate began to climb in the early 1970s. Black, Latinx, and indigenous communities are disproportionately represented throughout the country's vast system of lockups and hence disproportionately affected by the myriad social, political, and economic consequences of the mass incarceration crisis.<sup>12</sup>

Much scholarly and public attention has been devoted to grasping the mul­tilayered political and economic roots of this massive prison boom. Whereas some scholars point to the Reagan administration's War on Drugs as the principal engine, others look further back to the pivotal moment of the 1960s War on Crime.<sup>13</sup> In 1965, amid black urban uprisings and insurgency and in the context of the civil and voting rights acts of 1964–1965 and President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society platform, Congress passed the Law Enforcement Assistance Act, which made local law enforcement a federal and increas­ingly militarized affair. Three years later, the Omnibus Crime Control and Safe Streets Act authorized the creation of the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA) within the Department of Justice. It quickly grew into a sprawling federal agency and the infrastructural backbone of the new anticrime initiative. Under the tenets of restoring law and order and modern­izing policing, the LEAA's principal function was granting millions of dollars to states each year to update and expand police weaponry, hire and train new personnel, and facilitate communication and coordination among local, state, and federal law enforcement. The LEAA played a decisive role in the buildup of carceral state power in the late 1960s and across the 1970s—most

acutely exercised in low-income, urban, black communities—by shaping, seeding, and subsidizing tens of thousands of local- and state-level crime control initiatives.<sup>14</sup> These involved a diverse array of state agents: “the police, sheriffs, and marshals responsible for law enforcement; the judges, prosecu­tors, and defense lawyers that facilitate the judicial process; and the prison officials and probation and parole officers charged with handling convicted felons.”<sup>15</sup> Just on the heels of unprecedented civil rights legislation intended to dismantle Jim Crow forms of racial exclusion and stratification, the racial state's capacity to surveil, police, and imprison swelled to new proportions.<sup>16</sup>

This immense influx of resources directly aided police and indirectly aided the FBI in criminalizing radical social movements in general and the Black Power movement in particular. As critical geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore writes, “the disorder that became ‘crime’ had particular urban and racial qualities, and the collective characteristics of activists (whose relative vis­ibility as enemies inversely reflected their structural powerlessness) defined the face of the individual criminal.”<sup>17</sup> By the late 1960s, antiracist, new left, feminist, and gay liberation movements, to varying degrees, joined ranks with increasing frequency in expressions of solidarity. In response to this burgeoning opposition to the existing social order and with the direct aid of local law enforcement, the FBI expanded its existing counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO) and set out to “neutralize” these movements. Per­vasive surveillance of organizations and individuals was the foundation for a barrage of tactics designed to disorganize groups from within, as well as to weaken their external appeal and credibility. These methods included leaking false information to the press, fabricating evidence for criminal prosecutions, planting infiltrators to act as provocateurs, and even facilitating the assassina­tions of dozens of activists. Though certainly not the sole cause of factional conflict and disarray among radicals, this campaign succeeded in demon­izing the left, especially black activists. It generated thousands of arrests and produced hundreds of women and men political prisoners, dozens of whom remain imprisoned today.<sup>18</sup> This intense and targeted state-organized repres­ion helped to make incarceration a core issue for the left. Communication and contact across prison walls increased, helping to spark the emergence of a radical prison movement.<sup>19</sup>

The precipitous growth of carceral state capacity not only placed more police in urban communities of color and aided in the repression of black and other radical activists, but it also created new political opportunities for the feminist antirape and battered women's movements that emerged in the early 1970s. Feminist efforts to politicize rape and abuse galvanized a multitude of local programs: by the middle of the decade, more than 500 feminist-run rape

crisis centers and refuges for abused women had been established throughout the country. These grassroots projects typically offered a combination of peer-based counseling, support groups, hotlines, and shelter; some included self-defense classes and community education programs. All embraced a philosophy of radical self-help and mutual aid, and many included staff who self-identified as rape survivors and formerly battered women. The resources needed to provide around-the-clock shelter and other forms of crisis support led many activists to pursue government funding, and one of the most readily available sources was the LEAA. Feminists who built these institutions from the ground up weighed the possibilities and contradictions of relying on criminal justice funds to keep their doors open. Some advocates evinced a fundamental mistrust of law enforcement and pointed to persistent patterns of institutional racism, class bias, and the repression of left-wing social movements. Most were concerned about the potential for such a relationship to undermine values and strategies that they had fought to prioritize, such as survivor self-determination, layperson expertise, and participatory decision-making structures. And those working to amend rape and domestic violence laws questioned the strategic value of developing a client relationship with the state as they sought to reform the police and courts. Police and prosecutors often dismissed accusations of rape and battering, blamed victims for inviting assault by dressing or acting provocatively, exposed women's entire sexual histories to public scrutiny to degrade their credibility, avoided "domestic disturbance" calls, and, as was the case with Dessie Woods, prosecuted women who used violence in self-defense.<sup>20</sup>

Scholars have argued that feminist movements contributed to the making of mass incarceration through support for "get tough" policy making in response to rape and domestic violence.<sup>21</sup> Feminist advocacy efforts in the 1970s helped to put sexual and domestic violence on the national crime control agenda by advocating more punitive responses, such as preferred and mandatory arrest policies and stiffer sentencing, and by narrowly framing domestic violence as a social problem that could be most effectively addressed by granting battered women "the protection afforded to other victims of crime."<sup>22</sup> Sociologist Beth Richie points to the significance of the antiviolence movement's early rhetoric of *it can happen to any woman*—what she and others refer to as the everywoman construction—to this process of state incorporation. Grassroots activists initially developed this formulation to make plain that rape and battering were pervasive cultural phenomena and not matters of individual pathology. By deploying it, they sought to debunk racist, classist, and imperialist stereotypes that such violence was inherent in and confined to particular "races," classes, or nations. Yet, as feminists

"won the mainstream but lost the movement" between the 1970s and 1990s, as Richie puts it, this construction inadvertently took on a new valence—it can *even* happen to white, middle-class, gender- and sexual-conforming women—and helped to reroute resources and energies into improving law enforcement and judicial interventions and away from a community organizing approach.<sup>23</sup>

The passage of the 1994 Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) is perhaps the starkest example of how the claim to crack down on individual perpetrators of violence against women became a critical lever of legitimacy for expanding the carceral state. The new law earmarked unprecedented federal funding for improving the prosecution of sexual and domestic violence as well as providing services for victims. Yet VAWA was just one component of the largest crime bill in U.S. history. The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act allocated nearly 10 billion dollars for new prison construction, put 100,000 more police officers on the street, applied the three-strikes-and-you're-out rule to a variety of federal crimes, and terminated government funding for prisoners to pursue postsecondary education. Hence, an act promising to curb violence against women simultaneously authorized the expansion of institutional violence against the nation-state's racial and economic others, including many victims of domestic and sexual violence.<sup>24</sup>

*All Our Trials* complements and extends these indispensable accounts of the making of "carceral feminism" by demonstrating that, in tandem and in tension with feminist advocacy for criminal justice-based approaches to rape and battering, activists also explicitly challenged criminalization and explored nonstatist approaches.<sup>25</sup> It offers an alternative history of feminism and the carceral state by shifting the focus to spaces and places at the edges of the mainstream antiviolence movement: prisoner defense campaigns, women's prisons, multi-issue coalitions, and radical print culture. Indeed, the various organizing efforts and debates tracked in this book constitute important evidence that the process of state cooptation through "liberal law-and-order" was neither unchallenged by some activists nor unwitting on the part of others.<sup>26</sup> The terrain of feminist antiviolence organizing in the 1970s and early 1980s was experimental and conflicted, and the dialectical relationship between this organizing and the state not only yielded "incorporative reforms" but also compelled emergent expressions of a prison abolitionist feminism.<sup>27</sup>

By homing in on this understudied current of late-twentieth-century radical activism, this book contributes to the overlapping fields of carceral history and critical prison studies. To date, scholars have provided illuminating analyses of prison and jail rebellions, prison activist cultures, and the writings and cultural production of imprisoned radicals in the 1960s and 1970s, but

very few of these studies focus on organizing and collective action inside and outside of women's prisons and jails.<sup>28</sup> *All Our Trials* builds on these works as well as on a growing scholarship that examines how gender and sexuality are entwined with race and class in the history of the modern carceral state.<sup>29</sup> Placing feminist prison organizing at the center of historical analysis does more than recover examples of various women's participation in the radical prison movement of the 1970s. It invites a rethinking of the movement's allies and influences, strategies and targets, geography and durée. For instance, freedom campaigns for women of color such as Dessie Woods drew together activists affiliated with a variety of movements and helped to make gender violence an arena of anticarceral organizing. Similarly, the campaigns to oppose the construction of new maximum-security behavior modification units for women prisoners that I explore in chapter 2 took shape at the interface of feminist, psychiatric patients' liberation, and prison movements. Gender and sexual nonconforming or "queer" feminist radicals, both white and of color, brought their personal encounters with psychiatric coercion to bear on their analyses of the prison system, impelling their demand for the end of all forms of caging.

This study of antiracist queer feminist activism joins a vibrant scholarship that illuminates the diverse participants, contentious politics, and manifold fronts of struggle that defined the so-called Second Wave of U.S. feminism. By centering the activism of women of color, working-class and poor women, and queer and trans women, or by focusing on the politics of multiracial and cross-class coalitions and alliances, this body of work has demonstrated the "messy multiplicity" and broad horizons of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>30</sup> *All Our Trials* is particularly indebted to scholarship that emphasizes the permeable boundaries and interchanges among postwar liberation movements, either by recovering the itineraries of individual activists who traversed these movements—and transformed them in the process—or by zeroing in on particular local spaces, places, and coalitions in which the boundaries of feminism were constructed and contested.<sup>31</sup> As it brings our attention to feminist organizing at the nexus of criminalization, imprisonment, and violence against women, it especially heeds historian A. Finn Enke's argument that "feminism exceeded feminist identification."<sup>32</sup> While numerous radical and progressive women of color and working-class and poor women embraced and defined feminist identities for themselves in this period, many others eschewed this label because of the racism and class bias of white feminisms, or they opted to use other terms to express their gender politics. Hence the genealogy of activism drawn in this book represents the

efforts of self-described black, indigenous, Native American, Chicana, Latina, Asian American, socialist, and lesbian feminists as well as people who were not identified with the moniker of feminism.

\* \* \*

*All Our Trials* traces the making of anticarceral feminist politics by a translocal, loose collection of activists and groups that spanned the country. I have structured the book's chapters around particular forms, or genres, of collective action, rather than around geographic locations or case studies. This arrangement brings into focus the development and circulation of ideas and organizing models and conveys the breadth and variety of people and groups that contributed to this feminist formation. I provide a close look at particular groups and coalitional spaces, as well as trace conversations in activist print media that brought together people and organizations in different places. The publications I explore not only linked but transformed existing organizing efforts while catalyzing the emergence of others. As Maylei Blackwell argues in her study of 1970s Chicana feminism, "movement print culture functioned as a mediating space where new ideas, theories, and political claims were constructed, negotiated and contested."<sup>33</sup>

Print culture was a particularly vital organizing forum for prison activists, as it enabled their ideas to breach carceral walls and helped to form political communities that included many people who were not allowed to meet face to face. Researching the history of women prisoners' organizing presents particular challenges since its archive is inherently evanescent. Incarcerated women who led sit-down strikes and uprisings, drafted and circulated petitions, or smuggled uncensored mail in or out of the prison risked a range of punishments, including solitary confinement, transfer to a higher security prison, and denial of parole, as well as unofficial retribution by prison staff in the form of verbal and physical abuse and the destruction of their personal belongings. The threat and reality of reprisal effectively suppressed access to written records of the necessarily clandestine organizing done by dissident prisoners. The transient quality of much of this organizing and the inaccessibility of prison records renders the surviving archive even more opaque. At the same time, prisoner activism centers on piercing the isolation and invisibility that shields institutional authorities from scrutiny and accountability.<sup>34</sup> As they do today, prison activists on both sides of the bars in the 1970s and 1980s turned to alternative media and created their own newspapers and newsletters to circulate information, confront dominant ideologies of crime and punishment, and participate in political communities that traverse in-



stitutional and local boundaries. The three chapters of this book that detail examples of inside-outside prison organizing analyze letters, communiqués, and prose collected in “underground” and alternative media as an unauthorized archive of the political activities and ideas of incarcerated women.

Writing a grassroots and translocal history of feminist radicalism presents difficulties that are inherent in documenting small groups that typically operated on shoestring or nonexistent budgets and were sometimes short-lived. Concerns about state surveillance may also have prompted groups to encourage anonymous authorship and to avoid keeping records of their activities. Hence, the book draws on primary sources scattered across a wide array of state, university, community, and personal archives. These include organizational records and newsletters, activist ephemera and propaganda, personal correspondence, speeches, photographs, and mainstream and alternative newspapers. Ephemeral materials such as leaflets, pamphlets, and posters that I repeatedly found in diverse archives were integral to my research process, both as cultural texts that I interpret as performing intellectual work, and as indicators of how and where locally produced knowledges traveled. I surveyed a variety of creative works that were independently produced or published by movement activists, including films, chapbooks, memoirs, and multigenre anthologies. Oral history interviews, conducted by myself and others, augment these archival and media sources and help me to reconstruct the histories of particular formations.<sup>35</sup> The campaigns, organizations, and activist periodicals that garnered the brightest spotlight in this study are those for which I was able to trace a more substantial paper trail. For each one chronicled here, there were a half-dozen more that left only small archival fragments and whose stories remain to be told.

Chapter 1 examines the role of participatory defense campaigns in the making of a feminist politics that conceived of the struggle against the abuses of the carceral state and the struggle to eradicate sexual and domestic violence as indivisibly linked. It focuses on four contemporaneous campaigns for racialized women who killed a sexual assailant: Dessie Woods, Joan Little, Inez García, and Yvonne Wanrow. In a range of locales, black, indigenous, Latina, and white radical women helped to link these mobilizations ideologically and practically. For these activists, the indictments, murder charges, trials, and imprisonments faced by each of these four women concretely exemplified and publicly symbolized the ways in which the carceral state compounded rather than redressed violence in the lives of those whom antiracist leftists identified as “US Third World women.” The chapter pays particular attention to the Free Joan Little campaign, the most renowned of the four, and shows how it became a coalitional space for black liberation, feminist, and

prison movements that, in turn, transformed leftists’ understandings of who should be considered a political prisoner and galvanized support for the other three criminalized women. This cohort of freedom campaigns pivotally influenced debates about law enforcement funding in the rape crisis center movement. By placing the criminalization of low-income, racialized women’s self-defensive violence at the forefront of conversations about social movement strategy, it forced a reckoning with the contradictions of pursuing a crime-control approach to sexual violence under racial capitalism.

The mobilizations that I explore in chapter 1 fueled the development of new organizations focused on imprisoned women in such places as North Carolina’s Triangle Area, New York City, Seattle, and the San Francisco Bay Area. Chapters 2 and 3 explore the political strategies and thought of groups that prioritized organizing between the bars of women’s prisons and what many prisoners called “the free world.” In chapter 2, I examine how women prisoners and their activist supporters analyzed and resisted the escalating use of medicalized forms of behavior modification in federal and state prisons during the 1970s. I focus specifically on the Coalition to Stop Institutional Violence (CSIV), a broad-based, feminist-led alliance in Greater Boston that represented a coming together of diverse organizations and constituencies, from those advocating for the rights of prisoners and mental patients to the Prostitutes’ Union of Massachusetts and the Boston Committee to End Sterilization Abuse. The chapter details the coalition’s successful campaign to block the construction of a locked treatment center for “violent women” prisoners at a state mental hospital, showing how activists theorized the gendered, racial, and economic dimensions of what they termed the “prison/psychiatric state” and identified this interlocking network of jails, prisons, and mental hospitals as a facilitator of violence against marginalized women. Through its organizing strategies and writings, CSIV interrogated the pathologization of women prisoners’ acts of noncompliance, refiguring them as acts of survival and political resistance in an abusive prison regime. The chapter also explores the nascent blueprints for community-based alternatives to incarceration that the coalition generated and how these informed its organizational structure and culture. Making the means of organizing reflect the liberatory ends they desired was a central aspiration of many feminist activists, as well as of the fledgling movement for prison abolition that CSIV helped to advance.

Chapter 3 analyzes women’s prison newsletters as constituting a counterpublic sphere. It explores how feminist prison activists made alternative media production an elemental part of their organizing, allowing prison activists to forge lines of communication among those incarcerated in myriad institutions and disrupting the invisibility of women’s prisons and prisoners

in mainstream and leftist political milieus. I focus on the conversations that took shape among imprisoned and nonincarcerated contributors within two key newsletters, *Through the Looking Glass* and *No More Cages*, which were produced and circulated from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s and independently published by feminist collectives in Seattle and Brooklyn. I read the newsletters as archives of what anthropologist James C. Scott would call “hidden transcripts” of prisoners’ everyday resistance to the violence of incarceration.<sup>36</sup> As they facilitated counterpublic communications within and across institutional walls, these grassroots publications attacked the isolation that was (and still is) a key strategy of social control in prisons. This print culture incubated trenchant critiques of the chasm between a prisoner rights movement focused on men’s institutions and a feminist antiviolence movement increasingly enmeshed with the criminal justice state. In the process, activists produced new knowledge about the gendered and sexual dimensions of the racial carceral state.

Chapter 4 provides a close look at coalition-building efforts in Boston and Washington, D.C., in the late 1970s and early 1980s that simultaneously addressed gender, racial, and economic violence. On both of these highly segregated and stratified local terrains, black feminist organizations emerged as intellectual and organizational leaders of alliances that crossed lines of race, class, gender, sexuality, and neighborhood. The chapter begins in Boston with an examination of the origins, ideology, structure, and strategy of the Coalition for Women’s Safety, a multiracial feminist alliance forged in response to the murders of twelve black women and girls within a few months in the winter and spring of 1979. I highlight the leadership of the Combahee River Collective in the Coalition for Women’s Safety, demonstrating the pivotal influence this group of self-described black lesbian feminist socialists had on the coalition’s intersectional analysis of power, and its theorization and method of violence prevention. In Washington, D.C., I focus on the political strategies and thought of a cohort of black women radicals at the helm of the capital city’s Rape Crisis Center (RCC) in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In addition to serving as a force of interconnection between local feminist and black liberation movements, the RCC organized and hosted the First National Third World Women and Violence Conference in 1980, an unprecedented gathering of black, Latina, Asian American, and indigenous activists. The intersectional coalitions explored in this chapter reoriented local discourses of violence against women around a critique of state harm and a mandate for alternatives to criminal justice. In so doing, they expanded the purview of what was considered “antirape work” and confronted its growing containment through the requirements of government funders.

In the more than forty years since Dessie Woods was tried in court and sentenced to prison, the need for a transformational antiviolence politics has only become more acute. Despite the growing chorus of activist groups, advocates, and scholars that has demonstrated the contradictory consequences of pursuing tough-on-crime approaches to sexual and domestic violence in a “prison nation,” it has been enormously difficult to dislodge the notion that law enforcement and incarceration are the keys to safety from gendered forms of violence.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the promise to protect women, children, and LGBTQ people from violence remains the alibi par excellence for expanding U.S. carceral power.<sup>38</sup> *All Our Trials* returns to the first years of the making of the contemporary carceral state to excavate the ideas and actions of activists who imagined otherwise.<sup>39</sup> As the epilogue suggests, the culture of opposition they created resonates with and offers a usable past for activists working in today’s prison abolition, antiracist, and feminist movements.

## 1. Lessons in Self-Defense

### *From "Free Joan Little" to "Free Them All"*

I'm only one out of a thousand. Don't forget it.

—Joan Little (1975)

So these four cases—Dessie Woods, Joanne Little, Inez García, Yvonne Wanrow—were cases that raised national attention and brought out a lot of the contradictions, the conflict, you know, was played out and so, it was a very educational process for people who were paying attention.

—Nkenge Touré (2005)

On Saturday morning, November 16, 1974, a crowd of demonstrators assembled outside the gates of the North Carolina Correctional Center for Women (NCCCW) in southeast Raleigh. In the back of a pickup truck with a bullhorn in hand stood Celine Chenier, a black community activist in her thirties from nearby Durham and cofounder of a newly formed local group, Action for Forgotten Women. When she shouted, "Can you hear me, sisters?" to the more than 400 people held captive in the prison, cheers erupted from behind the fence. Chenier, along with Brooke Whiting, a young black student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill who was also a cofounder, had called the demonstration to help their fledgling grassroots group recruit new allies for the state's women prisoners, including a particular NCCCW prisoner by the name of Joan (pronounced Jo-Ann and sometimes spelled JoAnne and Joann) Little. The twenty-year-old black woman had recently been charged with the murder of a white jail guard.

Activists from throughout North Carolina's Triangle area and beyond—including members of the Winston-Salem group Mothers for Black Liberation, the Black Panther Party, and the Triangle Area Lesbian Feminists—joined

Action for Forgotten Women that morning to support Little and to denounce the deplorable conditions at the prison. 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. Those assigned to work in the laundry, a principal industry at the institution, reported having to lift heavy loads of unsanitary clothing from the prison and nearby hospitals and sanatoriums in temperatures as high as 120 degrees. Activists inside and outside also condemned the institutional violence of routine vaginal and rectal searches. The protesters, mostly black and white women, held handmade signs that read "Free Joan Little!" and "Abolish Women's Prisons!" as they chanted along with Chenier: "Free Our Sisters, Free Ourselves!"<sup>21</sup>

Little had begun serving a seven-to-ten-year sentence for burglary and larceny in the Beaufort County jail in the state's Coastal Plain region that summer. In the early morning of August 27, sixty-two-year-old Clarence Alligood was found dead in Little's cell. According to the autopsy report, the night jailer's "shoes were in the corridor, his socks on his feet. He was otherwise naked from the waist down. . . . Extending from his penis to his thigh skin was a stream of what appeared to be seminal fluid."<sup>22</sup> 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. Traumatized, terrified, and unaware that the wounds could be fatal, she fled from the jail.<sup>3</sup> One week later, with the help of an activist attorney, Little emerged from hiding and surrendered to police on the condition that she would not have to complete her sentence at the same county lockup. She was taken to the women's prison in Raleigh, and a grand jury swiftly handed down an indictment for murder in the first degree, which could carry the death penalty.

By the close of Little's trial the following summer, thousands had participated in a national campaign to save her life, and countless others had become familiar with her name, if not the details of her plight. The far-reaching mobilization of civil rights, Black Power, prisoner rights, and other left-wing and feminist activists helped to secure her exoneration in what some at the time dubbed the "trial of the decade," making her the first woman in the United States to be acquitted for wielding deadly violence to protect herself from rape.<sup>4</sup>

Joan Little's murder trial was one of several causes 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, Yvonne Wanrow, and Dessie Woods inspired significant numbers of activists to work together to raise



Action for Forgotten Women demonstration at the women's prison in Raleigh in November 1974. Photographer unknown. Appeared in *Break de Chains of Legalized U.S. Slavery*, edited and published by the North Carolina Women's Prison Book Project, 1976. Courtesy of the Freedom Archives.

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.<sup>5</sup> All four defense campaigns brought diverse social-movement actors, ideologies, and agendas into contact, exchange, and at times contention with one another.

More than a legal strategy, "self-defense" was a shared and galvanizing rhetoric that transected the radical social movements of the era. The breadth and efficacy of these four campaigns were made possible by the extent to which each woman's story of violation and resistance came to symbolically represent multiple and intersecting struggles for racial, gender, and economic justice. As American Studies scholar Rebecca Hill suggests in regard to the history of defense organizing in the United States, "campaigners assert the value and strength of their own people, their own ideas, and their own movements, and they create a popular history of America as a struggle between forces of repressive terror and heroic defiance."<sup>6</sup>

This chapter demonstrates the catalytic role that defense organizing played in the emergence of an expressly anticarceral feminist agenda in the 1970s. It uncovers the intellectual and organizing work of activists who established connections between the coalitional campaigns for Little, García, Wanrow, and Woods.<sup>7</sup> This labor 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, and as a cautionary tale for feminist antirape activists about the dangers and costs of aligning with the state. I begin with the Free Joan Little campaign, which played a critical role in generating political momentum for the other three mobilizations. I trace how it expanded the boundaries of who was considered a “political prisoner,” made the coercion of incarcerated women visible, and contested a “single-axis analysis” of rape as a matter of gender power alone.<sup>8</sup> I then turn to the other three defense campaigns, focusing primarily on the ways they overlapped in time, political milieu, and participants, as well as in the new perspectives they articulated and propagated. 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 nascent feminist politics of prison abolitionism.

## 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. The local papers in Beaufort and surrounding eastern counties cast Little as a calculating, Jezebel-like seductress who lured Alligood, “a man who gave his life in the line of duty,” into her cell as part of an escape plot.<sup>9</sup> Her attorneys anticipated that the prosecution would construct a narrative of “a sexually deviant delinquent who murdered Alligood in cold blood,” and they feared that Little’s biography provided ample fodder for the state’s plot.<sup>10</sup> She routinely ran away as a teenager, eager to escape a stressful home environment, and, when she dropped out of school at age fifteen, a judge ordered her to a nearby training school for delinquent girls. Because Little 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 rumors flew that she and her older boyfriend were the organizers of local theft and prostitution rings. Prior to her indictment for burglary and larceny in March 1974, she 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.<sup>11</sup>

As several historians have demonstrated, Little’s case must be situated in the context of unfinished struggles for racial and economic justice in the Tar Heel state.<sup>12</sup> The violent white supremacist power structure remained in place ten years after the civil and voting rights acts of 1964 and 1965. The Ku Klux Klan, which had a resurgence in the 1950s and 1960s, was thousands-strong. Racism and economic oppression remained starkly intertwined. Black North Carolinians fought pitched battles with whites in the streets and in courtrooms over school desegregation, voting rights, and police brutality. Moreover, Christina Greene has recently reconstructed Little’s earlier encounters with the criminal justice system: jailed as a youth, harassed by police, failed by a public defender, and sentenced at age twenty to seven-to-ten years in prison for confessing to stealing \$1,300 worth of property. Greene argues that these experiences reflected a widespread “pattern of racially discriminatory policing, judicial, and sentencing practices” and were perhaps fueled as much by Little’s reputation as a wayward girl as “by any alleged criminal activity on her part.”<sup>13</sup> Not merely vestiges of Jim Crow, the forces of racial criminalization in North Carolina were emboldened by federal sponsorship from the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA) beginning in the late 1960s, and by 1980 the state incarcerated more people per capita than any other in the country.<sup>14</sup> Like Little, the majority of North Carolina’s prisoners were black, indigent, and had not graduated high school. Moreover, black women comprised two-thirds of the women’s prison population but only one-fourth of the state’s citizenry.<sup>15</sup> Little’s lawyers and grassroots campaigners alike sought to draw national attention to entrenched racial and economic inequality in the state, especially in its criminal justice system.

In September 1974, Little’s legal team—which included Jerry Paul, a prominent white civil rights attorney, and Karen Galloway, an African American recent graduate of Duke University Law School—along with several local and seasoned civil rights, Black Power, and women prison activists, promptly established the Joan Little Defense Fund, the organization that anchored what soon became a national campaign.<sup>16</sup> Through publicity materials and speaking engagements, Defense Fund members laid the groundwork for a multivocal understanding of the case, intended to draw the broadest pos-

**WANTED**



**JUSTICE FOR  
JOANNE LITTLE**

CRIME: Self Defense Against Rape	
INDICTMENT: Murder	PENALTY: Death
Defendant	Prosecution
sex: female	sex: male
race: black	race: white
age: 20	

TRIAL DATE: April 14  
PLACE: North Carolina  
Joanne Little Defense Fund: P.O. Box 1003, Durham N.C. 27702

Joanne Little Defense Fund poster, circa 1974–1975. Courtesy of the Center for the Study of Political Graphics.

sible array of supporters. They suggested that the case raised and connected several critical issues, including “the very right of a woman to defend herself against sexual attack; prison conditions for women, including misuse of prison guard authority to obtain sexual gains; the discriminatory use of the death penalty against poor people and blacks; the selection processes which fail to produce juries of true peers; [and] the right of a poor person to an adequate defense.”<sup>17</sup>

In Durham, North Carolina, where the defense fund was headquartered, the campaign’s eclectic and predominantly African American base included university students and professors, everyday working and unemployed people, and organizers for regional and national racial justice organizations.<sup>18</sup> Defense committees sprouted up in numerous cities around the country, including Atlanta, Boston, New York City, Oakland, Pittsburgh, and Washington, D.C. They were encouraged to “follow their own initiative” while keeping Durham apprised so that their strategies could be shared through the growing communication network.<sup>19</sup> A central task for these campaigners was fund-raising. In addition to putting together Little’s massive bail bond of \$115,000 (\$562,000 in today’s dollars), the Defense Fund needed tens of thousands of dollars to defray legal, publicity, and campaign expenses, including those associated with the effort to get the trial moved from eastern to central North Carolina. The coastal counties had exceptionally few registered black voters, so few black citizens were prospective jurors, and polling data showed strong support for the death penalty among whites. Thanks in no small part to the national mobilization, the legal team ultimately won an unprecedented change of venue to Wake County, home to the capital city of Raleigh and the university cities of Chapel Hill and Durham.<sup>20</sup> A jury comprised of six African Americans and six whites, the majority of whom were women, ultimately heard the case and unanimously voted to acquit Joan Little after only seventy-eight minutes of deliberation.

The campaign became a common cause among antiracist, feminist, and leftist organizations at the regional and national levels as well. It drew support from prominent civil rights organizations such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and Urban League; the more recently established Southern Poverty Law Center; and antiracist and anticapitalist organizations such as the Black Panther Party, National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression, and Young Socialist Alliance. It also garnered endorsements from women’s organizations, ranging from the equal rights-oriented American Association of University Women and National Organization for

Women (NOW) to the left-wing and antiracist Black Women's United Front, Third World Women's Alliance, National Black Feminist Organization, and Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.<sup>21</sup> 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. The renowned southern civil rights organizer Rosa Parks helped to found a Joan Little Defense Committee in her new home city of Detroit. Parks's antirape activism dated back to the 1940s, when she led a campaign to demand that a group of white men in Abbeville, Alabama, be prosecuted for raping a young black woman. The mobilization for Recy Taylor was only one of several civil rights coalitions in the 1940s and 1950s to demand criminal accountability for white men's sexual violence against black women.<sup>22</sup>

Little's case resonated most poignantly with that of Georgia sharecropper Rosa Lee Ingram in the late 1940s and 1950s, which had brought unprecedented activist and media attention to the state's long-standing practice of criminalizing and imprisoning black women who defended themselves against rape and domestic violence.<sup>23</sup> Ingram, a widowed mother of twelve, and her two teenage sons were sentenced to death by an all-white jury in January 1948 for the murder of John Stratford, a white local landowner. She maintained that Stratford had, on multiple occasions, made unwanted sexual advances toward her, and that in November 1947, her two sons had come to her defense in the face of the man's armed sexual attack. The NAACP lent vital legal support, filing several appeals and staving off the executions until the courts ultimately reduced the death sentences to life in prison. According to one scholar, "no issue galvanized black women in the black left more than the Ingram case" during the 1950s.<sup>24</sup> Black women activists spearheaded two national organizations that endorsed Ingram's claim of self-defense and fought for the family's freedom by organizing demonstrations, collecting signatures, visiting the Ingrams in prison, and drumming up publicity. The Women's Committee for Equal Justice of the leftist Civil Rights Congress took up the cause, and the Sojourners for Truth and Justice placed Rosa Lee Ingram at the forefront of its work, unequivocally asserting "self-protection as a right for all black women."<sup>25</sup> Despite these efforts, the Ingram family

spent more than ten years in prison before being released on parole in 1959. Several veteran black women activists in the Raleigh-Durham area who had campaigned for the Ingram family's freedom helped to found Concerned Women for Justice in 1974 to raise money for the Joan Little Defense Fund among black church congregations across the state. The group also visited Little and other women imprisoned at NCCCW.<sup>26</sup>

As it built upon the efforts of previous generations of black women activists, the campaign brought a new level of visibility to state-sanctioned sexual violence in southern prisons and jails. The National Association of Colored Women had first exposed the ubiquity of prison abuse more than a half-century earlier through its campaign to abolish the convict lease system.<sup>27</sup> In the 1960s, black women civil rights activists affiliated with the Congress of Racial Equality and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee drew national attention to a culture of sexual violence in the region's jails. The Mississippi freedom fighter Fannie Lou Hamer testified on national television at the 1964 Democratic National Convention about the sexualized brutality that she and four other black women endured in an Alabama county lockup in 1963. The five were among many black women activists who were jailed for their participation in nonviolent direct action campaigns and faced beatings and sexual assaults at the hands of guards. Along with Hamer, dozens of women courageously recounted stories of violation to their families, fellow activists, and movement leaders.<sup>28</sup>

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.<sup>29</sup> The nearly one hundred media correspondents who descended upon Raleigh to cover the July–August 1975 trial reported the testimonies of several of the women who took the stand to recount being sexually harassed and abused by guards, including Clarence Alligood.<sup>30</sup> Their stories cohered into a collective account of chronic verbal and physical sexual abuse at the facility. An Atlanta attorney pressed reporters to take note that there were "a thousand Joan Littles all over the South. . . . What happened in North Carolina is typical."<sup>31</sup>

After the trial concluded, Little's defense attorneys began working with the Southern Poverty Law Center to lay the groundwork to sue the state for mistreatment of women in custody. They had received calls from numerous women beyond those they interviewed who also reported their experiences of sexual abuse in North Carolina prisons and jails.<sup>32</sup> Speaking to *New York Times* journalist James Reston, Celine Chenier of Action for Forgotten Women and the defense fund declared: "Joan's courage has inspired people to come forward now."<sup>33</sup>

## “Power to the Ice Pick”

The Free Joan Little campaign was forged within a 1960s–1970s left political culture in which questions and tactics of armed resistance to state violence, as well as issues of government repression, were central. Around 1970, as the FBI counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO) escalated its assault on leftists and black radicals, increasing numbers of activists were incarcerated for their political work. In turn, violence by law enforcement became a central issue for the radical left, prisoner defense campaigns emerged as a key mode of activism, and the walls separating radical social movements from the country’s prisoners grew increasingly permeable. Both locally and nationally, Black Power and prison activists joined the forefront of the Little campaign, helping to situate it within a broader narrative of racist political repression and state violence. Simultaneously, they celebrated Little’s violent self-defense against a man who embodied the white supremacist power structure as an expression of a long tradition of black armed resistance.

The Black Panther Party, a staunch participant in the Free Joan Little movement, was perhaps the most visible and controversial proponent of armed self-defense in the Black Power era. Yet in North Carolina and throughout the South this strategy had been a through-line of “the ethics and politics of living and overcoming Jim Crow,” to borrow a phrase from American Studies scholar Nikhil Pal Singh.<sup>34</sup> Indeed, with a touch of prophetic vision, fifteen years before Black Power and feminist activists donned shirts and held signs that read “Power to the Ice Pick” in front of the Wake County courthouse, the iconic militant activist and North Carolinian Robert F. Williams argued that armed resistance was both a right and a necessity for black people in the face of unrelenting white supremacist violence, and that they “must make use of the gas bomb, the lye can, *the ice pick*, the switchblade, the axe, the hatchet, the razor, the brick and the bullet”—the same arsenal of weapons that whites routinely used to terrorize African Americans.<sup>35</sup> In founding the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California, in 1966, Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale looked to the Jim Crow South as they developed their practices and aesthetics of armed resistance. Yet, as scholars of the party have demonstrated, the organization cast self-defense broadly to include not only its notorious armed surveillance of the police, but also its various community survival and self-help initiatives, such as free health clinics and freedom schools, which resisted the structural and institutional violence embedded in the normative social order.<sup>36</sup>

In tandem with and influenced by the Black Panthers, the Puerto Rican Young Lords and pan-indigenous American Indian Movement adopted

equally capacious understandings of self-defense. The Young Lords, for example, pledged to defend Puerto Ricans living in the barrios of U.S. cities “from greedy businessmen, racist teaching systems, rats and roaches, disease, police brutality, robbery and murder.”<sup>37</sup> These organizations conceived of U.S. imperial militarism and U.S. domestic law enforcement as intertwined elements of the same power structure, and they defined racially oppressed communities and indigenous peoples in the United States as a “Third World within.” For radicals of the U.S. Third World left, self-defense signified a critique of the state’s claim to a monopoly on legitimate force.<sup>38</sup>

Black women had long been leaders in this tradition of armed self-defense; its foremost spokeswoman was the legendary antilynching crusader and journalist Ida B. Wells. Yet, as many women involved in the Black Power movement charged then and later, sexism too often circumscribed the “construction of the revolutionary, of the militant leader with transformative agency, [as] masculine.”<sup>39</sup> The political organizing and theorizing of groups such as the Third World Women’s Alliance (TWWA) helped to create a political imaginary that eschewed masculinist protection and asserted the right of racialized and colonized women to take up arms in defense of their own bodily integrity as well as the integrity of the collective body of the oppressed.<sup>40</sup> The TWWA concluded an extensive document on the organization’s mission and politics with a statement on self-defense: “Whereas the struggle for liberation must be borne equally by all members of an oppressed people, we declare that third world women have the right and responsibility to bear arms. Women should be fully trained and educated in the martial arts as well as in the political arena. Furthermore, we recognize that it is our duty to defend all oppressed peoples.”<sup>41</sup>

The TWWA began as the Black Women’s Liberation Committee of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, based largely in New York. In 1970, it became an independent organization of black, Latina, Asian, and Native American women that understood the “struggle against racism and imperialism” and the “struggle for women’s liberation” as interdependent.<sup>42</sup> As cofounder Frances Beal recalls, “What we were trying to deal with was the integration of race, gender, class, in consciousness, and not like just put one above the other, because we didn’t think it actually operated as one is more important than another.”<sup>43</sup> By 1972, the organization had a strong chapter in the San Francisco Bay Area and a fledgling one in Seattle. The TWWA’s stance on armed self-defense informed its decision to make women political prisoners, and imprisoned women more generally, an organizational priority. The group participated in the 1970–1971 international defense campaign for the black radical activist and scholar Angela Davis, who was



jailed for nine months on trumped-up charges stemming from her ties to imprisoned Black Power militants. TWWA helped to draw attention to the cases of Joan Bird and Afeni Shakur, two women members of the New York chapter of the Black Panther Party who were arrested and jailed along with nineteen of their male comrades (altogether known as the Panther 21) on false charges of planning to bomb several government buildings. The group used its bimonthly newspaper, *Triple Jeopardy*, to highlight the "struggle in the prisons" and to facilitate communication with imprisoned women.<sup>44</sup> Joining the freedom campaign for Joan Little in 1974–1975 was an organic extension of this work.<sup>45</sup>

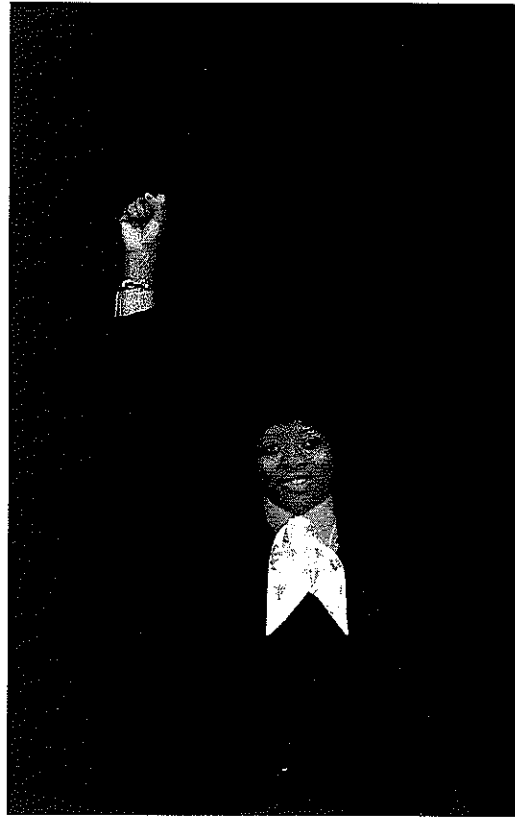
The far-reaching fights to "Free the Panther 21" and "Free Angela Davis" were important precursors to the Little campaign. Members of the National United Committee to Free Angela Davis, including Davis herself, created the National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression (NAARPR) in the wake of their victory. This new formation played an instrumental role in generating support for Little throughout the country. In particular, Davis used her media prominence to shine a light on the case and helped Little and her attorneys prepare for trial, while alliance director and veteran black radical organizer Charlene Mitchell traveled to North Carolina from California more than once over the course of the yearlong mobilization to help build its local base.<sup>46</sup> North Carolina held particular significance for NAARPR members. One of the alliance's cofounders, Reverend Ben Chavis, was himself imprisoned in the Tar Heel state. In 1971 he and nine other civil rights activists were arrested and convicted on fabricated charges of arson and conspiracy to commit arson. The group, which included eight black youths and one middle-aged white woman, became known as the "Wilmington Ten" and attracted international attention.<sup>47</sup> The NAARPR organized a 10,000-strong "March on Raleigh" that took place on July 4, 1974, seven weeks before Joan Little's flight from the Beaufort County jail. With the highest death row population per capita in the country and more than a dozen black activists behind bars, North Carolina's criminal justice system was a strategic target for the newly launched alliance.<sup>48</sup>

Another key contributor was the Attica Brothers Legal Defense, the anchor organization for a broad movement in support of the sixty-two prisoners indicted for their participation in the infamous 1971 rebellion at the New York State prison. As historian Devin Fergus observed, the composition of Little's defense team "ensured that the case's connection to other New Left causes was more than rhetorical": taken together, lead attorney Jerry Paul and consultants William Kunstler and Marvin Miller had defended Attica prisoners, American Indian Movement leaders, and members of the Black

Panther Party.<sup>49</sup> Affiliates of the Attica Fair Jury Project traveled from Buffalo, New York, to North Carolina in early 1975 to teach volunteers with the Joan Little Defense Fund the methods of data collection and statistical analysis they had used to prove that the Attica defendants would not receive a fair trial in the same county as the prison. The social-scientific survey the group administered demonstrated "extremely high levels of racial bias" in the state's eastern counties and helped to win the change of venue for the trial.<sup>50</sup>

Over the course of the yearlong mobilization, many local defense committees sponsored events that linked Little's case to the cases of activists imprisoned for their political organizing and to those of prisoners facing reprisal for their participation in prison strikes. The lineup of speakers at the "Joann Little Solidarity Day Rally" in New York City, for instance, included black feminist lawyer Florynce "Flo" Kennedy, Puerto Rican independista and former political prisoner Carlos Feliciano, and Herbert X Blyden of the Attica Liberation Faction.<sup>51</sup> In Louisville, the Southern Organizing Committee for Social and Economic Justice organized "Free Joann Little Week," drawing connections between Little's case and that of the Wilmington Ten and locating both within "a fabric of repression that has made North Carolina notorious across the U.S."<sup>52</sup> In Oakland, hundreds gathered on the weekend before the trial began to hear Elaine Brown, chairperson of the Black Panther Party; Maria del Drago of the NOW's recently established Task Force on Minority Women; Angela Davis on behalf of the NAARPR; and William Tate of the San Quentin Six situate the case in the context of a broader pattern of racist repression, historical forms of racialized sexual violence, and a "racist and sexist" judicial system.<sup>53</sup>

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. As Angela Davis argued in *Ms.* magazine on the cusp of the trial, Little's self-defense was not a singular act of fighting off Allgood before dawn on August 27, 1974. Rather, it was a sequence of actions that included her flight from the jail to avoid becoming "just another number in the statistics surrounding prison deaths" and her decision to remain in North Carolina and tell her story to the court and the jury.<sup>54</sup> Though not all leftists understood Little to be a bona fide political prisoner, she was, indisputably, a *politicized* prisoner. A poem she penned in early 1975 and shared with campaigners affords a window onto her self-understanding of her insurgent actions: "I, a black woman, stood proudly up for self, For without pride, dignity, what is there left; I struggled in self-defense; now I'm caged, behind a prison fence."<sup>55</sup> While Little was out on bail in the months leading up to her trial, she told



Joan Little speaking at  
Northeastern University,  
1975. Photograph © Ellen  
Shub 2018.

audiences about the squalid medical, hygiene, and housing conditions she endured at the North Carolina Correctional Center for Women in Raleigh.<sup>56</sup> As she explained to supporters at a Washington, D.C., rally, “My ordeal has changed me in that I am now more concerned about the conditions received by prisoners.” She expressed her determination to call attention to prison conditions that affected countless other women “just like her.”<sup>57</sup> And yet, as historian Genna Rae McNeil importantly heeds, Little was also wary of being reduced to a political symbol, telling journalists, “I am nobody’s cause, . . . I am on trial for my life.”<sup>58</sup>

### Action by and for “Forgotten Women”

The North Carolina Correctional Center for Women (NCCCW) became a center of gravity for the campaign in its own right. Imprisoned women in Raleigh enlisted new allies from among the defense movement’s ranks,

helping to expand activist efforts both inside and outside the state’s women’s prison. Action for Forgotten Women (AFW) staged the boisterous rally outside the gates of NCCCW in November 1974 to draw attention to the prisoners’ demands for improved conditions of confinement as well as Little’s legal plight.<sup>59</sup> The small but determined crowd of protestors reflected the growing base of the defense campaign: AFW cofounders Celine Chenier and Brooke Whiting had worked with the Defense Fund from its inception, and many of the demonstration’s cosponsoring organizations had pledged their support for Little.<sup>60</sup>

Just weeks before the trial, roughly half of the more than 400 women imprisoned at NCCCW participated in a spontaneous sit-in. This direct action began on Sunday, June 15, when they gathered in the courtyard and refused an order to return to their dormitories for lockup. AFW members responded swiftly to a last-minute telephoned request, from one of the protest leaders, to assemble outside the prison gates and keep a watchful eye. Demonstrators had filed numerous grievances about the paltry health facilities, unsafe working conditions, and lack of educational and occupational training programs, but to no avail.<sup>61</sup> Moreover, they alleged that many women had been subjected to unnecessary and compulsory pelvic examinations, and complained that infirmary staff frequently engaged in racist commentary.<sup>62</sup> The deputy and acting directors of the Department of State Prisons addressed the women that night and listened to their indictment of the institution, but made no promises to change these conditions. Early the following morning, guards forced the women into the gymnasium. Once inside, some women armed themselves with anything they could find, from riot sticks to broomsticks, and fought their way back out and into further clashes. More than a dozen injured women were taken to the hospital.

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. Formal negotiations between corrections officials and demonstrators began and ended on Thursday, when prison guards and police officers from across the state used nightsticks and tear gas to quell the protest. Dozens of participants were placed in segregation or temporarily transferred to the state’s maximum-security men’s prisons.<sup>63</sup> One AFW member wrote in the Triangle Area Lesbian Feminists’ newsletter, *Feminary*, “I have witnessed the state arrogance and police violence that caused Attica, the Chicago Police Riots, and now the disturbance at Women’s Prison.”<sup>64</sup>

Two weeks after the June demonstration, Celine Chenier, Joan Little, and

Karen Galloway shared a stage at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill where they addressed a crowd of several hundred about the uprising and retaliation at the prison. Little gave an extemporaneous talk about conditions at NCCCW and urged the audience to pledge their support for her own case and those of “all political prisoners.”<sup>65</sup> Those imprisoned at the correctional center reciprocated Little’s solidarity. As Chenier later recalled, “All the women there supported Joan a hundred percent. I got stuff in the mail saying ‘give my love to Joan.’ They would correspond with her.”<sup>66</sup> An imprisoned contributor to the July issue of *Feminary* affirmed: “We all are with her even though we are locked up. I believe hell will break loose in the prison if any shit gets flaky at that trial.” In August, an incarcerated contributor commented on the acquittal: “Oh wow, sister Joann’s victory has renewed old strength and given to the non-believer new strength. . . . If you see her, congratulate her for me and give her many thanks from her struggling comrades. As the power of the people has freed sister Joann, so shall it free the many brothers and sisters of the dehumanizing conditions and treatment we are currently forced to endure.”<sup>67</sup>

The imprisoned activists sought to capitalize on the media attention Little’s trial brought to Raleigh that summer. 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 critiqued the structural violence of the institution, from exploitative working conditions to medical neglect, as well as expressing their concern about the welfare and return of those transferred off site or put in solitary confinement as a result of the June uprising.<sup>68</sup> Eighteen of the thirty-three women who were illegally transferred to the men’s prison in Morganton brought a class action lawsuit with the assistance of the National Conference of Black Lawyers and AFW.<sup>69</sup> Grasping the window of opportunity the trial afforded, one activist expressed the hope that the suit might be expedited “while the attention is still on the system.”<sup>70</sup> The bad press helped to compel officials to agree to modest versions of some of the prisoners’ demands, and it prompted them to promise enforcement of an existing law that required female matrons in every state lockup facility that held women. As activist Marjorie Marsh suggested, however, improvements at NCCCW were more cosmetic than substantive: “We did not ask for a softer bed, a night stand, a locker, etc., we asked for life! i.e., someone qualified to operate these various aids to medical attention. A new dental chair with no dentist is useless. . . . New equipment only makes the hospital *appearance* more pleasant.”<sup>71</sup> Joan Little’s own victory was also circumscribed. Although the defense campaign succeeded in saving her from being killed by the State

of North Carolina, it stopped short of securing her freedom. Her appeal on the original conviction for burglary and larceny was heard and denied, and the court ordered her back to NCCCW to continue serving the seven-to-ten-year sentence.

## Contesting the “Everywoman” Narrative

One of Joan Little’s most ardent supporters was Bernice Johnson Reagon, a civil rights activist and founder of the renowned black women’s vocal ensemble Sweet Honey and the Rock. Reagon took to song to chronicle Little’s story of resistance and persecution and swell the ranks of the campaign, composing “Joanne Little” in the thick of the mobilization. She began and ended with the same line: “Tell me, who is this girl, and what is she to you?”<sup>72</sup> Who saw Little as a “sister,” and on what basis? 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.”<sup>73</sup> A fund-raising letter penned by Senator Julian Bond on behalf of the Southern Poverty Law Center described Little’s story as “one of the most shocking and outrageous examples of injustice against women on record.”<sup>74</sup> While clearly a strategy of expediency in order to save her life, expressions of what sociologist Beth Richie has called the “everywoman analysis” also drew criticism for obscuring the particular social, political, and historical conditions of the case.<sup>75</sup>

The most widely circulated refutation of a universalizing feminist analysis of the case was Angela Davis’s essay, “JoAnne Little: The Dialectics of Rape,” published in June 1975 in *Ms.* magazine. It was a pressing appeal to the feminist publication’s estimated three million readers—particularly white women and those involved in antirape organizing—to dedicate themselves to the campaign for Little’s freedom, and, equally importantly, to grasp the “socio-historical context” of her circumstances. She began the piece with a different black woman’s story: that of Cordella Stevenson, raped and murdered by a white lynch mob in Columbus, Mississippi, in 1915. “Little, one of the most recent victims in this racist and sexist tradition, is the cultural grandchild of Cordella Stevenson,” Davis declared. Alligood’s attack on a prisoner was part of a history of white male sexual violence against black women that reached back to chattel slavery and its cultural and legal construction of black women as licentious and sexually available to all white men. This history, Davis argued, could not be pulled apart from the formidable racist narrative of the black beast rapist that had provided ideological cover for lynching in the Jim

Crow South. Both represented tools in the “arsenal of racism.” Little’s case afforded yet another object lesson in the “rape-racism nexus”: when white feminists treat rape as solely an issue of male supremacy and demand a “get tough” response from the police and courts, they will not only fail to stem rape but strengthen a criminal justice system pervaded by racism and class bias—the same system that ensnares and harms women like Little. Indeed, Davis emphasized that the specificity of Little’s social location as a young, indigent, black woman had shaped the trajectory of events, beginning with the circumstances that led to her imprisonment in the Beaufort County jail in the first place. The essay urged feminists involved in the burgeoning anti-rape movement to proceed from a recognition of the reciprocal relationship between “racism and male supremacy” in the context of sexual violence.<sup>76</sup>

Several southern white socialist feminists who participated in the campaign, including the well-known antiracist organizer and journalist Anne Braden, seized the opportunity offered by the high-profile case to address the women’s movement about what they viewed as the problems inherent in framing rape primarily as an object of criminal justice. The Socialist Women’s Caucus of Louisville interpreted Little’s story as confirmation of “common knowledge that the worst offenders are white policeman and jail guards—because they are so often in a situation where Black women are at their mercy.”<sup>77</sup> Braden, a member of the Louisville group, pointed out in an open letter to other white women in 1976 that, while many white women in and beyond the South joined in the black-led movement for Little’s freedom, significantly fewer white feminists were willing to “struggle against the racist use of the rape charge.” Braden was among those who had joined a campaign coterminous with Little’s to drop the charges against Delbert Tibbs, an African American man convicted of rape and sentenced to death in Florida despite the fact that the prosecution was not able to place him within 150 miles of the crime scene. White feminists’ silence on the Tibbs verdict, along with other concurrent cases involving false charges of rape brought against black men, confirmed for Braden, Davis, and others the contradictions of an everywoman ideology that “tears rape from its social context.”<sup>78</sup>

Yet even Joan Little met with ambivalence among southern white feminists, particularly in North Carolina. Out of fear of rebuke by family, employers, law enforcement, or other whites, or their own belief in her guilt, white women involved in local feminist groups did not join the mobilization in meaningful numbers. Support was most robust among the memberships of the leftist Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, which organized its own events to raise funds and awareness, and the relatively new Triangle Area Lesbian Feminists (TALF). Several members of the pre-

dominantly white and middle-class TALF joined the black-led group AFW, and the organization circulated information about Little’s case as well as the upheavals at NCCCW through its newsletter *Feminary*. The editors urged readers to view Little as a victim of the criminal justice system for asserting her right to defend herself against Alligood’s attack, no matter her criminal status or her sexual interests, practices, or past, and more generally for being a woman “who violates their norm (women are passive and submissive).”<sup>79</sup> In this way, they imagined an affiliation rooted in a shared gender and sexual nonconformity between themselves and Little, who lived beyond the pale of both white and black standards of respectability.<sup>80</sup> The political influence of the Little campaign and the NCCCW uprising on organized lesbian feminist communities in the Triangle area was visible in the increasing emphasis they placed on what they described as the “interrelatedness of all oppressions,” as well as on differences of “class, lesbianism, age, race, and political affiliation” within the ranks of TALF, *Feminary*, and a third affiliated organization, the Triangle Women’s Union.<sup>81</sup> While AFW appears to have disbanded sometime in 1976, that same year TALF collaborated with the North Carolina Hard Times Prison Project to publish a collection of writings, drawings, and poetry by women prisoners involved in the June 1975 rebellion.<sup>82</sup>

Aside from these organizations, public support for Little remained relatively rare among white feminist women in North Carolina. Several white feminists with a history of involvement in racial justice organizing found their way from New York to the Triangle area in the spring and summer of 1975 through their connections to the Attica Fair Jury Project (FJP) and the NAARPR. Among them was Marjory Nelson, a graduate student at the State University of New York, Buffalo, whose daughter had taken a temporary assignment with the FJP. Early in July Nelson attended the first major socialist feminist conference in Yellow Springs, Ohio, where, she recently recalled, “everybody was talking about Joan Little.” When her daughter told her about the merely nominal participation of local white feminists in North Carolina, she decided to go see how she could be of use. Particularly dismaying to Nelson was the news that only six of 150 people on the mailing list of the Raleigh Rape Crisis Center responded positively to a mailer about the campaign. During her two-week stay she worked with the NAARPR; her task was to organize other white women to attend the local demonstrations surrounding the trial. In addition to the Rape Crisis Center, she focused her energy on NOW.<sup>83</sup>

While the newly established NOW National Task Force on Rape, as well as NOW’s National Task Force on Minority Women, endorsed the campaign as early as the fall of 1974, support for Little among the organization’s North

Carolina members remained uneven and tenuous. Fortuitously, a statewide NOW meeting took place in Raleigh on the weekend prior to the start of Little's trial. As card-carrying members of the organization, Nelson and another visiting white feminist organizer from Chicago Women's Liberation attended, determined to recruit local members to take action. The two joined several black women and two dozen white women at a black feminism workshop on Saturday. Aware that the state-level "leadership did not want the issue raised," the group decided to present a resolution in support of Little to the "whole convention" at the final plenary session that evening. Scattering themselves around the room to create the impression that support for Little came from "everywhere," they "swung the organization" in favor of their resolution and a proposal that NOW hold a press conference the next morning to publicly declare its solidarity with Little. Notably, the resolution passed by just one vote. Thirty members assembled on the Raleigh courthouse steps on Sunday, holding signs that read "Black and White Women Together" and "None Are Free Until All Are Free." Despite the small turnout, the NOW-sponsored press conference represented an important victory for the ad hoc group.<sup>84</sup>

Just on the heels of the trial, Susan Brownmiller published her book *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* to popular acclaim. The feminist activist and accomplished journalist offered a sweeping critique of male violence against women across a multiplicity of historical and cultural contexts that culminated in a clarion call for promoting arrests and stiffening penalties for sexual assault. As one antiracist feminist writer wryly observed of the book's mainstream appeal, "Never before has the media been so friendly to radical feminism."<sup>85</sup> In a review of the book published in *Freedomways*, Angela Davis noted that it was the Little case that piqued her interest in the burgeoning feminist booklist on rape. Although she found that the majority of this literature had a "decidedly racist edge," it was Brownmiller's tome that she found most guilty of both reproducing the racist myth of the black-beast-rapist and disavowing "the systematically ruthless ways in which Black women have been subjected to sexual violence by white men."<sup>86</sup> In the Free Joan Little movement was the analytical brick and mortar for an antirape movement that challenged, rather than collaborated with, racial criminalization.

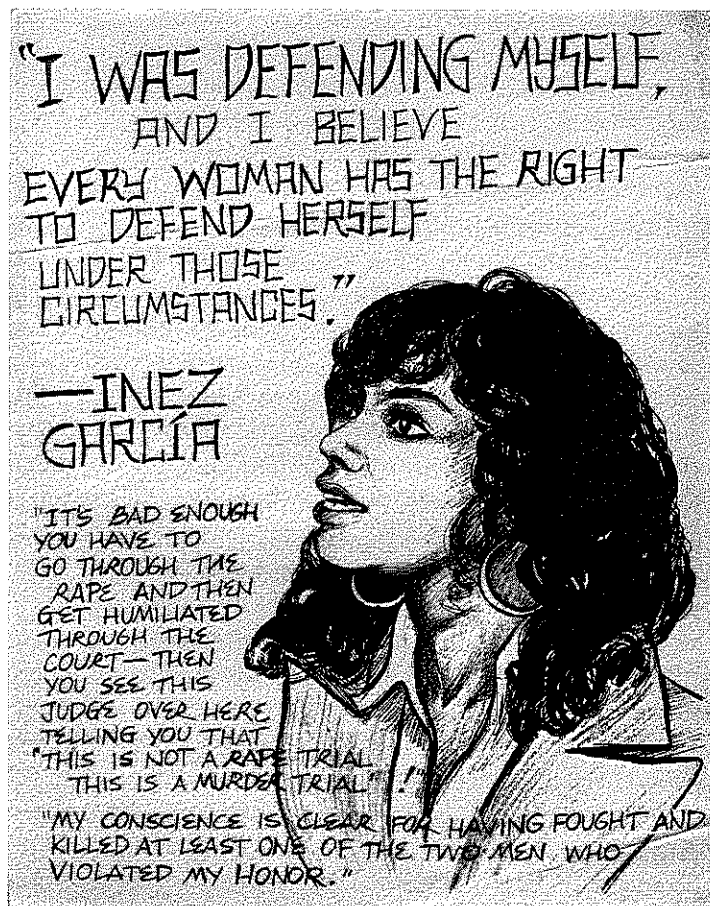
### "Inez Will Be Free because Joan Is Free": The Defense Campaigns Coalesce

On the other side of the country and just a month after Joan Little fled from the Beaufort County jail, a California jury found a thirty-one-year-old Latina woman guilty of murdering her rapist. On March 19, 1974, Inez García

was beaten and raped outside her home in the Central Coast town of Soledad by Miguel Jimenez and Luis Castillo. Once she made it back inside her apartment, the men telephoned and threatened to kill her if she told anyone about the assault. Approximately twenty minutes later, García took a rifle in her possession and went out in search of her assailants, whom she found beating her roommate nearby. When Jimenez threw a knife at her, she shot and killed him. García, who was of Cuban and Puerto Rican descent, had moved to the Monterey County area from New York in 1971 to live near her husband, who was incarcerated at Soledad prison. She supported herself and her young son by laboring in the local lettuce fields; in contrast, Jimenez's "large and influential family . . . owned a labor camp on which many local workers depended."<sup>87</sup> While in jail awaiting trial, she disclosed to her husband that she had been raped. On his recommendation she contacted San Francisco activist attorney Charles Garry, "well-known to Soledad inmates for his radical defense of Black Panthers."<sup>88</sup> Another client of Garry's suggested the formation of a defense committee.

In August, a small group of feminist activists in the San Francisco Bay Area set to work building a grassroots campaign. The Berkeley-based Inez García Defense Committee (IGDC) organized daily carpools throughout the Bay Area and the coastal cities near the town of Salinas where the September–October trial took place, ensuring that the gallery was packed with supporters, in addition to the many reporters covering the event.<sup>89</sup> The judge instructed the jury that the question of whether García was raped prior to the shooting was irrelevant, ruling out the matter of self-defense. Moreover, when García took the stand she refused to perform remorse. "I'm not sorry I did it . . . I'm only sorry I missed Luis [Castillo]," she declared before defiantly walking out of the courtroom in the face of the prosecutor's cross-examination.<sup>90</sup> Predictably, the jury handed down a verdict of second-degree murder. Afterward García told reporters: "Nobody gets justice, but I've already won. A lot of women know about my trial now and a lot of women believe in the action I took."<sup>91</sup>

Two weeks later, García was sentenced to five years to life in the California Institution for Women, an hour east of Los Angeles. At the sentencing hearing, "Viva Inez" campaigners turned out in the hundreds. Activists rallied outside the Monterey courthouse, chanting "Stop Racism in the Courts!" and "Free Inez! Free All Political Prisoners!" IGDC members read statements of solidarity from well-known feminist writers such as Gloria Steinem, Simone de Beauvoir, Marge Piercy, and Kate Millett, and organizers such as Flo Kennedy and Margaret Sloan of the National Black Feminist Organization, and Maria del Drago, former chairperson of NOW's Task Force on Minority



Inez Garcia flier, circa 1975. Louise Merrill papers. Courtesy of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Historical Society.

Women and a member of IGDC. The leading sex worker rights activist Margo St. James had challenged her colleagues in the sex industry to make that day “National No-Nookie Day.” According to the IGDC, demonstrations took place throughout California and in Seattle; Chicago; Iowa City; Washington, D.C.; and several Florida cities, as well as at the U.S. embassies in London and Paris.<sup>92</sup>

While the Inez García Defense Committee was a predominantly white and Bay Area-based group, the Viva Inez campaign was a much broader, decentralized movement that attracted a wide range of participants and endorsers, including the Third World Women’s Alliance, the San Francisco-based Latina

feminist organization Concilio Mujeres, the National Conference of Puerto Rican Women, and the San Francisco gay men’s group Combating Sexism, as well as members of the Black Panther Party and the United Farm Workers.<sup>93</sup> Like Joan Little’s defenders, Viva Inez campaigners as well as García herself encouraged a capacious understanding of the case’s social and legal implications and promoted an analysis of the intertwined workings of racism, sexism, and classism within the criminal legal system. A testament to the campaign’s high visibility, García appeared on the glossy cover of *Ms.* magazine in May 1975. Inside its pages, Maria del Drago wrote about the collective significance of García’s testimony for all survivors of rape, and for Latina survivors like herself in particular: “Inez freed me with her defiance, her shouted insistence on her own right to self-defense. She freed me, and untold numbers of other women, to speak of our own past without shame.”<sup>94</sup> A fact sheet circulated in 1976 proclaimed that “her struggle is the struggle of all oppressed people against the racist, sexist, and class-oriented system that exploits and oppresses brown, black, red, yellow, and poor white women, children, and men.”<sup>95</sup> Like Little, García spoke to reporters while out on bail about the galvanizing effects of the defense campaign on her own politics: “I have changed in that I want to get involved in helping other women like me—getting involved in the people’s movement and trying to help other people. There are a lot of changes that need to be done in the system—not only about rape. We have all types of different oppression, different rapes.”<sup>96</sup>

Campaigners increasingly drew links between García’s and Little’s cases and made them a platform for addressing the politics of gendered imprisonment in the Golden State more generally. In February 1975, roughly 250 activists in San Francisco marched from Union Square to the State Building to present Governor Jerry Brown with more than 2,000 signatures for “justice for Inez García and other women prisoners.” The petition demanded that the governor pardon García, recognize a woman’s right to self-defense against rape, and establish a “multi-racial women’s commission . . . to review the convictions of all women presently serving prison or probation sentences in CA. The cases of women convicted of murder or manslaughter must receive first priority.” The demonstrators occupied the building’s lobby, filling the space with the sound of their chants, songs, and wooden clackers. An activist with a bullhorn provided an update on the Joan Little campaign. Under threat of arrest, all but thirty-eight protestors left the building after an hour. The thirty-two women and six men remaining were arrested and charged with trespassing, marking the start of their own legal battle that persisted until the end of that year.<sup>97</sup> In Washington, D.C., black and white women affiliated with the D.C. Rape Crisis Center and the newly launched Feminist



## TWO SISTERS ONE STRUGGLE      DOS HERMANAS UNA LUCHA

"Inez Garcia and Joann Little: Two Sisters, One Struggle/Dos Hermanas, Una Lucha." Poster © Juana Alicia, 1975. All Rights Reserved.

Alliance Against Rape 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.

García, too, saw her own and Little's stories as interdependent aspects of the same struggle.<sup>98</sup> With the aid of a new attorney, feminist Susan Jordan, and a steadfast defense campaign, García won her appeal for a new trial in 1976, and in March 1977 she was acquitted on the ground of self-defense.<sup>99</sup> After the victory, Louise Merrill of the IGDC sent a note of thanks to those who gave money to the campaign in which she expressed "hope that Inez's victory will help to hasten a victory for Yvonne Wanrow and for Dessie Woods, whose cases are as important to all women as Inez's was."<sup>100</sup>

Immediately following Joan Little's trial in July 1975, the State of Georgia charged Dessie Woods with first-degree murder and armed robbery. Woods was a thirty-year-old, working-class black woman with two children, as well as an activist and a practicing Muslim.<sup>101</sup> She and her friend Cheryl Todd, also a young, working-class black woman, had traveled from Atlanta to the Georgia state prison in Reidsville on June 14, 1975, to advocate for Todd's

brother, who was in need of medical care. Not only were they denied access, but when Todd fainted from heat exhaustion in front of the prison the police arrested both women for public drunkenness (without administering breathalyzer tests) and jailed them for three days. They were hitchhiking home to Atlanta after this harrowing experience when Ronnie Horne, a white insurance salesman impersonating a detective, offered them a ride. He then entrapped them in his car in a deserted area. As Todd and Woods resisted his armed sexual attack, Woods shot Horne with his own gun. The women took money from Horne's wallet and made their way toward Atlanta; they were arrested the next day.<sup>102</sup>

Todd was ultimately given a five-year sentence, of which she served four months, whereas Woods was found guilty of manslaughter and robbery and sentenced to twenty-two years in prison. She was tried in the rural town of Hawkinsville in south-central Georgia in February 1976. The judge had acted preemptively to avoid the media blitz that accompanied Little's trial in Raleigh the previous summer by issuing a court order that severely curtailed media access and activist demonstrations in the courthouse area. Additionally, dozens of state troopers were dispatched to the town to augment the local police force.<sup>103</sup> "The whole trial was unjust," she later told members of the D.C. Rape Crisis Center. "Because I was a black woman they put me in prison. . . . And my case came right behind Joann Little and they would not allow two women to be acquitted in a row."<sup>104</sup>

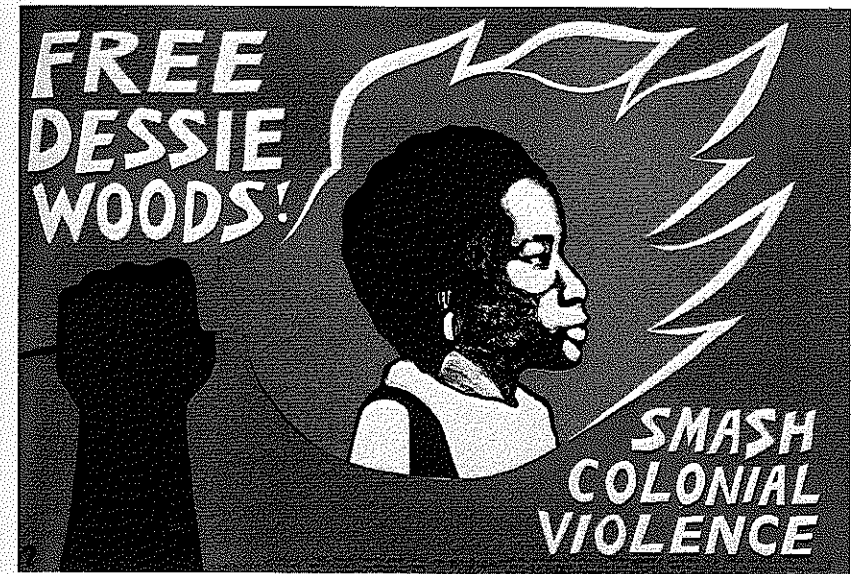
For the six years until she was finally released in July 1981, the National Committee to Defend Dessie Woods (NCDDW) coordinated local, regional, and national fund-raising, educational, and direct action efforts.<sup>105</sup> The group was formed and led by women and men affiliated with the African People's Socialist Party, a revolutionary black nationalist organization established in the southeast in the early 1970s that advocated a Black Power politics of community self-defense and Pan-African solidarity.<sup>106</sup> Defense committees were formed in Florida, California, Illinois, Kentucky, and elsewhere, and campaigners sold a multitude of Dessie Woods buttons, posters, and T-shirts that generated both necessary funds and visibility. The campaign traversed prison walls, and letters of solidarity came from numerous activists behind bars, including imprisoned women in Raleigh. By 1980, Woods had gained supporters in Paris, London, Berlin, and Geneva.<sup>107</sup>

Activists worked to intervene at Hardwick prison where Woods routinely endured abuse in the form of beatings, death threats, solitary confinement, and denials of mail and visitors.<sup>108</sup> She, in turn, funneled information to her supporters beyond the prison walls about conditions of confinement, including ubiquitous sexual abuse. More than once she was transferred to a mental

hospital in Milledgeville where she was drugged and beaten. "They destroyed my records at Central State," Woods told a feminist reporter. "People from all over the world called to have me released and yet there is nothing."<sup>109</sup> In the face of extreme and unrelenting abuse at the hands of authorities, Woods continued to advocate not only for her own freedom but for the rights of other prisoners.

In September 1977, a national day of action brought together hundreds of demonstrators from "virtually every progressive sector" in both Atlanta and San Francisco.<sup>110</sup> The crowd of 500 in Atlanta that marched in the rain to the State Capitol building included former Joan Little campaigners from North Carolina, and Inez García was one of the featured speakers at the rally. In a press release, the NCDDW declared: "After the case of Joann Little, it had been hoped that such cases as Dessie Woods's would diminish. . . . Inez García, Yvonne Wanrow, and Dessie Woods, are three of the cases we know of. There are probably others which have not got the publicity and therefore are unknown to us. . . . The NCDDW is committed to smashing such attacks on Black women once and for all."<sup>111</sup> Feminist organizers with the recently victorious Viva Inez campaign helped to mobilize hundreds to rally for Woods's freedom in San Francisco, where Yvonne Wanrow addressed the crowd.<sup>112</sup>

While Little's attorneys and the Defense Fund had especially encouraged a kaleidoscopic narrative of her case, the NCDDW employed the rhetoric of *colonial violence* against black women and emphasized racial capitalism as the primary contradiction. This frame reflected the African People's Socialist Party's theoretical orientation of "internal colonialism," which held that the United States' political and economic subjugation of black communities within its borders constituted a colonial relationship.<sup>113</sup> Committee members acknowledged and celebrated the fact that securing Woods's freedom would "be a major setback for the reactionary anti-woman attitude and forces," but they also called upon white feminists to adopt a political framework of anticolonial and antiracist solidarity rather than solely one of antisexism.<sup>114</sup> The campaign's rhetoric linked Little, García, Wanrow, and Woods as "colonized women who have shown by their heroic actions that they will no longer tolerate the subjugation of their people, of women, and the tactics used to maintain that subjugation."<sup>115</sup> This narrative not only militated against the everywoman frame but asserted an alternative view: the common bond shared by these four defendants was their victimization by, and resistance to, a colonialist, capitalist, racial state that condones sexual violence as a tool of suppressing U.S. Third World women. Woods also stressed the specificity of gendered antiblack 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



"Free Dessie Woods! Smash Colonial Violence" poster, 1978. Courtesy Lincoln Cushing/Docs Populi Archive.

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."<sup>116</sup> These political and rhetorical differences from the Little and García campaigns combined with the media blackout of the trial help to explain why Woods received far less mainstream media attention and attracted far fewer white liberal feminist supporters. The unwavering revolutionary black nationalism of her defense committee did, however, resonate with Yvonne Wanrow's claim of self-defense against white settler-colonial patriarchy.

Although Wanrow was arrested before Little, García, and Woods, her legal appeals extended through 1979, and her case attracted growing notoriety and activist energy through its connection with the others. Wanrow, a member of the Sinixt/Arrow Lakes Nation of the Colville Federated Tribes, was living in Spokane, Washington, in August of 1972 when she fatally shot a white man who broke into her friend's home. William Wesler, who had a prior arrest for child molestation, had recently threatened her nine-year-old son with a knife and sexually assaulted her friend's seven-year-old daughter; the two women had contacted the police earlier that day but were told there was nothing to be done. Significantly smaller in size than Wesler and on crutches and in a leg cast at the time of his break-in, Wanrow maintained

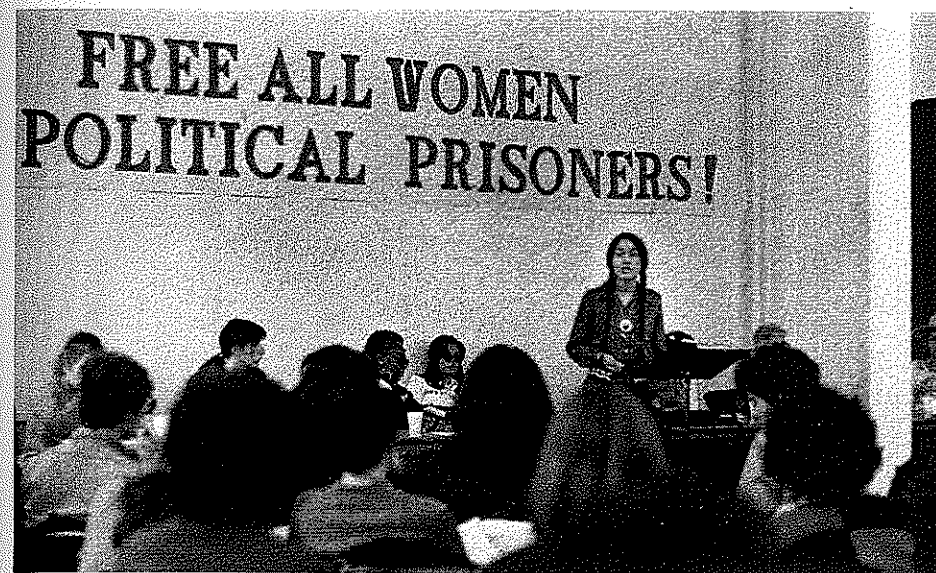


that she acted instinctively to protect the children in the house when she fired her own registered gun first at Wesler and then at his friend, who sustained a minor injury: "When Wesler headed towards one of the children, I screamed for help. Wesler, who was drunk out of his mind, turned, lurching toward me. So I shot him. I immediately called the police to report what had happened. They arrested me and put me in jail. I feel all I was guilty of was being a mother who loves her children."<sup>117</sup> In May of 1973, she was convicted of first-degree assault and second-degree murder by an all-white jury and sentenced to twenty-five years in prison.<sup>118</sup>

The trial took place in a general climate of virulent anti-Indian racism in eastern Washington and against the particular backdrop of the American Indian Movement's (AIM) seventy-one-day occupation of the small town of Wounded Knee in South Dakota, the site of a U.S. Army massacre of several hundred Lakota people in 1890. The occupation was front-page news during her jury trial, and the coverage was overwhelmingly disparaging of the occupiers. "All Native Americans were seen as militants and extremists," Wanrow later recollected.<sup>119</sup> By 1973 AIM had identified criminalization and imprisonment as priority concerns. It was the first activist organization to rally behind Wanrow and work with her and her family to launch a national defense campaign. Through her involvement with AIM she came to secure representation from feminist lawyers with the New York-based Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR) in 1975.<sup>120</sup>

Over the next several years a growing number of Native American, feminist, and civil rights activists joined the effort, and defense committees emerged in the Pacific Northwest, California, Midwest, and Northeast. Out on bond throughout the six-year appeals process, Wanrow headed her own defense campaign. She traveled around the United States meeting with activists and participating in solidarity events, not only for herself, Inez García, and Dessie Woods, but also for several other lesser-known black and indigenous women in comparable legal predicaments, and for imprisoned AIM leader Leonard Peltier.<sup>121</sup> In 1976 she took part in the historic International Tribunal on Crimes Against Women in Brussels, and in 1978 she joined a delegation of indigenous peoples in the Americas that traveled throughout West Germany, helping to circulate her story and mobilize supporters internationally.<sup>122</sup> "I'm fighting as a woman, I'm fighting as a Third World person, and I'm fighting as a Native American," she told audiences.<sup>123</sup> She regularly stressed that her case was "not unique" but rather "just one blatant example of brutality that has been perpetrated towards Native people in this country."<sup>124</sup>

Wanrow and her multitude of supporters achieved a victory in 1977 when the Washington State Supreme Court affirmed her right to claim self-defense.



Yvonne Wanrow at a political prisoner speak-out in New York City, November 1975. Photograph © Bettye Lane.

After the court denied a request for a rehearing, however, the prosecutor brought new charges. Facing another trial in Spokane, Wanrow and her team expanded their organizing efforts there. Under the modest sponsorship of CCR, former Joan Little campaigner Marjory Nelson and her lover at the time, Polly Taylor, traveled to Spokane in 1977 to drum up additional support for Wanrow among non-indigenous people. The two helped to build an eclectic defense committee that included religious leaders, civil rights activists, students, and teachers with the goal of demonstrating to Spokane residents and eventually a jury that "this isn't just an isolated little case." Wanrow gained another powerful base of support in Women of All Red Nations (WARN), a coalition of more than two hundred activists, many with ties to AIM, that formed in 1978 and made reproductive rights, imprisonment, and environmental degradation key priorities.<sup>125</sup> As a prospective prisoner, Wanrow was fighting not only for her right to protect her children but to continue parenting them, and in this way her case dovetailed with contemporaneous campaigns by WARN and other indigenous women against forced and coercive sterilization and the removal of indigenous children from their families and communities.<sup>126</sup> In 1979 Wanrow decided against enduring another trial and accepted a plea bargain that reduced her crime to manslaughter in self-defense. She was sentenced to five years of probation.<sup>127</sup>



Yvonne Wanrow poster, 1976. Courtesy Lincoln Cushing/Docs Populi Archive.

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. As one organizer put it: “In Yvonne’s case, the refusal of the police to provide protection was an act of violence. The continuing effort of the prosecutor to go after her—after 5 years—is an act of violence. A prison system that locks up a Joanne Little for theft for 8 years and lets Watergate criminals go free is violent. . . . We need to go a lot further back into the chain of violence to reach the real source.”<sup>128</sup> 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 to the gendered structural violence of the settler colonial relationship between the United States and indigenous communities within its borders.

## The Antiviolence Pedagogy of the Campaigns

The four defense campaigns unfolded amid the burgeoning of the rape crisis movement and quickly came to figure in contentious debates among activists about the future of “feminist-controlled” antiviolence programs. As Nkenge Touré of the Washington, D.C., Rape Crisis Center later reflected, the mobilizations for Little, García, Wanrow, and Woods became an extended self-

defense classroom that “brought out a lot of the contradictions, the conflict” surrounding intersections of race and gender and interpersonal and state violence within the feminist antirape movement.<sup>129</sup> Joan Little was indicted for murder just two years after feminists founded the country’s first rape crisis centers (RCCs) in Washington, D.C., Seattle, and the San Francisco Bay Area. By 1974, hundreds of community-based antirape projects were in operation, and questions of “co-optation” and “professionalization” already loomed large. Many activists worried that the requirements and expectations imposed on feminist antiviolence programs as conditions for the receipt of public funds pushed them toward a more hierarchical organization directed by credentialed staff and toward a more exclusive focus on direct service provision rather than advocacy. The most readily available government funding source for RCCs was the sprawling and deep-pocketed federal LEAA agency, the linchpin in the dramatic expansion of the state’s capacity to surveil, police, and imprison across the 1970s.<sup>130</sup> Perspectives on criminal justice sponsorship and partnership increasingly diverged, stimulating heated debates in feminist conferences, newsletters, and anthologies. The self-defense cases of women of color offered activist critics of a criminalization-centered antirape movement a “moral and ideological discourse” that emphasized the capacity of the criminal legal system to facilitate rather than stem violence against women of color and advocated an intersectional, rather than an everywoman, analysis of rape.<sup>131</sup>

Sexual violence had first become a focal point of the predominantly white women’s liberation movement around 1970, and the question of “self-defense for women” saturated early conferences and speak-outs by rape survivors.<sup>132</sup> Many activists reasoned that it was “justifiable to deal with the problem in extralegal fashion.”<sup>133</sup> San Francisco Women Against Rape (SFWAR), for example, initially saw little promise in criminal legal responses since the “police, laws, and courts all have been set up to serve the ruling men in power in the country.” In addition to establishing a hotline, emergency shelter, and community education program, the group “envisioned community self-defense as a militant, collective alternative to reliance on the police.”<sup>134</sup> Other organizations made self-defense training their sole focus, offering affordable classes taught by feminist instructors. Self-defense teachers and students saw women’s physical fear and sense of vulnerability as an important basis of “the power structure between men and women.” Training in self-defense focused not only on “growing strong” but also on transforming the “mind set” of powerlessness.<sup>135</sup> The feminist press celebrated women who fought back against their sexual assailants. One of the most iconic images of the feminist antirape movement, designed by Betsy Warrior, a member of the

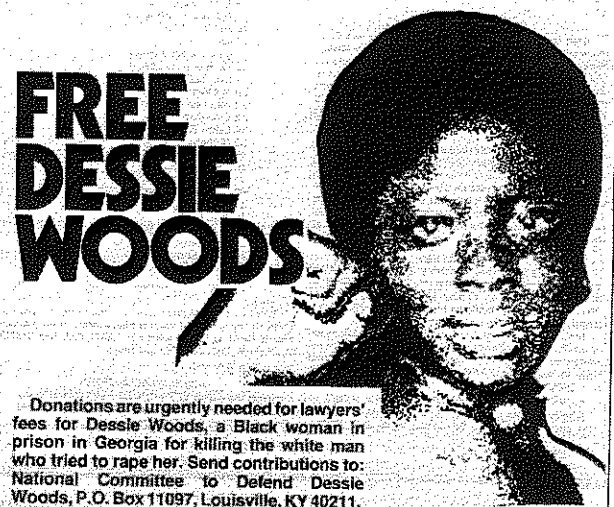
Boston-based radical feminist group Cell 16, boldly proclaimed that physical self-defense tactics that “disarm rapists” are necessary to “smash sexism,” indicating that self-defense training was more than a “liberal strategy” of individual empowerment.<sup>136</sup> As historian Pamela Haag has argued, “this strain of the feminist imagination followed a certain leftist and militant logic of . . . insurrectionary violence.”<sup>137</sup> For example, the feminist newspaper *off our backs* reported in 1974 that “Dallas women . . . are pursuing an alternative means to ensure justice, both swift and righteous, for rape or attempted rape victims” by forming Women Armed for Self Protection, which promoted “immediate and drastic retaliation against all rapists.”<sup>138</sup> Importantly, however, these forms of antirape militancy did not necessarily translate into a total rejection of legal reforms. Rather, militant self-defense was more often conceived of as a grassroots alternative to abusive men and an unresponsive state.<sup>139</sup>

In 1974, a small collective of primarily white and working-class women inaugurated the *Feminist Alliance Against Rape Newsletter (FAAR News)*. Its editors envisioned a forum for dialogue and strategizing among feminist activists who were concerned that “the rape issue was being co-opted” by government funders and law-and-order politicians, as well as by “non-feminist professionals.”<sup>140</sup> In 1978, FAAR merged with the battered women’s movement’s National Communications Network and the Alliance Against Sexual Coercion to become *Aegis: Magazine on Ending Violence Against Women*. *FAAR News* and *Aegis* played a central role in bringing the cases of Little, García, Wanrow, and Woods to bear on feminist antiviolence discourses in the mid-to-late 1970s. This counterpublic space provided readers with consistent coverage and analysis of these cases and a forum for debate about criminalization, imprisonment, and state cooptation into the mid-1980s, when *Aegis* ceased publication.

FAAR founders dedicated their second issue to the theme of incarceration, in which they contended that “encouraging women to prosecute a rape [helps] to reinforce the legitimacy of the criminal justice system. . . . We should begin to actively seek alternatives.”<sup>141</sup> An article on García’s unfolding trial followed one written by the founders of Prisoners Against Rape, a self- and peer-education program organized by a group of black men convicted of rape and incarcerated in Lorton, Virginia. The decision to problematize criminal justice interventions provoked a critical response from SFWAR, published in the next issue, wondering whether *FAAR News* was “feminist in name only” since it advocated “male rapists’ needs and rights.”<sup>142</sup> Clarifying their stance, the editors responded: “What we are saying is that we don’t believe increasing the conviction rate will lead to the elimination of rape. Therefore, we question whether we as feminists should devote our energy to

JULY/AUGUST 1979  
PRICE: \$1.75

**Aegis**  
Magazine on Ending Violence Against Women



**FREE  
DESSIE  
WOODS**

Donations are urgently needed for lawyers' fees for Dessie Woods, a Black woman in prison in Georgia for killing the white man who tried to rape her. Send contributions to: National Committee to Defend Dessie Woods, P. O. Box 11097, Louisville, KY 40211.

NATIONAL COMMUNICATIONS NETWORK / FEMINIST ALLIANCE AGAINST RAPE  
Box 21033 · Washington, D.C. 20009 · (202) 543-5580

©Aegis: Magazine on Ending Violence Against Women 1979

Dessie Woods on the cover of *Aegis*, July–August 1979. From the Women’s and LGBT Periodicals Collection, Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s History and Culture, Rubenstein Library, Duke University.

winning individual convictions, or whether we should examine alternatives which may have a greater influence on society as a whole.”<sup>143</sup>

FAAR and the D.C. Rape Crisis Center were both instrumental in forming the D.C. Coalition to Support Inez García and Joan Little.<sup>144</sup> Activists utilized the newsletter to help galvanize national attention and financial support for both Little and García—and later for Wanrow, Woods, and others—by calling on its burgeoning readership to publicize the cases through their local networks. Moreover, they highlighted what they viewed as the race and class implications of these self-defense cases for feminist antirape agendas. A fall

1974 editorial argued that the criminal legal system offered few prospects for redress, let alone transformational justice. Police officers, prosecutors, and judges base their decisions on their “white male experience,” and “because men are rarely, if ever, subject to rape, they cannot identify with the feelings of a rape victim.”<sup>145</sup> In concrete terms, this analysis translated into taking a neutral stance on prosecution when counseling rape victims, as well as a thematic focus in the newsletter on developing “alternatives to the criminal justice system.”<sup>146</sup> In February 1975, the coalition sponsored a teach-in featuring Yvonne Davis, a core member of the Joanne Little Defense Fund, and Lourdes Miranda King of the National Conference of Puerto Rican Women. Both speakers situated the cases in broader frames of economic marginalization, racialized and gendered images, and structures of state violence. An *off our backs* reporter wrote: “The experiences of the speakers with the police and courts hardly pointed to these institutions as our source of defense. Yet, when a woman in the audience told us that she had been receiving phone calls from a man threatening her with murder, the first response was ‘call the police,’ followed by an air of bewilderment which hung over the rest of the conference.”<sup>147</sup> This observation suggests the ways the Little and García cases were thought to exemplify what was wrong with “the system,” as well as pointing to the yawning gap between theorizing alternatives to the law enforcement system and successfully putting them into practice.

Informed by these critiques, the largely white, socialist feminist group Santa Cruz Women Against Rape (SCWAR) utilized *FAAR News* to circulate its “Open Letter to the Anti-Rape Movement” in 1977. Following Angela Davis and other critical voices, the organization lambasted a higher conviction rate for rape as a misguided goal: “The system is racist through and through. Prisons are used to keep *all* Third World people down. We cannot turn our backs to the racism of the system when a Black man is being prosecuted and expect that same racism not to be used against Joann Little, Yvonne Wanrow, Inez García, etc.”<sup>148</sup> Several years later, artists and activists affiliated with SCWAR produced a docudrama entitled *The Confrontation: Latinas Fight Back Against Rape*. Promoted as a representation of “what can happen when women unite against racist and sexist violence,” the film features the story of a young Chicana teacher, Marta, who is raped by a white male acquaintance after a party. In the face of police indifference, Marta and her friends confront the man at his place of work.<sup>149</sup> The Inez García Defense Committee also took aim at liberal feminist proposals to expand the number of women police officers, arguing that “they will just throw a few more poor white and Third World men in jail, and leave rapist upper-class and white men free to terrorize us as always.”<sup>150</sup> In addition to confrontations, these two

groups promoted self-defense classes, increasing community-based sanctions through public education, and publicizing descriptions of men known to have raped women.

Nonstatist and antistatist antiviolence strategies were the subject of the 1981 activist anthology *Fight Back! Feminist Resistance to Male Violence*, a 400-page sourcebook of essays, letters, interviews, poetry, photography, and art by nearly sixty activist contributors that crossed lines of race, class, sexuality, and gender expression. Its capstone is a directory of approximately 1,200 organizations, including crisis centers, shelters, self-defense schools, newsletters, and legal aid organizations. Coeditors Frédérique Delacoste and Felice Newman forthrightly asserted in their preface: “We cannot unwittingly become tools of racism by looking to the state for solutions to male violence. We must be conscious that giving unlimited power to a racist, classist and violent judicial system perpetuates our own oppression.” Several contributors assessed the challenges, strategies, and significance of prisoner defense work, and one remarked that antiviolence activists “too often forget all the women inside [prison] who never found a shelter or who could not wait for the larger changes.” Others described examples of direct-action-style, militant interventions: groups of feminists who would move into an abused woman’s home to pressure the batterer to move out or to prevent his return; small squads that stalked men who stalked women, “effectively intimidating the man into a change of behavior”; guerilla groups that posted detailed descriptions and the names of men who raped women in the perpetrators’ neighborhoods; “dyke patrols who have been known to respond on the spot, tailing a man on foot or by car, verbally embarrassing him or roughing him up”; and ad hoc groups like the one fictionalized in *The Confrontation* that accompanied survivors to face their sexual assailants at their homes or places of employment.<sup>151</sup>

As various defense committees organized events that linked the cases of criminalized rape resisters to those of political prisoners from the Black Power, Red Power, Chicano/a, and Puerto Rican independence movements, discourses of “self-defense for women” and “racist and political repression” interacted and influenced one another. Some antirape activists came to view all women imprisoned for killing their sexual assailants and batterers as political prisoners, regardless of their political histories or the particular circumstances of their cases.<sup>152</sup> FAAR member and self-defense instructor Sue Lenaerts wrote in *FAAR News* in 1976 that “attitudes reflecting sex, race, and class bias cloud the judgment of both judges and juries. It is likely that only in a society where rape did not exist could a woman get a fair trial for a self-defense killing. Thus, by this contradiction, we consider women found guilty of murder in

a self-defense case to be political prisoners.” As greater numbers of women faced conviction for using lethal violence to defend themselves from rape and battering, Lenaerts argued, it was the responsibility of antiviolence activists to accept the “politically crucial” challenge of increasing the scale and efficacy of prisoner defense work.<sup>153</sup> Noting that the primary organizational vehicle for addressing this contradiction was the “individual defense committee or defense fund,” she suggested forming a “national network for the defense of all women who are prosecuted for killing their attackers” that would thread through crisis centers and “self-defense schools.” At the same time, Lenaerts acknowledged that most centers were “ill equipped to fully shoulder the responsibility of a full fledged defense committee.” Indeed, FAAR’s unsuccessful attempt in 1974–1975 to build a membership-based organization of local “feminist-controlled anti-rape projects” alongside and in relation to publishing its newsletter suggests that the “hand to mouth” existence of most rape crisis centers limited their engagements with these high-profile cases and the urgent and broad-based coalition-building efforts they engendered.<sup>154</sup>

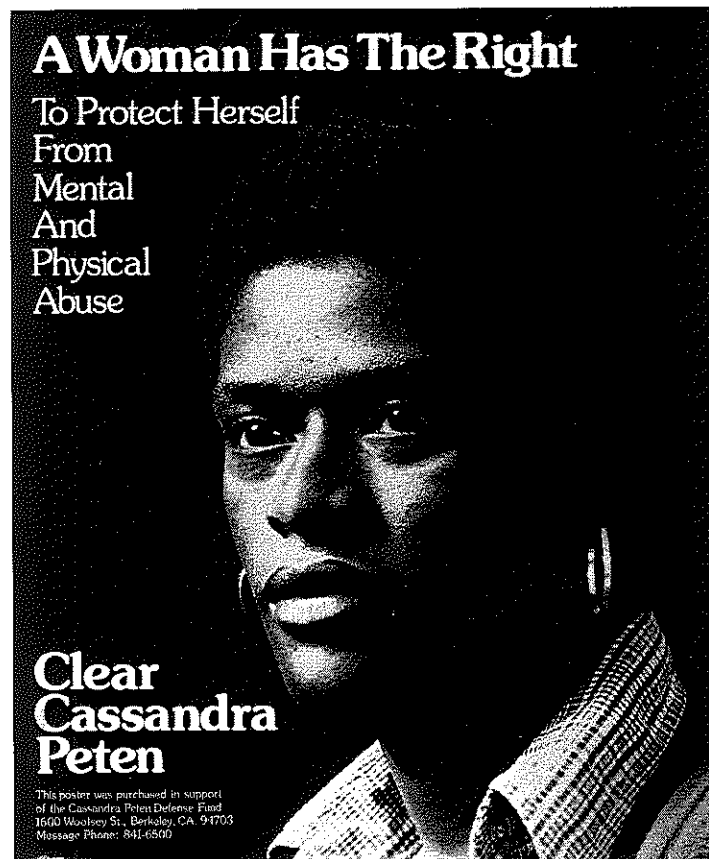
Members of SFWAR were divided over these issues. Cofounder Diana Block reflected: “We had to come up with a way to balance a woman’s right to determine her own options with our own political distaste for the police as the enforcement arm of a system we abhorred. We decided to explain what a woman’s options were and, if she decided to go to the police, we would accompany her in order to assure that she was correctly treated. Many women ended up choosing this option and inevitably this drew us into dealing more and more with the police.”<sup>155</sup> News of Inez García’s upcoming trial surfaced just as members were grappling with this predicament in 1974. While Block expected that SFWAR would participate actively in the defense campaign, the demands of direct service provision left some staff wary that publicly endorsing García would compromise “the fragile working relationship” the agency was cultivating with law enforcement.<sup>156</sup> Ultimately, according to Block, very few SFWAR affiliates worked on the campaign. For her and a number of other radical white women in the San Francisco Bay Area who joined the mass defenses of Little, García, Woods, and Wanrow, these campaigns moved them to channel their feminist activism into antiracist, anti-imperialist solidarity organizing.<sup>157</sup>

Unlike SFWAR, the D.C. Rape Crisis Center (RCC) functioned as a hub for defense work in the mid-to-late 1970s. “We always intentionally lifted up these cases of women of color who lived at the intersection of violence against women and the criminal justice system,” former RCC director Loretta Ross recently recollected.<sup>158</sup> In addition to its involvement in the D.C. Coalition

to Support Inez García and Joan Little, the RCC became a significant ally to the National Coalition to Defend Dessie Woods. Staff members traveled to Georgia to visit Woods in prison and helped disseminate information about her case in *Aegis* and through local public education efforts and direct actions. After her release in 1981, the RCC sponsored Woods’s visit to Washington where she participated in Anti-Rape Week, an annual political education event organized by the center.<sup>159</sup> Significantly, the RCC avoided LEAA funding and sustained a central focus on grassroots organizing and coalition-building into the early 1980s. A group of primarily young, white women involved in the local women’s liberation movement founded the organization in 1972, and several of them went on to establish FAAR. By the RCC’s third year of operation, Black Power feminist and community organizer Nkenge Touré had become the center’s first paid director, and over the next several years increasing numbers of women of color joined the staff, board of directors, and volunteers.<sup>160</sup> In 1980, the center’s leaders identified the Little, Woods, and García cases as having pivotally “exposed the injustices of the criminal justice system as it related to Third World Women,” and, at the same time, galvanizing more women of color to join the rape crisis center movement.<sup>161</sup>

By and large, however, few RCCs appear to have incubated, anchored, or even endorsed these campaigns. These institutional silences likely had diverse and multiple causes, ranging from racism and class bias to the depoliticizing effects of crisis center–criminal justice collaborations and the rigorous demands of everyday crisis intervention work. Rather than emanating from within the rape crisis center movement, the four defense campaigns pressed this movement to engage in critical and reflexive dialogue about the path forward for RCCs, given their increasing entanglement with the criminal legal system.

From defense committee meetings to the pages of *Aegis*, activists discussed the daunting challenge of how to mobilize support for countless other women who had been criminalized and imprisoned for fighting back not only against strangers, acquaintances, and authorities, but also against their intimate partners. By the late 1970s, a feminist movement for battered and abused women—distinct from, but modeled upon, the rape crisis movement—spanned the country, comprised of local programs providing emergency shelter, peer-based counseling, and other forms of emotional and practical support to women negotiating or leaving abusive relationships and organized through statewide and national alliances. Radical feminist newspapers and newsletters did their part to educate readers on the ubiquity of such cases by regularly pairing updates on García, Little, Wanrow, and Woods with news of



Cassandra Peten Defense Fund poster, circa 1978. Courtesy Lincoln Cushing/Docs Populi Archive.

numerous other women—who were primarily of color or indigenous, more than occasionally disabled, and almost always working class or poor—in comparable circumstances who were supported by a local defense committee. Wanrow’s feminist attorneys from the Center for Constitutional Rights helped to launch the Women’s Self-Defense Project in 1978, whose affiliates “consulted on more than 100 cases, most of them involving women charged in the deaths of an abusive intimate partner or ex-partner.”<sup>162</sup>

One particularly salient, albeit short-lived, attempt at scaling up defense campaign organizing was the Bay Area Defense Committee for Battered Women (BADC). Formed by women activists with ties to U.S. Third World, women’s, and gay liberation movements, this multiracial feminist group

sought to trade on the visibility and pedagogical work of the four well-known defense campaigns to generate support for other women imprisoned for killing their intimate partners. The committee understood the activism these cases engendered as having helped to situate “third world women in a pivotal position—to forge the links between the white women’s movement and third world communities.”<sup>163</sup> BADC intended to coordinate multiple defense campaigns for women of color, especially battered women who endured “the repressive power of the state machinery,” seeing these campaigns as a strategic pressure point for “transforming our intimate social relations as well as the society we live in.”<sup>164</sup> The group initially came together around the case of Cassandra Peten, a young African American mother and shipyard worker from Oakland who was convicted of killing her abusive husband. Over its two-year existence, the organization coordinated education, publicity, and fund-raising efforts for more than a half-dozen battered women of color who had injured or killed their intimate abusers. Ultimately, this work proved too difficult to sustain with a relatively small group and on a meager budget. In an application to the progressive foundation Vanguard, project coordinator Amma Price acknowledged the transformative power of the “few celebrated cases” of women of color who killed their sexual assailants, yet emphasized that the four represented only the “mere tip of the iceberg.”<sup>165</sup>

\* \* \*

In the mid-1970s, the cases of Joan Little, Inez García, Dessie Woods, and Yvonne Wanrow engendered powerful grassroots campaigns that illuminated the interconnections of gendered violence and racial criminalization. The four cases had cumulative effects, not merely because of their “calendrical coincidence,”<sup>166</sup> but primarily because activists made analytical, rhetorical, and practical connections among them. These mobilizations functioned as coalitional spaces where multiple liberation movements interfaced and cross-fertilized. Indeed, defense organizing provided key opportunities for developing coalitional consciousness and practice.

Campaigners drew on the moral power and momentum afforded by Little’s cause, which itself built upon a long history of black resistance to sexual exploitation and racialized punishment. The campaign combined a civil rights organizing tradition of collectively resisting interracial sexual violence with Black Power critiques of policing and imprisonment, and fused multiracial feminist rebukes of respectability with the embrace of sexual self-determination and autonomy. Despite the meaningful differences between Little’s case and those of García, Wanrow, and Woods, activists insisted that the four—and the multiple forms of violence they represented—should be linked together.

The debates and initiatives that grew out of these organizing efforts reveal the great urgency that propelled activists and the difficulties they confronted as they attempted to develop a social movement strategy that prioritized those most vulnerable to violence in its myriad structural, institutional, and interpersonal forms. As the following chapters demonstrate, the organizing and theorizing propagated by the cases of Little, García, Wanrow, and Woods stimulated feminists to consider alternatives to reliance on the coercive power of the state to protect women against sexual and domestic violence. They also informed and spurred feminist organizing efforts that confronted the institutional violence of imprisonment itself.

## 2. Diagnosing Institutional Violence

### *Forging Alliances against the "Prison/Psychiatric State"*

They write us up, or send us to seg [solitary] if we refuse to take a needle of drugs that destroy our minds and spirits.

—Carol Crooks (1975)

Ultimately, then, our goal is to dismantle the whole violent system.

—Coalition to Stop Institutional Violence (1977)

On October 1, 1977, nearly a thousand demonstrators took to the streets of downtown Boston to protest the planned opening of a center for "violent women" at a Massachusetts state mental hospital in Worcester. Organized by a local alliance called the Coalition to Stop Institutional Violence (CSIV), the march culminated at the Boston Common in front of the State House, where spokespersons outlined their objections to the center. Worcester State Hospital, which was already the subject of investigation for its mistreatment of incarcerated patients, would function as an institutional outpost of the Massachusetts Correctional Institution at Framingham (MCI-Framingham), the state's women's prison. The center was the latest in a series of proposals issued by the state's departments of corrections and mental health to establish a secure facility for Framingham prisoners deemed a threat to themselves or others. Activists focused their protest on correctional authorities' opaque use of the designation *violent*, suggesting that it veiled the highly political nature of the center. They argued that the center would be used discretionarily against imprisoned women who protested their conditions of confinement, and that women of color and lesbian women would be especially vulnerable.

### 3. Printing Abolition

#### *The Transformative Power of Women's Prison Newsletters*

And, if I know anything at all,  
It's that a wall is just a wall  
and nothing more at all.  
It can be broken down.

—Assata Shakur, "Affirmation" (1987)

Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here  
and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete  
possibility for another world.

—José Esteban Muñoz (2009)

The first issue of the Seattle-based grassroots publication *Through the Looking Glass: A Women and Children Prison Newsletter* hit activist bookstores, feminist mailboxes, and prisons and jails in the spring of 1976. The dozen mimeographed tabloid-size pages featured stories about conditions in Washington State's women's prison and the use of grand juries to harass local leftist activists. Readers also learned the latest news about Yvonne Wanrow's protracted legal battle, and some heard, perhaps for the first time, about Gloria Timmons, a local African American woman recently imprisoned for killing her violently abusive husband. The *Through the Looking Glass* (TTLG) collective, which published the newsletter, declared its multifaceted and ambitious feminist mission on the inside cover: "to remind people that women and children are locked up . . . to encourage analysis of different forms of incarceration . . . to communicate ideas on how to improve conditions, reduce the numbers of us in jails, and shorten sentences while believing that society needs to be radically changed so that prisons of any kind will no longer exist, to communicate across the barriers that have been put up

to keep us in, or out," and to create a place where women incarcerated in various prisons "can communicate to each other."<sup>1</sup>

Two years later, on the other side of the country, a feminist collective based in Brooklyn, New York, launched a women's prison newsletter of its own. As was also true of TTLG, Women Free Women in Prison (WFWP) was a primarily white, working-class, and lesbian group; a few members of these groups described themselves as survivors of psychiatric institutions or former prisoners. Both TTLG and WFWP engaged in various forms of "prisoner support work," such as transporting children to see their incarcerated parents and coordinating letter-writing campaigns, as well as political education and direct-action organizing. After three years, WFWP decided that a newsletter could play a key role in publicizing incarcerated women's political thought and activism and facilitating communication across prison walls within and beyond the Northeast. *No More Cages: A Bi-monthly Women's Prison Newsletter* would also analyze "the parallels between prisons and other institutions used to lock people up" and promote interchange between "the prison movement and the anti-psychiatry movement."<sup>2</sup>

In 1980, the two groups struck a mutually supportive agreement to publish on alternate months and encourage their respective readers to subscribe to the other's newsletter.<sup>3</sup> Although they depended entirely on volunteer labor and grassroots fund-raising, WFWP managed to keep *No More Cages* in print for five years, and TTLG sustained its newsletter for more than a decade.

Part of a "revolution in ephemera" that took place in the long 1970s, *No More Cages* and *Through the Looking Glass* emerged at the intersection between the print culture of antiprison activism and what came to be called the Women in Print movement.<sup>4</sup> They resembled many other grassroots and underground periodicals, "juxtaposing typed and handwritten text, photographs and hand-drawn graphics, signed and unsigned articles, and layout that appears professionally done alongside typos, misnumbered pages, and crooked lines of text."<sup>5</sup> Several feminist periodicals, including such titles as *Big Mama Rag*, *off our backs*, and *Lesbian Tide*, regularly included a page or more on happenings in and around women's prisons, as did antiprison periodicals such as *Midnight Special*, *Bar None*, and the gay liberation publication *Join Hands*. TTLG and WFWP often reprinted and remixed material from these and other left-wing publications. What set their newsletters apart, however, was their central focus on women's prisons and imprisoned women's writings.

This chapter explores the "world-making project" of women's prison newsletters. Queer studies scholars Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner explain that "'world,' like 'public,' differs from community or group because it necessarily includes more people than can be identified, more spaces than



can be mapped beyond a few reference points, modes of feeling that can be learned rather than experienced as a birthright.”<sup>6</sup> Bringing together disparate voices and places, these publications helped to build a highly decentralized, cross-regional women’s prison movement in the 1970s and early 1980s. They functioned as a critical forum through which a racially, economically, and geographically diverse cross section of incarcerated activists and their allies forged “unsystematized lines of acquaintance” and exchanged ideas, strategies, and updates, enabling information to traverse institutional and local boundaries.<sup>7</sup> The newsletters also constituted an imagined community, as they allowed an unknowable number of people, many of whom would never meet directly, to conceive of themselves as part of a shared culture—or *world*—of opposition.<sup>8</sup>

The chapter examines how this outlaw counterpublic incubated a politics of prison abolition that centered carceral violence against women. Grassroots print cultures, as feminist scholar Maylei Blackwell has suggested, are important sites for “helping us to understand the development of . . . ideology, discourse, and political praxis in a way that accounts for how ideas traveled through local formations as well as larger cross-regional circulations.”<sup>9</sup> As rare archives of numerous imprisoned women’s activist writings, *No More Cages* and *Through the Looking Glass* shed light on the ways in which these missives influenced social movement discourses beyond bars and shaped the trajectory of antiracist and queer feminist politics. Contributors, both captive and free, used these platforms to amplify their organizing efforts by appealing to readers to lend support to and spread the word about campaigns to improve prison conditions, oppose behavior modification regimes, halt new prison construction, and defend women who had killed their batterers and sexual assailants. In the process, this counterpublic culture circulated trenchant critiques of the institutional violence of incarceration and of the chasm between a prisoners’ rights movement focused on men’s institutions and feminist antirape and battered women’s activism increasingly enmeshed with the criminal justice state. Moreover, the world constituted by these publications fostered life-supporting relationships and alternatives to the dominant political culture that systematically devalued and excluded those deemed criminally other. Additionally, by tracing the trajectories of the collectives behind *Through the Looking Glass* and *No More Cages*, the chapter explores their efforts to build alliances with imprisoned women, both in print and in person.

## This Newsletter Is an Action

Prisons rely on isolation. Visiting, phone, and mail regulations limit prisoners’ access to their loved ones and others concerned about their well-being. Geography plays a key role in generating isolation, since many institutions are located far from prisoners’ communities of origin. Inside the walls, security classification schemes, policies limiting physical and verbal interaction, and the well-founded fear of reprisal all work to isolate prisoners from one another. These practices help to make prisons inaccessible, even invisible, to much of the public, shielding institutional authorities from scrutiny and accountability. In the 1970s, prison activists on both sides of the bars employed what historian Dan Berger calls a “strategy of visibility” to counteract this problem.<sup>10</sup> They turned to alternative media to challenge dominant ideologies of crime and punishment and to bring greater attention to prisoner organizing in leftist and feminist milieus. By circulating information and facilitating relationships that enabled incarcerated people to resist their conditions, newsletters and newspapers such as *No More Cages* and *Through the Looking Glass* represented a palpable threat to the prison as a “total institution.”<sup>11</sup> It is precisely for this reason that prison authorities regularly attempted to thwart the circulation of these publications and that prisoners repeatedly listed mail censorship as a major grievance.

Prison newspapers and newsletters represented one strand of a multifaceted and widespread radical print revolution in the 1960s and 1970s that involved new leftists, antiracist radicals, gay liberationists, feminists, and antipsychiatry activists. The radical feminist Robin Morgan opened her 1970 anthology, *Sisterhood Is Powerful*, by announcing: “This book is an action.” The editors of alternative newspapers shared that conviction.<sup>12</sup> Across the country, hundreds of activist groups made and distributed their own newspapers, and together these antiestablishment journalists created an “underground press” that reached millions of readers. Among the conditions of possibility for this revolution was the development of the inexpensive and easy-to-use technology of photo-offset printing.<sup>13</sup> Many papers, including *No More Cages* and *Through the Looking Glass*, relied on the Liberation News Service (1967–1981) for graphics, bulletins, and photographs to supplement locally generated content.<sup>14</sup> Embracing advocacy in their reporting and addressing their readers as comrades in struggle, activist newspapers “educated, politicized, and built communities.”<sup>15</sup> They fomented cross-local, cross-regional, and cross-wall communications and alliances.

In the context of prison newspapers and newsletters, it is important to distinguish between antiprison publications and those sanctioned by prison

authorities. Some one hundred institutions had prisoner-produced news organs in the 1970s and early 1980s that were sponsored by the administration. By and large, the editors of these publications failed to obtain approval from censors to publish anything that criticized prison conditions or policy. From the vantage point of officials, a prison newsletter was a vocational opportunity with rehabilitative potential, not a forum for dissent.<sup>16</sup> These stood in dramatic contrast to several clandestinely produced prisoner publications and more than a dozen radical inside-outside publications that circulated during the period.<sup>17</sup> Among the latter were black nationalist newspapers, such as *Arm the Spirit* and *Midnight Special*, and newsletters produced by local and regional organizations, such as the New England Prisoner Association and the San Francisco gay liberation group Join Hands.<sup>18</sup> Most of these publications included at least some coverage of cycles of rebellion and repression in women's prisons, as well as letters and communiqués from women prisoners.

*No More Cages* and *Through the Looking Glass* were part of the Women in Print movement, a distinctly feminist strand of the radical print revolution. By the early 1970s, more than 500 grassroots feminist newsletters and newspapers were in circulation.<sup>19</sup> From advertising local events to explaining how to start your own consciousness-raising group or rape crisis center, these publications became a primary way in which women learned about, located, joined, and helped to grow feminist movements. The proliferation of feminist news media was complemented and facilitated by the emergence of feminist bookstores, printing presses, and publishers in urban centers across the country, within which lesbian women often played central roles.<sup>20</sup>

At least a dozen feminist periodicals, almost all of which were written and produced by lesbians and women of color, saw imprisoned women as prospective readers and offered them free subscriptions.<sup>21</sup> A smaller number of these publications, particularly those based in places where women's prison activism burgeoned in the 1970s, regularly covered prison happenings as well as the cases of women facing incarceration for their political activism or their acts of self-defense against rape and battering. The Third World Women's Alliance's emphasis on incarceration in its quarterly newspaper, *Triple Jeopardy* (1971–1975), reflected and extended the organization's commitment to working on issues felt most acutely by multiply marginalized women of color and its involvement in defense campaigns for black and Puerto Rican women political prisoners. Others that made conditions in women's prisons and jails a journalistic priority, such as Denver's *Big Mama Rag*, New Orleans' *Distaff*, Los Angeles' *The Lesbian Tide*, and Washington, D.C.'s *off our backs*, did not reflect a particular organizational agenda but mirrored the concerns of local and regional activist networks.

Drawing on their experiences as readers and writers of the alternative press, members of the Through the Looking Glass and Women Free Women in Prison collectives envisioned and created prison newsletters that linked women in prison to one another and to those outside. They aimed to bring "the issues of the Prison Movement and the Anti-Psychiatry Movement . . . together with the Anti-Racist, Women's and Lesbian and Gay Movements."<sup>22</sup>

## Dykes Organizing between the Bars

### The Through the Looking Glass Collective

The TTLG collective emerged out of a Seattle-based feminist organization called the Women Out Now Prison Project (WON), a support and organizing group formed in 1973. One of the key founders of the collective, a white, working-class, self-described dyke from rural Oregon named Rita "Bo" Brown, had recently returned to Seattle after serving a year in a federal prison in the Los Angeles area for mail theft. She had begun developing an antiracist consciousness and cut her activist teeth while incarcerated, thanks in part to a friend who was involved in an "underground black women's reading group."<sup>23</sup> Upon returning to Seattle, Brown enrolled in courses at Seattle Central Community College, where she joined an activist group that visited prisoners at a nearby men's institution. She also formed a connection with a program at the University of Washington (UW) for men being released on parole from Walla Walla State Penitentiary, Washington's oldest and largest prison, located in the southeastern corner of the state. Through these and other local activist circles, Brown met Therese Coupeze, a white working-class UW student, and several others who shared her interest in creating an organization dedicated to supporting women prisoners. The group decided to concentrate its energies on Washington's new women's prison located in Pierce County, roughly an hour southwest of Seattle.<sup>24</sup>

Prior to establishing the Purdy Treatment Center for Women, Washington State had incarcerated women with felony convictions in a separate structure on the grounds of the men's prison in Walla Walla. The women's annex was severely crowded, and recreation, job training, and education programs were nearly nonexistent. Purdy Treatment Center promised to become "one of the nation's most enlightened correctional institutions," according to officials. The prison's name, along with its physical resemblance to a "community college campus," was meant to communicate its ostensible anticustodial approach. Purdy's program of "progressive freedom" meant that compliant prisoners were rewarded with increasing degrees of mobility and privacy, graduating

from locked units to self-locking rooms and finally to two-person, two-bedroom apartments for those participating in work and education release programs.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the prison's first superintendent advertised her "hope that hundreds of citizens will be coming to the center from the community . . . providing encouragement and guidance to the residents, and letting the people who support our institutions with their tax dollars see that the program is working."<sup>26</sup> WON leveraged the prison's commitment to citizen engagement, cloaking its own prison abolitionist and anticapitalist politics in the institution's vocabulary of training, personal development, and productive citizenship after release.

The new organization of "ex-convicts and friends" quickly drew women students who had been volunteering with the men's prison programs, as well as other leftist feminist lesbians.<sup>27</sup> Within its first year, the organization brought women from more than thirty Seattle-area organizations into the prison under the rubric of vocational training and skill development, including self-defense instructors, a band of "queer puppeteers," and representatives of the Lesbian Resource Center and the local chapter of COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics), a sex workers' rights organization.<sup>28</sup> "So we were women outside trying to help women inside transition back into the community and get involved," as one former member explains it.<sup>29</sup> WON responded to prisoners' desires to see their loved ones more often by organizing a weekend carpool program between Seattle's predominantly African American Central District and Rainier Valley neighborhoods and the prison. Additionally, the group fund-raised to provide what monetary support they could to women just released on parole, participated in defense campaigns for women imprisoned for defending themselves from male violence, and helped to link prisoners with progressive women attorneys willing to do pro bono work. An informational letter described the underlying aim of these activities as to "try to help convicts recognize their power to demand change as a united body."<sup>30</sup> This support work, the group suggested, was in service of their long-range vision of "the abolishment of prisons and the full restoration of all human and civil rights."<sup>31</sup>

Several events precipitated the end of WON and the formation of TTLG in its stead. In the fall of 1975, two of WON's principal cofounders, Brown and Coupez, left the group to join the George Jackson Brigade, a clandestine armed group named in honor of the famed prisoner activist and Black Panther who was killed by guards at California's San Quentin State Prison in 1971. The small mixed-gender and predominately white group advocated and engaged in armed resistance against capitalism and the state; it claimed responsibility for several bank robberies and more than a dozen pipe bombings

of various government and corporate targets.<sup>32</sup> By 1978, Brown and Coupez (along with the rest of the Brigade) were behind bars for their participation in these actions. Both became readers and occasional contributors to *Through the Looking Glass* and *No More Cages*.<sup>33</sup>

Around the same time that Brown and Coupez joined the political underground, a small group of women who had worked together on *Moonstorm*, a lesbian feminist newsletter in St. Louis, Missouri, moved to Seattle. The remaining WON membership, together with these newcomers, decided to form a collective that would continue the carpool program and other forms of direct support for women imprisoned at Purdy, as well as create a women's prison newsletter.<sup>34</sup>

TTLG's membership fluctuated over the organization's eleven-year run, but the group generally hovered around fifteen. Publishing a monthly (and later quarterly) newsletter on a shoestring budget with an entirely volunteer staff of working people required frequent meetings that went long and late. The collective made decisions by consensus, and individual members were encouraged to have a hand in the substantive work of corresponding with imprisoned writers, generating content, and working on layout, as well as expected to take part in the routine tasks such as mimeographing, folding, stapling, stamping, and mailing. In addition to the several hundred copies mailed to prisoners each month, stacks of *Through the Looking Glass* were delivered to feminist bookwomen at Mad Woman and It's About Time, as well as two anarchist bookshops, Red and Black Books and Left Bank Books.<sup>35</sup> Some TTLG members belonged to Seattle's Lesbian Feminist Radio Collective, which produced a regular show for the noncommercial station KRAB-FM; occasionally, they would "just read *Through the Looking Glass*" on the air.<sup>36</sup> Alongside the constant grind of newsletter production, TTLG members sustained their concrete support work for prisoners and their families and engaged in various educational, advocacy, and direct action organizing activities.<sup>37</sup>

### The Women Free Women in Prison Collective

WFWP's beginnings can be traced to a series of prisoner uprisings in 1974 at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, located roughly an hour north of Manhattan, New York City, in an affluent, overwhelmingly white section of Westchester County. Though Bedford Hills was not proclaimed a beacon of rehabilitation like Purdy Treatment Center, Attica-inspired reforms helped to open up the prison's gates to artists, educators, and legal volunteers in the early 1970s. When a black prisoner activist named Carol Crooks was severely

beaten by a group of guards and placed in segregation in February 1974, news of this incident traveled swiftly to prisoner advocates on the outside. Afeni Shakur, one of the Panther 21, was working at the time as a paralegal at South Bronx Legal Services. She and several other women formed a defense committee for Crooks and helped her to retain an attorney.<sup>38</sup> In August, the court ruled that Crooks's rights to due process had been violated by the prison, and she was sent back to general population. Not even a month passed before she was once again brutalized by a group of guards and thrown back in segregation. This abuse catalyzed roughly seventy women prisoners, the majority of whom were African American and Latina, to stage a major demonstration.

When Crooks and nearly two dozen women involved in the "August Rebellion" were transferred to the Matteawan Complex for the Criminally Insane in Dutchess County, a small group in New York City calling itself Women Against Prison made frequent trips up the Hudson River Valley to the notorious institution and funneled information to and from the prisoners' loved ones and advocates at South Bronx Legal Services.<sup>39</sup> Crooks's 1974 lawsuit became the first of many brought by her and other prisoners over the course of the decade. According to sociologist Juanita Díaz-Cotto, the more that prisoners and their advocates turned to the courts for redress for institutional injustices, the more prison administrators obstructed their path: "Tactics included labeling prisoners who sought reforms as 'disruptive,' 'violent,' and 'troublemakers,' threatening prisoners with reprisals if they challenged institutional rules and regulations or participated as plaintiffs in the lawsuits, and promising additional 'privileges' to prisoners who informed on their peers."<sup>40</sup> Moreover, officials continued to use the pipeline from the prison to the state hospital that had been in place at least since the mid-1960s.<sup>41</sup> In blatant violation of their due process rights, seven African American women were transferred to the facility's segregation unit in 1976 and subjected to a behavior modification program called Steps toward Eventual Acceptance of a Disciplined You, or "STEADY."<sup>42</sup> Women Against Prison continued to make weekly trips to visit the "Matteawan sisters" until a federal judge ordered that they be returned to Bedford Hills.<sup>43</sup> Around this same time, the group decided on a new name. As a former member recalls, "While we were against *all* prisons, we felt it was important to make clear that we were women working to free *women* in prison."<sup>44</sup> Notably, the group rejected biologically deterministic conceptions of gender; at least one of the prisoners WFWP regularly visited at Matteawan was a transgender woman.<sup>45</sup>

As Díaz-Cotto has documented, black, Latina, and white prisoners, especially so-called long-termers, forged unprecedented cross-racial solidarities in the face of persistent repression, refusing to allow correctional officers or

administrators to exploit racial distinctions. An underground multiracial coalition collected stories of abuse and discrimination, drafted and circulated petitions, and liaised with outside activists.<sup>46</sup> In the summer of 1978, more than three-quarters of Bedford Hills' 450 prisoners, "after many months of filing grievances," waged a nonviolent, daylong strike against "increased beatings and harassment by guards" and excessive use of segregation, as well as mail tampering, limited phone access, little "gym and yard time," and egregiously low wages.<sup>47</sup> When the administration refused to negotiate with the strikers, prisoner leaders called upon New York City activists for a loud and visible display of solidarity. Together with a group called Solidarity with Sisters Inside, WFWP organized a "Coalition to Defend Women at Bedford" that rallied at the prison gates in August and helped to disseminate the prisoners' list of demands through alternative media.<sup>48</sup>

After several years of visiting prisoners, packing courtrooms, and organizing protests and educational programs about prison conditions, WFWP members resolved to concentrate on publishing a bimonthly newsletter in an effort to nurture the fledgling women's prison movement. Members argued that bourgeois bias within the women's movement and male supremacy within the antiprison movement conspired to render imprisoned women invisible. By channeling a portion of their energy into a newsletter, WFWP members sought to increase the level of support for women prisoners within an assemblage of radical and progressive movements. *No More Cages* was designed to be a forum for exchanging information, creating knowledge, and documenting resistance.<sup>49</sup> An essay by a WFWP member in the 1980 activist anthology *Top Ranking: Essays on Racism and Classism in the Lesbian Community* described the newsletter's aims as alleviating "the isolation of women in prison" by facilitating communication "between women in different prisons, but also between 'them' inside and 'us' outside, so that we can learn to understand each other and each other's struggles and work together to change the system."<sup>50</sup>

Although the collective remained quite small—at times having as few as four members—comrades, friends, and lovers pitched in to help with everything from addressing and stamping copies to designing covers. Among this wider network of helpers were several affiliates of the Liberation News Service and members of the Brooklyn-based collective, Dykes Against Racism Everywhere (DARE).<sup>51</sup> Fund-raising for the newsletter also created opportunities for other antiracist feminist organizations in New York City, such as DARE, Asian Lesbians of the East Coast, and Salsa Soul Sisters, to lend their support by cosponsoring and organizing benefit events.<sup>52</sup> Like TTLG, WFWP continued its prisoner support work alongside its alternative media

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production and treated its newsletter as an outreach tool to help expand local feminist opposition to women's imprisonment. By dedicating themselves to putting their abolitionist politics in print, these small collectives had a reach and impact that far exceeded their numbers.

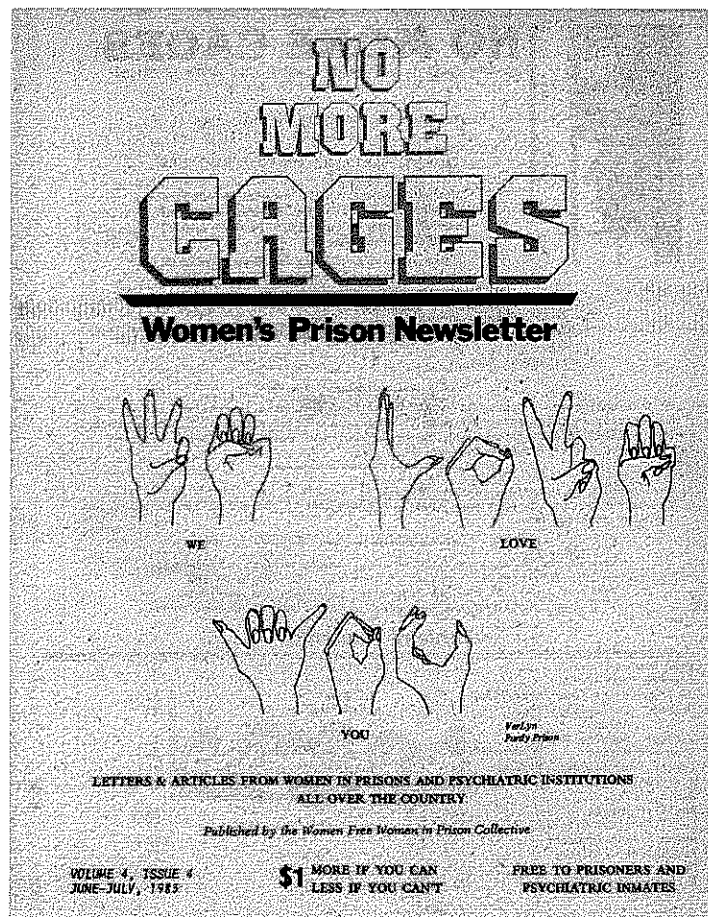
### Creating a Counterpublic against Incarceration

A letter published in *No More Cages* in January of 1982 attests to the connections generated by the newsletter. An imprisoned woman wrote:

Hello Sisters, How's it going? I'm still in the struggle. A few months ago I sent a letter, Poem, and Picture and asked for correspondence to my dismay alot of the letters I received from sisters inside I cannot answer because of the corresponding rules at this institution. I'm sending a poem I wrote this morning along with this letter please Publish this letter and the poem. To all the womyn who wrote me thank you very much. I only wish I could return the feeling you sent my way. Thank you. . . . Keep the newsletter going I love it! It's the best thing that's happened to me since arriving in this hellhole called Prison.

This missive illustrates the power of antiprison newsletters and the counterpublic they created. Contributors used these publications to circumvent administrative roadblocks and address an imagined community of imprisoned resisters, survivors of incarceration, advocates, and allies belonging to "incommensurate geographies."<sup>53</sup> For some, participating in this print culture was a vital means of countering the demoralizing effects of institutionalization. As one Bedford Hills prisoner put it in her request for a subscription to *No More Cages*: "For all it's worth, I'm a Black lesbian interested in one day becoming a writer. Who knows maybe your newsletter will help keep me inspired. Prison has a way of breaking a woman down. I don't want it to happen to me."<sup>54</sup> Imprisoned writers found in these newsletters a sense of companionship and camaraderie with one another, an audience for their creative and political expression, and evidence of the existence of people and groups urgently concerned about the injustices of incarceration.

The January 1982 issue of *No More Cages* included letters, poetry, manifestos, and statements of demands by writers imprisoned in more than a dozen different institutions in the Midwest, Northeast, and Pacific Northwest. Readers learned, for example, about a hunger strike at Muncy state prison in Pennsylvania led by several members of Philadelphia's MOVE, a black liberation organization that was subjected to a massive, military-style attack and bombing by the police. The strikers were protesting severe overcrowding and a lack of institutional protocols for preventing the spread of communicable diseases.<sup>55</sup> Acts of advocacy, expressions of solidarity, and requests for information and support flowed in multiple directions. A "jailhouse lawyer" at Menard Correctional Center in Illinois wrote to request a subscription so that he might "become more familiar with the plight of my sister prisoners" and offered his self-taught legal skills; a feminist attorney replied to a prisoner's request for legal advice in a previous issue; a deaf prisoner suggested strategies her "hearing sisters" might use to better communicate with deaf women at their own institutions. Interspersed throughout the issue were journalistic pieces, reprinted from leftist or feminist periodicals or penned by collective members, on such topics as the disproportionate incarceration of people with

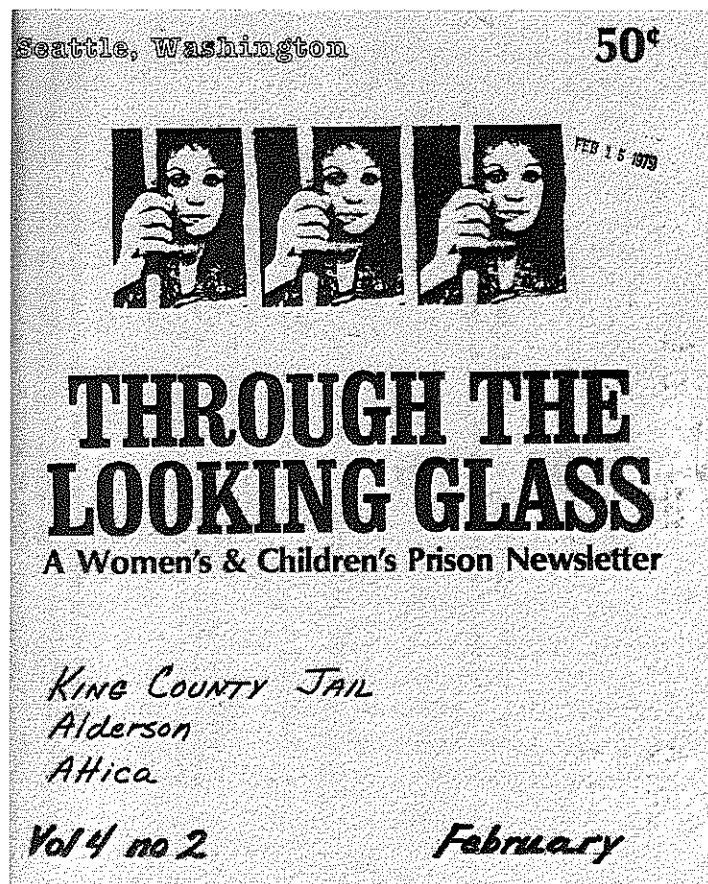


Cover of *No More Cages*, June–July 1983. From the Bromfield Street Educational Foundation Prison Newsletter Collection, Northeastern University Archives and Special Collections.

cognitive and psychological disabilities; a fire that took more than two dozen lives at a Mississippi women's prison; the impunity of corporate crime as juxtaposed to a sharp spike in prostitution-related arrests; and recent prisoner advocacy and organizing efforts in Oregon and Washington. On the short list of "books free to women inside" recommended by WFWP were the renowned anthologies, *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (1982) and *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981).<sup>56</sup> *Through the Looking Glass* was characterized by a similar heterogeneity of subjectivity, genre, and purpose.

The two newsletters' subscription lists grew to include several hundred people incarcerated in more than 150 different jails and prisons in the years around 1980. Imprisoned readers of these publications likely numbered more than a thousand, since a single copy might change hands multiple times within a cell block or dormitory. Both newsletters regularly included writings by and news about incarcerated women activists who were generally well-known among feminists and leftists and viewed as political prisoners, such as Assata Shakur and Puerto Rican independistas Lolita Lebrón and Alejandrina Torres. Most contributors' imprisonment, however, resulted not from social movement activity but from getting caught in the carceral dragnet for committing survival crimes or "because they offended this society's moral standards."<sup>57</sup> These contributors opted for varying levels of anonymity and self-identification to mitigate the tangible threat of institutional retribution. Most shared where they were incarcerated, some also provided a first name, and some gave a full name and prison mailing address and requested direct replies. Many identified themselves in letters as African American or black, Native American, and lesbians or dykes as they elucidated the ways in which racism, settler colonialism, and heteropatriarchy structured both the prison as an institution and the conditions of their criminalization. A number of politically active prisoners in men's institutions, including at least one transgender woman, subscribed and occasionally contributed to these newsletters as well.<sup>58</sup> (Throughout the chapter, I have included any racial, ethnic, tribal, sexual, and gender identifications that imprisoned contributors chose to make known in their writings.) Although both publishing collectives regularly expressed a desire to reach women institutionalized in psychiatric hospitals and made their publications "free to prisoners and psychiatric inmates," institutional barriers proved intractable. Another factor limiting participation in these print communities was fluency and literacy in English. Neither editorial collective developed bilingual materials, despite the growing number of incarcerated monolingual Spanish-speaking immigrants in the early to mid-1980s.<sup>59</sup>

Prison authorities actively sought to block prisoners' participation in these print communities as both contributors and readers.<sup>60</sup> Mykki, a white, lesbian-identified woman imprisoned at Purdy, wrote to WFWP to inform the group that she had "not been receiving your newsletter every 2 months. Sometimes I receive a slip in its place that says I can't have it because it contains plans of escape, etc. in it. They do this more frequently with the newsletter 'TTLG' especially if any newsletter contains anything I've written."<sup>61</sup> Writing for a radical periodical could easily result in disciplinary action. In an Arkansas prison in 1976, for example, a woman who had recently



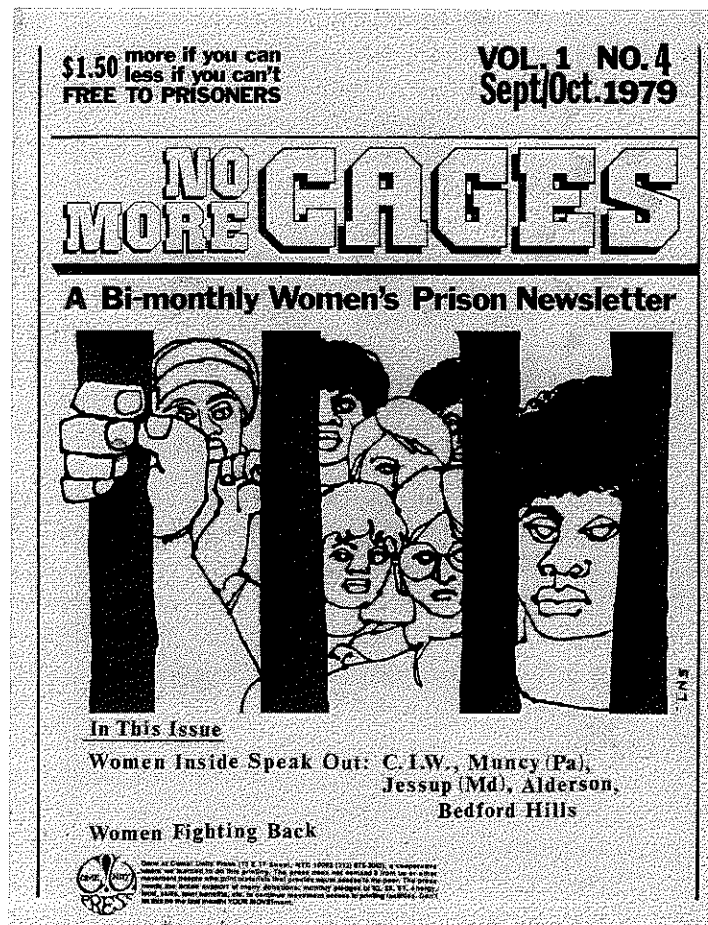
Cover of *Through the Looking Glass*, February 1979. From the Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance Periodicals Collection, Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture, Rubenstein Library, Duke University.

published a letter in a feminist newspaper produced in Eugene, Oregon, was accused of “mutiny,” beaten by guards, and placed in maximum security.<sup>62</sup> A person imprisoned at the California Institution for Women in the early 1980s stated that she chose “not to include my name in this letter, because one of the women here is locked down for calling the news.”<sup>63</sup> Others made the same decision as Sharron Wallace, an African American woman who suffered years of solitary confinement in a Midwest prison. She was well aware that writing to these publications would “cause a great deal of retaliation” toward her, yet she “had come to the conclusion that to be forced to

live in such confinement and under such wretched conditions was itself a kind of death” and therefore chose to take the personal and political risks of circulating her name and story as broadly as possible.<sup>64</sup>

In December 1976, the U.S. Bureau of Prisons issued an official ban on “gay” publications in the federal prison system. Officials rationalized that gay and lesbian prisoners would be “outed” by receiving such literature and would, in turn, face greater risk of social isolation along with harassment and violence from other prisoners.<sup>65</sup> At least some state departments of corrections banned gay publications on the grounds that they endorsed and promoted deviant sexual behavior.<sup>66</sup> In 1977, TTLG began to receive return mail from several federal prisons.<sup>67</sup> The newsletter may very well have been flagged for its queer content, but it also bore the return address of its fiscal sponsor, Seattle Gay Community Services. Rather than end or conceal this organizational affiliation, TTLG reaffirmed “the hated word gay,” declaring that it conveys “love and unity among women, and enables us to reach across prison walls to each other. We will not deny who we are and what we work for, even though . . . [that would] make prison officials a little more comfortable, more likely to decide that we are harmless and helpless enough for ‘their’ prisoners to read.”<sup>68</sup> The group appealed to allies to write to their legislators and galvanize community groups to take action on this issue, and encouraged those inside to continue sharing their “direct knowledge of discriminatory practices.”<sup>69</sup> Prisoner and gay and lesbian rights organizations in collaboration with several affected publishers successfully toppled the ban by bringing a legal suit in 1980, but censorship of antiracist, feminist, and gay liberation literature remained pervasive in county, state, and federal institutions.<sup>70</sup> In turn, imprisoned activists often named mail tampering and censorship as among their key grievances. In one instance, three prisoners at the Ohio Reformatory in Marysville took steps to file a class action lawsuit when they became aware that prison officials had banned *No More Cages*. As a result, the superintendent relaxed the ban, but the group reported to WFWP that they still endured harassment from guards and administrators in retaliation for their collective action.<sup>71</sup>

Despite these institutional barriers, a multitude of people on both sides of the bars utilized *No More Cages* and *Through the Looking Glass* to myriad ends. Contributors expressed themselves creatively; circulated news of strikes, campaigns, and other prison happenings; recruited allies and sympathizers; and countered the isolation of incarceration. Readers could compare conditions of confinement in dozens of prisons and jails throughout the country while imagining themselves as part of broader political communities that traversed the walls of these institutions.



Cover of *No More Cages*, September–October 1979. From the Coalition to Stop Institutional Violence Records, Northeastern University Archives and Special Collections.

## Outlaw Knowledges of Violence and Antiviolence

*No More Cages* and *Through the Looking Glass* served as sites of convergence and exchange, as well as archives of subjugated knowledge. Conversations in the pages of these newsletters produced understandings of violence against women that implicitly, and sometimes directly, critiqued the mainstream feminist movement both for embracing a law-and-order approach to rape and

battering and for marginalizing women prisoners, including those incarcerated for fighting back against their abusers. Contributors, both captive and free, analyzed the political economy of punishment; racial, gender, sexual, and economic hierarchies shaped who would (and would not) be sent to prison and for how long and in what conditions they would be confined. Letters and essays from prisoners testified to sexual harassment, abuse, and coercion and identified practices that were part of the “normal functioning of the prison”<sup>72</sup> as forms of violence, including body cavity searches, inadequate or absent medical care, rules limiting verbal and physical interactions, and behavior modification regimes. At the same time, these publications illuminate what the anthropologist James C. Scott has called “hidden transcripts” of everyday resistance to imprisonment. As sociologist Avery Gordon has argued, the “body of subjugated knowledge” found in insurgent prison literature contains a “radical methodology of imprisonment, a pedagogy of finding and making life where death and destruction dominate.”<sup>73</sup> Serving as repositories for the critical thought of women prisoners and their allies, these publications offered a powerful counter-narrative of violence against women that elucidated the violence of the carceral state and contended that prison abolition should be a feminist demand.

### The Criminalization of Survivors

Nearly every issue of *No More Cages* and *Through the Looking Glass* contained news of the legal battles of women facing criminal charges or appealing convictions related to defending themselves against rape and battering. Although they were founded after Joan Little’s and Inez García’s court victories, these newsletters kept their names and stories in circulation. They followed Little’s continued legal troubles by providing coverage of her incarceration until she was paroled in 1979 and provided consistent updates on Yvonne Wanrow’s and Dessie X. Woods’s legal struggles, which culminated in 1979 and 1981, respectively. The Little, García, Wanrow, and Woods cases inspired significant cross-movement organizing in part because these fight-back stories coalesced into an allegory of gendered racial power and resistance. But these newsletters also covered dozens of cases that never achieved the same national-level visibility, including those of women of color who killed their intimate partners, rather than an acquaintance, stranger, or state agent. *No More Cages* and *Through the Looking Glass* provide a crucial window onto a world of local defense organizing that otherwise left few archival traces.

Readers learned of the case of Edna Louise Pipkins, a twenty-seven-year-old working-class African American woman living in Hartford, Connecticut,



who killed her live-in boyfriend after enduring two years of abuse. Pipkins had called the police on twenty-three separate occasions. The combined efforts of women from her housing project and the Hartford Interval House, a battered women's shelter where she had sought support, were instrumental in securing a dismissal of her charge of manslaughter. The Edna Louise Pipkins Defense Committee educated the Hartford community about the facts of her case and collected more than 1,000 signatures to deliver to the court on her behalf. WFWP remarked: "In legal terms it is said that Edna Louise Pipkin [*sic*] won her case. It would be more accurate to say that she escaped the usual punishment of imprisonment faced by most poor women of color who fight back against their batterers."<sup>74</sup>

Both newsletters covered the case of Paula Three Stars, an Oglala Sioux woman living near Seattle who shot and killed her abusive partner of more than six years in 1983. The previous year, Three Stars had called the police for help. As her pan-indigenous, women-led defense committee chronicled in *No More Cages*, she was told there was "nothing they could do. Realizing the police would not respond to a domestic dispute, Paula called again and reported a robbery. The police responded, but rather than take her to a shelter, they took her to jail for making a false report."<sup>75</sup> Three Stars was originally given ten years for first-degree manslaughter, but thanks to the efforts of her defense committee she successfully appealed for a sentence of three years of probation.<sup>76</sup> On the other side of the country, supporters of Bulesa Gibbs declared victory when a New Jersey judge decided to sentence Gibbs to probation rather than prison after an all-white jury found the African American abuse survivor guilty of "atrocious assault and battery" against her husband. According to a story produced by the Liberation News Service and published in both newsletters, Gibbs's supporters had packed the courtroom for the duration of the trial and delivered hundreds of letters and a petition to the court. "There was consensus among everyone in the courtroom that [the judge's] leniency was directly attributable to this wide response."<sup>77</sup>

Readers learned about a successful community mobilization in Cincinnati to defend an African American woman named Anna Small. Small shot her neighbor, rumored to be a Ku Klux Klansman, when he threatened her life and broke into her home in January 1980. The man had verbally and physically harassed her for years: "Anna was insulted daily, rocks were thrown at her house, gasoline was spread on her lawn in an apparent attempt at arson . . . police provided little or no protection during this time."<sup>78</sup> When she was charged with involuntary manslaughter, a handful of labor, church, and women's groups forged an alliance to politicize her case.<sup>79</sup> The dissemination

of numerous stories of success affirmed the grassroots strategy of participatory defense and its potential to mitigate judicial racism and sexism.

Yet most abuse survivors who killed in self-defense in the 1970s and early 1980s were convicted rather than acquitted, and incarcerated rather than sentenced to probation. For imprisoned self-defenders such as Juanita Thomas and Robin Anderson, women's prison newsletters served as forums for sustaining communication with supporters, soliciting legal aid, and finding resonance in others' accounts of intimate and state violence.<sup>80</sup> In 1979, Thomas, an African American mother of five who worked as a janitor in Lansing, Michigan, killed her live-in boyfriend when he sexually attacked her at knifepoint one night after she had suffered more than a decade of his physical, emotional, and sexual violence. Thomas was convicted by a jury of ten white women and two white men of first-degree murder and sentenced to life without parole. She recalled that advocates at the local battered women's shelter initially lent their support, but "once I went to prison they soon forgot about me real quick."<sup>81</sup> A small group of women activists calling themselves Support Group for Women in Prison made Thomas's case their central focus in the early 1980s. This group utilized *No More Cages* to find and learn from other activists engaged in similar advocacy work around the country.<sup>82</sup>

Similarly, the Committee to Free Robin Anderson used the newsletter to circulate information and build a wider base of support for the Bedford Hills prisoner. Anderson, a low-income, African American woman living on Long Island, had "called the police on twenty separate occasions" over the course of two years "and yet the police, if they came at all, only drove [her husband] around the block and released him." When he attacked her with an iron in late December 1976, she stabbed him with a kitchen knife. Following the advice of her court-appointed lawyer, Anderson pleaded guilty to manslaughter and received a sentence of five to ten years at Bedford Hills, which separated her from her young son. In her letter, which was published in *No More Cages*, Anderson described her sentence as punishment for "refusing to remain a 'battered-wife.'" Just after she became eligible for clemency in 1979, she was charged with second-degree assault for hitting a guard. Anderson, who maintained her innocence, was summarily convicted by an all-white jury and faced an additional sentence of three to seven years. Anderson appealed to readers to help her secure reliable legal aid, write letters on her behalf, and visit the prison to "see for yourself." She concluded by pointing out the parallels between her home and the prison: "I am not a danger to society, I have never been, I am a woman that just 'got tired' of having my ass kicked three times a day, I left him and begged the courts for protection,

their reply was 'that is a domestic problem!' Here I am now in prison, and the new male guards are talking about kicking us in the 'but[t]!' What are we to do as women?"<sup>83</sup>

Both *No More Cages* and *Through the Looking Glass* regularly provided coverage of the protracted case of Rita Silk Nauni, a Lakota Sioux woman imprisoned for killing one airport security officer and wounding another in 1979. Thirty-year-old Nauni fled Los Angeles for Oklahoma with her ten-year-old son to escape her husband's violent abuse. Upon landing in Oklahoma City, Nauni learned that bus service to her destination was suspended because of a labor strike. She removed some clothing from her son's bag so he could manage the weight as they set out on foot with plans to hitchhike. Shortly thereafter, they were detained on the side of the road by airport police for littering. Nauni maintained that one of the two officers "manhandled and attempted to force" her son into a security car, making her fear for the child's physical safety. As the second officer attempted to restrain her, she gained control of his gun: "A scuffle resulted and one officer was killed, the other wounded." Nauni and her son then fled in the airport security vehicle. In an interview with TTLG, local Native American activist Frances Wise (Wichita-Caddo), coordinator of Nauni's defense committee, recounted what happened next:

When the police officer rammed his cruiser into hers that forced her off the highway, the other police cruisers from Oklahoma City and from the airport security force, they all just converged on the scene. They jerked her from the police car, handcuffed her with her hands behind her back, and took her around to the back of the police car, and it was at that point that six to eight police officers knocked her to the ground and kicked her and stomped her. . . . There were witnesses at a restaurant across the highway from where she was stopped who filed complaints with the Internal Affairs Division of the Oklahoma City Police Department for the way she was treated once she was apprehended and placed under arrest. . . . She was taken to Intensive Care at University Hospital and she had broken fingers, a black eye, and a concussion.<sup>84</sup>

Wise, who had been a central leader in the Oklahoma chapter of the American Indian Movement, and a handful of other Native American women activists swiftly formed a defense committee. According to *No More Cages*, the local Native American Center had received numerous reports that "these same two officers . . . had abused their authority many times."<sup>85</sup> Although the committee's efforts produced a groundswell of community support for Nauni and provided crucial funds for her legal expenses, she was ultimately convicted by an all-white jury of first-degree manslaughter and assault with

a deadly weapon and egregiously sentenced to 150 years in prison. Updates on Nauni's case in the two newsletters stressed its connection to Yvonne Wanrow's and situated these and other examples of Native American women fighting to maintain custody of their children, resist police violence, and defend themselves from intimate violence in the context of "escalating attacks on Native American people as well as on women throughout the country."<sup>86</sup> Nauni's claim that fear for her son's life caused her to shoot the two police officers was likely controversial in some activist circles, yet these newsletters endorsed the indigenous feminist analysis put forth by the defense committee that her actions could not be evaluated apart from her experiences of intimate and colonial state violence.

As they circulated and juxtaposed news and analyses of numerous cases of women who had fought back against their assailants, *No More Cages* and *Through the Looking Glass* made a searing critique of the criminalization of women's survival strategies in the context of gendered racism, economic oppression, rape, and battering, illuminating the complicities of the "racist, sexist court" system, law enforcement, and the prison in sanctioning and perpetuating intimate violence.<sup>87</sup>

### The Institutional Violence of Imprisonment

In April 1981, Carol Ann Wilds filed a suit against the Indiana Department of Corrections for creating "an environment . . . that is ripe for coercion and extreme influence over female prisoners concerning sexual harassment and exploitation by male guards and supervisory personnel." In a piece published in both *No More Cages* and *Through the Looking Glass*, Wilds explained that because of "repeated abuse by male personnel of both myself and other female inmates, and out of concern for the future of my recently born child, fathered by a Department of Corrections employee, I am requesting that this matter be tried by jury." Wilds, a white, working-class woman from rural Kentucky, was 22 when she went to prison for shooting her violent husband, who was also her pimp. She argued that for four years her constitutional right to freedom from cruel and unusual punishment had been violated by "corrupt Department of Corrections employees who force indecent liberties upon me and others through intimidation, coercion, fraud, promises of medical treatment, preferential job placements, monetary gain, conduct adjustment board leniency, and guarantees of early release from prison." Her breaking point came the night that a male guard had the depraved audacity to proposition her for sex while she lay shackled to a prison hospital bed after a liver biopsy. Wilds turned to the underground press in her quest "to have sexual

harassment branded cruel and unusual punishment even in a punitive setting. To accomplish this, it is necessary that I have support from my sisters throughout the nation who are in agreement with me on this issue.<sup>88</sup> With the help of a “jailhouse lawyer” from the National Prisoners Rights Union, she filed suit in U.S. District Court. Although the Department of Corrections roundly condemned the charges, telling the press that this was an isolated case fabricated for “personal gain,” this position grew untenable as dozens of other prisoners began contacting the press to share their stories of either witnessing or directly experiencing sexual harassment and coercion, through which several other women became pregnant. Although the publicity and investigations her suit provoked led to the dismissal of several guards and the resignation of the prison’s superintendent, Wilds’s target was the whole “program,” or culture, of coercion.<sup>89</sup> “The issue is by all means not that of, ‘one bad apple’ in the barrel of ‘Good Apples’ in the Department,” she explained.<sup>90</sup>

When we read these newsletters cumulatively, they become evidentiary archives of the systematic character of state-sponsored sexual violence and coercion in U.S. prisons. The Free Joan Little movement of 1974–1975 helped to create a political opening for women prisoners and free world activists to expose sexual violence throughout the country’s prisons.<sup>91</sup> In California, Florida, Indiana, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, and elsewhere, women prisoners protested this carceral culture of state-sponsored rape, harassment, and coercion through writing, reporting, filing suits, and striking.<sup>92</sup> When a federal prisoner in Lexington, Kentucky, reported that a guard had raped her, officials refused to take action. She then filed a district court suit against the guard as well as against the administration for negligence. In response, she was written up for “engaging in sexual acts” with a correctional officer, thrown in segregation, and eventually transferred to the federal prison for women in Alderson, Virginia.<sup>93</sup> June Boyd, a gay-identified, African American woman and a frequent contributor to *off our backs*, *Through the Looking Glass*, and *No More Cages* found herself in solitary confinement after she “signed two statements on their staff members, one of whom [she] had sex with on several occasions.” In 1979, Boyd helped to start a prisoner organizing group at Muncy called Sisters of Unity; this group made “unwarranted verbal and/or physical abuse by guards or matrons or nurses” one of their five key grievances and areas for action.<sup>94</sup>

In addition to confronting forms of sexual harassment, coercion, and violence that corrections officials denied, concealed, and formally condemned but actually tolerated or protected, imprisoned contributors politicized several routine custodial practices, including strip searches and body cavity searches, “frisking” procedures, and policies in some prisons requiring that

those in solitary confinement be stripped of their clothes and denied even a bed sheet.<sup>95</sup> The ostensible objective of refusing clothes and bedding was suicide prevention, but in practice it produced degradation and humiliation. At the Clinton Correctional Facility for Women in New Jersey in 1977, a group of activists submitted a list of grievances and demands to the administration with a brazen pronouncement: “We have exhausted our tolerance as to verbal uniformed pacification. . . . We will no longer remain silent and be continuously exposed to verbatim fruitless promises of remedies to the prevailing problems.” Among their chief concerns was the invasiveness of routine “pat frisks” and “strip frisks,” and they smuggled a copy of the procedural instructions for these searches to *Through the Looking Glass*.<sup>96</sup> Other imprisoned writers theorized the racialized sexualized violence of solitary confinement in their dispatches. Writing from a segregation cell in the Maryland Correctional Institution for Women in 1979, an African American woman explained to readers that the prison had

three different areas where you can be held in solitary confinement . . . “degrees” of solitary, if you can believe that a mentality exists that can get “into” refining and intensifying what is already an excruciatingly maddening type of torture. . . . Detention is Step I for everyone getting ready to undergo this “process.” . . . You can be kept in Detention cells naked from 3 days to 2 years. . . . The actual physical nudity [the warden] forces on women who are to be placed in Detention reflects, and (he hopes) instigates the psychological stripping that is his real goal. He attempts to render you so much clay to be molded and shaped into his conception of what a woman consists of, or in the case of African women, to eradicate those traits that we as an alleged inferior people have no right possessing.<sup>97</sup>

The introduction of male guards at Bedford Hills prison in 1977 spurred protest. Although this step initially took place under the auspices of ending sex discrimination in employment within corrections institutions in accordance with Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, many activists linked the shift to an uptick in calls for security, order, and an end to “liberal permissiveness” at the institution.<sup>98</sup> They emphasized that most of the several dozen new employees guarding the predominantly downstate, black and Puerto Rican prison population were white men from rural, upstate communities, some with prior experience working in maximum-security men’s facilities. Shortly after men joined the guard force at Bedford that spring, a group of ten black women, including several Muslim women, filed a federal class action suit charging multiple prison officials and the New York State guards’ union with invasion of privacy as well as violation of the religious rights of Muslim

prisoners.<sup>99</sup> The court's decision in 1978 was considered a "partial victory" for the activists: male guards would no longer work night shifts in the housing units or staff the shower areas, limiting their presence in places where they could gaze at naked women. Carol Crooks, who spearheaded the class action, reported to WFWP that in the wake of the ruling "the administration is intensifying its repression" through such means as restricting time in the yard, one of the only locations for women from different housing units to communicate and strategize, as well as limiting phone calls and delaying mail deliveries. Crooks herself claimed that guards "set up" an altercation between her and another prisoner on the cusp of her parole hearing in 1978, an incident that cost her parole and was punished by another stint in segregation.<sup>100</sup>

In May 1980, the court's decision was reversed on appeal on the grounds that it infringed on men's civil right to equal employment opportunity at the prison. Activists wryly remarked in *No More Cages* that women prisoners at Bedford and elsewhere had yet to secure their own rights, for example, to vocational training opportunities on par with those in men's institutions. Moreover, they situated this lack against the backdrop of increasing overcrowding and its potential to generate both abuse and resistance; by 1980, 400 people lived in an institution built for 250.<sup>101</sup> Despite this blow, prisoners as far away as California took keen interest in the newspaper's coverage of the Bedford Hills prisoners' class action. One woman wrote to WFWP to request a copy of the court records and share her own account of what she understood to be comparable conditions at the California Institution for Women in Frontera.<sup>102</sup>

As historian Regina Kunzel has shown, with the exception of the infamous "Daddy Tank" for gender-nonconforming lesbians at the Los Angeles women's county jail, women's prison officials did not appear to make it a matter of formal policy to segregate those perceived to be lesbians in the mid-to-late twentieth century.<sup>103</sup> Nevertheless, *No More Cages* and *Through the Looking Glass* demonstrate that other institutional forms of policing "homosexuality" and gender nonconformity abounded in the 1970s and early 1980s. Racialized norms of compulsory heterosexuality underwrote projects of social control and rehabilitation in women's prisons. Tactile expressions of affection of any sort could swiftly be labeled as lesbianism. Theresa King, who was incarcerated at a state prison in the Pacific Northwest, recounted: "If somebody's having a problem, I've learned the best thing to do is to go over and give them a hug, give them some support. But here, you can't even touch somebody, let alone hold their hand or put your arm around them. That's homosexual activity."<sup>104</sup> A prisoner at Purdy writing in *Through the Looking Glass* in the early 1980s observed that lesbians "who refuse to hide their sexual desires for

each other," and especially those who are not "the same color," could expect to "become targets for frequent harassment attacks." In her case, write-ups for homosexual activity were adduced as relevant transgressions in her parole hearing: "I never thought I would be given a life sentence just because I am a lesbian."<sup>105</sup> Two black lesbian women interviewed by members of TTLG for a piece titled "Racism at Purdy" in 1980 corroborated that "they're just on top of you all the time" when white women and black women display any signs of intimacy, from physical touching to visiting one another's rooms. One interviewee added: "When you go before the [parole] board, you have to dress and act like you're white."<sup>106</sup> Here, acting white and straightening up meld into a single mandate to perform normative femininity—rendered synonymous with "good behavior"—in order to be considered for parole. Historian Evelyn Hammonds argues that since the nineteenth century "black women's sexuality has been constructed in a binary opposition to that of white women: it is rendered simultaneously invisible, visible (exposed), hypervisible, and pathologized in dominant discourses."<sup>107</sup> The intensive policing of interracial intimacy also points to the ways in which prison officials produced and depended upon racial hierarchies for social control.

The newsletters documented the dense interplay of psychiatric power and carcerality in women's prisons in the 1970s and early 1980s. Psychiatric disability functioned as justification for labeling, drugging, segregating, and transferring unruly prisoners, and unruliness was not only a matter of conduct but one of racial, gender, and sexual embodiment. An African American prisoner activist in Kansas commented acerbically in a letter to *No More Cages*, "Whenever I have a question of law I am sent to the psychologist's office."<sup>108</sup> Letters and feature stories documented the institutionalized use of psychotropic drugs—which some activists referred to as "valium violence"—and the increased construction of new specialized units, both on campus and off, for women labeled troublesome, violent, and dangerous to themselves or their peers.<sup>109</sup> Several Bedford Hills prisoners described this common attitude: "Anyone who resists is unbalanced."<sup>110</sup> A contributor to *No More Cages* imprisoned at the California Institution for Women recounted, "Some of my friends have gotten themselves shipped out to Patton, a state hospital, not because they're really crazy; but because they go off due to the staff's actions on them."<sup>111</sup> A diagnosis of "mentally disturbed" facilitated the transfer of the ten black women at Bedford Hills to the Matteawan Complex for the Criminally Insane in 1976. WFWP recounted parts of the class action complaint brought by the "Matteawan Ten" against the New York Department of Corrections with the assistance of the National Prison Project of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU): "One of the women

... was once removed from her cell, taken to the strip room, and beaten severely. Another one ... refused her medication, was thrown into the strip cell, and was forcibly injected with Prolixin. A sign was hung outside her door reading: "This nigger is crazy again." The food was cold, stale, and, the women believed, drugged. They were often denied medical attention." After three years of litigation, the judge ordered corrections officials to discontinue their practice of shipping women to Matteawan and awarded the plaintiffs \$45,000 in damages. Despite the relatively small sum, the settlement was unprecedented. "It is a victory which none of us, the women inside and those of us outside supporting them, thought could be won," WFWP told readers.<sup>112</sup>

The ubiquity of accounts of forced drugging was matched by the ubiquity of prisoners' demands for better health care. These issues converged at the point of medication, where "valium violence" coincided with prison officials' refusals to provide safe and reliable access to life-sustaining medications for conditions not related to mental health, such as epilepsy, diabetes, and high blood pressure. Basic medical care routinely appeared at the top of prisoners' lists of demands published in *No More Cages* and *Through the Looking Glass*. Letters recounted how long delays to see a doctor or get a prescription refill and staff inaction in the face of medical emergencies complicated chronic and terminal illnesses. "There are epileptics, diabetics, and asthmatics who have all had their medication taken away by the doctor ... with the doctor claiming 'you're not sick, it's all in your head.'" <sup>113</sup> From jails and prisons, incarcerated women told of enduring prolonged waits to see a doctor during their pregnancy and being shackled during childbirth. Some testified to being sterilized either without their consent or under false pretenses. In an interview with Liberation News Service published in *Through the Looking Glass*, Carol Crooks said that in "1977 it was like they had a sale going around here. And I was put in that sale and got my uterus removed. They said I had a fibroid tumor. I went down to a hospital in New York (City) to have the operation. ... About 40 women were on the list that they needed to have their uterus removed. ... A lot of Black women won't ever have kids again."<sup>114</sup> On both sides of the bars in the 1970s, black, indigenous, and Latina women were most vulnerable to this pervasive form of reproductive violence.<sup>115</sup>

Activists also argued that systemic medical neglect threatened to turn women's punishments into death sentences. An open letter signed by the "Women of the California Institution for Women" and published in *No More Cages* in 1982 mourned the loss of a prisoner whose death, in their view, could have been prevented and called upon all concerned people to help them to force the California Department of Corrections to uphold its legal obligation to provide adequate medical care: "To sentence a woman to the

California Institution for Women, especially a person with obvious medical problems, is inflicting the death penalty on that inmate without due process of law, because their very life is in danger at the hands and discretion of present Administration and inadequate medical facilities and staff."<sup>116</sup> In these newsletters, prisoners memorialized friends and lovers lost to medical neglect and urged readers to help them demand institutional changes.

Agitating to obtain treatment for their own health emergencies or those of their peers could result in reprisal. In the wake of the June 1975 rebellion at the North Carolina Correctional Center for Women in Raleigh, working conditions in the prison laundry underwent modest reform, but prisoner activists reported that medical care remained abysmal. In 1977, TTLG reported that "disciplinary charges were brought against nine women who attempted to get medical attention for a sick comrade and to rescue another woman from a burning cell."<sup>117</sup> At the California Institution for Women in 1978, more than half of the prisoners participated in a sit-in to protest "atrocious medical conditions, quantity and quality of food, unsanitary conditions in the kitchen and hospital," and more. After holding out for thirty-two hours, the roughly 400 protestors agreed to return to their cells on the warden's guarantee that there would be no disciplinary action. Writing in *Through the Looking Glass*, the San Francisco Bay Area feminist group Women Against Prisons relayed that "200 women have been locked in their cells. ... They have not been allowed hot food or exercise. They have been charged with serious rule violations which could affect their release date and custody status. ... The women have added Warden Anderson's removal to their list of demands."<sup>118</sup> Muncy prison in Pennsylvania was the site of a protracted struggle concerning a multitude of health-related grievances, including spoiled food and poor medical treatment for pregnant women. Petitions signed by more than half of the prison population and prisoner-authored letters to the editor published in local newspapers and grassroots prison newsletters brought retaliatory punishments for those identified as the lead organizers, including extended time in the maximum-security unit and confiscation of mail.<sup>119</sup>

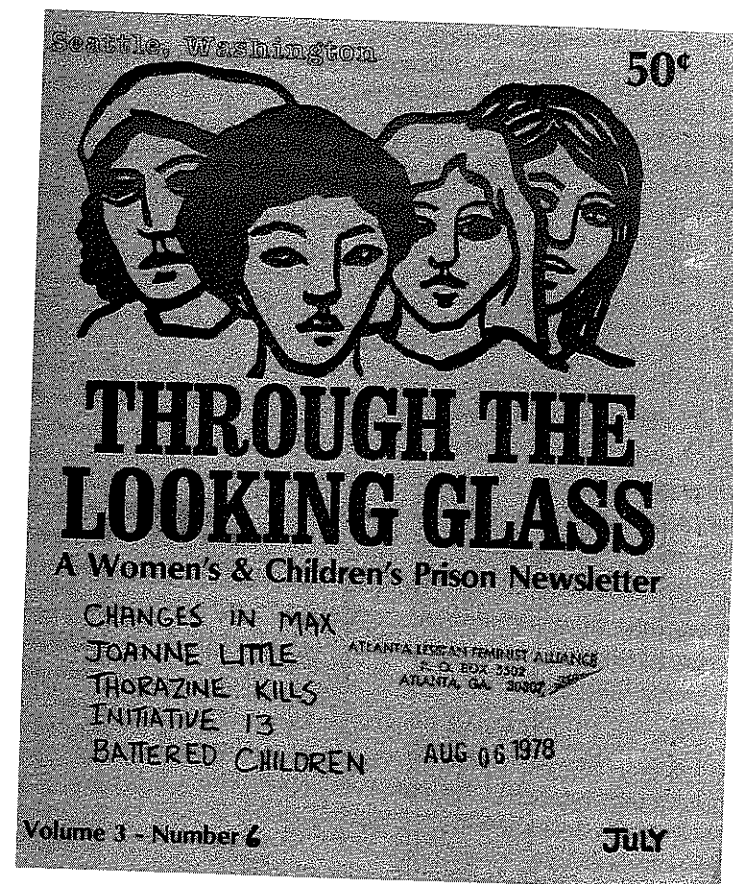
Though women's prisons remained the center of gravity for both of these newsletters, they mapped, dissected, and contested a broader carceral landscape of locked institutions and "cages." They published or reprinted pieces penned by activists affiliated with groups such as the Alliance for the Liberation of Mental Patients (Philadelphia), Mental Patients Liberation Front (Boston), and the Network Against Psychiatric Assault (Berkeley), as well as by the Coalition to Stop Institutional Violence. The collectives' own writings probed how various institutions of confinement functioned as containers for social Others deemed disposable, defective, or deviant. As one TTLG

member put it, "Lesbians are considered 'crazy' and locked up in psychiatric facilities, elders are called a 'burden' or 'unuseful' and put in nursing homes. . . . Women are locked up for fighting back when men attempt to beat, rape, or kill us."<sup>120</sup>

"The State Is in No Way Our Ally in the  
Struggle against Rape and Battering"

Prisoner solidarity work profoundly influenced feminist radicals who espoused critical positions on law-and-order approaches to interpersonal violence. Corresponding with and publishing the writings of numerous people imprisoned in women's and men's prisons throughout the country prompted TTLG and WFWP members to regard criminalization-centered approaches to stemming violence against women as a contradiction in terms. Both groups utilized their newsletter to express this view. In a statement of purpose that often appeared in the opening pages of *No More Cages*, WFWP decried the marginalization of imprisoned women in "a movement where violence against women has been a primary target of organizing." The group attributed this situation "to the fact that much of the work in the women's movement has been done from the perspective of white, middle class women, and so it has not focused on issues primary in the lives of women of color and poor women—and it is exactly these women that make up the majority of women in prison."<sup>121</sup> Collective members reserved particular criticism for white, middle-class feminists who championed physical self-defense for women yet failed to dedicate themselves to organizing efforts for those convicted and incarcerated for killing their batterers and sexual attackers.<sup>122</sup> TTLG urged feminists in Seattle who had, in fact, shown support for such women to consider the importance of "visiting and giving support to womyn who are jailed for *other* reasons. . . . We can recognize, learn from, and support different womyn's struggles to survive in this sexist, racist, classist society, without necessarily supporting or advocating the particular choices womyn have made."<sup>123</sup> Similarly, WFWP advocated the view that "ALL prisoners are, in fact, political prisoners."<sup>124</sup>

These activists understood themselves as laboring to grasp "where exactly violence against women lives in the midst of a network of oppressions."<sup>125</sup> As Janet Howard of WFWP put it, feminist activists who saw "male domination" as the principal source of "women's physical oppression . . . miss seeing other bruises and deep scars."<sup>126</sup> These activists appear to have rejected the notion held by some in the "white dominated women's movement" that women prisoners simply endured "magnified and intensified" forms of "male op-



Cover of *Through the Looking Glass*, July 1978. From the Atlanta Lesbian Feminist Alliance Periodicals Collection, Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture, Rubenstein Library, Duke University.

pression."<sup>127</sup> As the newsletters gathered together a plethora of critiques of the racialized and gendered violence of the carceral state, both TTLG and WFWP argued for strategies to challenge interpersonal violence that aligned with their abolitionist visions. In 1978, TTLG reprinted a series of updates compiled by the recently launched *Aegis: A Magazine on Ending Violence Against Women* on legislative changes in several states that would expand criminal punishment for domestic violence. The collective followed the piece with this critical appraisal:

We support the work of these women in getting these states to finally recognize violence against women as a serious societal problem. However, we don't believe that the long term solution to this problem is putting the abusers in prisons; it is clear, tho, that we have not worked out an alternative to prison. Prison is a violent environment. . . . We too feel rage at the men who abuse women but recognize that the anger must be directed in the long run toward the real enemies. These are the men at the top who profit by keeping the vast majority of the people down and attacking each other. We feel our energies should go to working against this larger enemy instead of working for longer and insured prison terms.<sup>128</sup>

Similarly, WFWP members argued that legal reforms should be evaluated against a commitment to racial justice and abolishing prisons, and only pursued with a critical awareness that "the state is in no way our ally in the struggle against rape and battering."<sup>129</sup> Although they may "bring small concessions to women's safety," enhanced policing, tougher sanctions, and more women in law enforcement would "more likely strengthen the repressive, racist power of the police, the courts, and the prisons" and bolster institutional violence against women multiply marginalized by racial, economic, gender, and sexual oppression. Although these groups had a well-defined understanding of why they opposed the feminist antiviolence movement's "carceral creep," as social movement scholar Mimi Kim describes it, identifying short- and medium-term alternatives to criminalization for imposing social sanctions and holding perpetrators accountable was a more formidable task.<sup>130</sup>

### Outlaw Alliances: Identity, Power, and Belonging

A leaflet created and distributed by WFWP during Gay Pride Week in New York City in 1981 posed the following contradiction to its readers: "This weekend, hundreds and thousands of lesbians and gay men will take to the streets in gay pride marches in every major city across the country. But what about those of us who can't march? WHAT ABOUT THOSE OF US WHO ARE LOCKED UP IN PRISONS, JAILS AND PSYCHIATRIC INSTITUTIONS?" WFWP explained to its audience of white, middle-class lesbians and gay men that "heterosexist oppression" pervaded the country's prisons, which were currently "bursting with working class, poor, and Third World peoples." As evidence, the group explained that a prison record of "homosexual activities" could function as a weapon of character assassination in "future court cases." The leaflet detailed the "strict rules about physical contact" and their uneven enforcement, arguing that these, in and of themselves, constituted a

dangerous behavior modification strategy. It reminded readers of the historical and contemporary pathologization of homosexuality and the involuntary institutionalization of numerous lesbians and gay men. WFWP concluded: "This week and every week we need to remember all the lesbians and gay men locked up in state institutions. We must remember *all* the people behind bars. And we must do *more* than remember."<sup>131</sup> This piece of ephemera captures the collective's intertwined commitments to educating "the outside" and providing material support to prisoners in the service of a long-term abolitionist vision. As it appeals to a sense of kinship between queers in the streets and "the queer queers" in the prisons (as Boston activist Mike Reigle dubbed lesbian and gay prisoners) while also emphasizing the racial political economy of imprisonment, the leaflet suggests group members' own routes to and investments in antiprison work.<sup>132</sup>

Many of the working-class, queer women who joined these collectives identified as outlaws in a compulsorily heterosexual world dominated by middle-class norms of propriety. Their encounters with imprisonment, police harassment, juvenile detention, psychiatric institutionalization, or expulsion from their families of origin shaped their pathways to feminist prison activism and their relationships—both imagined and interpersonal—with imprisoned women.<sup>133</sup> An outlaw sensibility produced a desire to forge alliances with those caged for participating in criminalized economies, resisting physical abuse, and failing to adequately perform economic productivity, gender conformity, or respectable domesticity. The majority of WFWP's members and at least a portion of TTLG's were Jewish, some from left-wing families directly affected by the 1950s Red Scare. As sociologist Becky Thompson has argued, "Jewish women and lesbians led the way" in white antiracist feminist activism in the 1970s and 1980s, culling insight from their contested belonging in the larger "women's movement that was, nevertheless, still homophobic and Christian biased."<sup>134</sup> Both groups regularly delineated for readers the racial, ethnic, class, and sexual identities of their respective collective bodies.

While declarations of their Jewish, queer, and working-class identities conveyed collective members' personal and familial histories of persecution, exploitation, and marginalization, when these primarily white groups acknowledged their racial composition they were seeking to convey an antiracist consciousness and accountability. As TTLG described in its contribution to *Top Ranking: A Collection of Articles on Racism and Classism in the Lesbian Community*, "racism pervades all the issues we encounter in our prison and jail support work, in the news we get from prisoners and in our group discussions."<sup>135</sup> In this way, the two groups practiced a "politics

of relation" that emphasized the asymmetries of oppression and privilege structuring the lives of those gathered under the sign of women but also identified shared political commitments and vision, and a "shared marginal relationship to dominant power," as a basis for coalition building.<sup>136</sup> Activists used the newsletters to point to the unavoidable power differential between imprisoned and "free" activists, encouraging the latter to grasp the crucial importance of not "throwing a letter on the pile and then forgetting it's there" or otherwise "leav[ing] the people inside hanging at the mercy of the state."<sup>137</sup>

While both organizations focused on women's prisons in an effort to redress the marginalization of women prisoners on the left in the 1970s, they also reflected their founders' desires to work collectively and autonomously with other feminist women. Hence, while they conceived of themselves as "part of a mass movement of oppressed people"<sup>138</sup> and to varying degrees participated in other mixed-gender organizations and activist spaces, TTLG and WFWP members do not appear to have ever entertained the possibility of men as members. Whereas WFWP's core group consistently remained lesbian-identified, a few straight-identified women filtered in and out of TTLG over its eleven-year existence. Despite clearly valuing autonomous space for women and lesbians, both organizations ultimately endorsed an intersectional ideology, theorizing racism, capitalism, imperialism, and heteropatriarchy as interlocking. Lesbian separatism was a central and contested politics in the social geographies of these activists. As a world-making project, separatism emphasized that women's primary relationships should be with other women and, in turn, idealized the "women's community" as one free of harm and hierarchy. These ideas were heavily criticized by radical women of color activists in the 1970s as a "dangerous and reactionary" political platform invested in a biologically deterministic definition of "women" and woefully inadequate for addressing the multiple "sources of women's oppression."<sup>139</sup>

Although WFWP's work was indeed women-centered, collective members found themselves in the position of having to defend their prison activism to some white women in "the NYC lesbian community." Writing in *Top Ranking*, WFWP cofounder Charoula Dontopoulos recounted: "I have been often asked by other lesbians . . . why I, a lesbian, found it necessary to work with/for women in prison. . . . It is to say that women of color, and poor women, who are in prison cannot possibly be lesbians. It is to say that to do work which is not directly related to lesbian issues is taking away from the lesbian movement, is divisive, and weakening, and not important enough for lesbians to be involved in. It is to say that the problems of every day survival which women of color and poor women are plagued with have nothing to do with our women's movement. What then *is* our women's movement? To be for women, and to

ignore the special plight of women in prison is a contradiction."<sup>140</sup> Like its close ally, Dykes Against Racism Everywhere (DARE), antiracism led WFWP to differentiate between an investment in autonomous lesbian organizing and an embrace of lesbian separatism. Coeditors and DARE members Sara Bennett and Joan Gibbs wrote in their introduction to *Top Ranking*: "We can not liberate ourselves in a vacuum and/or by assuming that the solution to all of the oppressions that lesbians face, particularly those of Third World lesbians, lies in the liberation of our heads and spaces [from] men."<sup>141</sup>

By the mid-1980s, these collectives increasingly contended with attrition as founding members cycled out. This form of volunteer labor had always been time-consuming and emotionally intense, but it became more arduous as the broader social movement milieu that incubated these groups waned. Prison authorities' various means of limiting as well as overtly sabotaging communication between prisoners and their supporters made the rhythms of support work irregular and unpredictable. All these conditions contributed to activist burnout. The fact that these organizations remained entirely grassroots-funded and unincorporated constrained their ability to recruit new members beyond the predominantly white lesbian feminist activist communities from which they emerged. Each collective drew staying power by blurring the boundaries between hours devoted to political work and time spent with friends, lovers, and chosen family.<sup>142</sup> WFWP, for example, was cofounded by two couples. A former TTLG member recalls "pulling all-nighters" to lay out issues of the newsletter in members' living rooms and the intensity of the weekly prison visiting schedule. Many members lived collectively with one another, and very few, if any, had young children.<sup>143</sup> The small scale and severely limited finances of these organizations prohibited them from developing any form of "reentry" support to recently formerly incarcerated women aside from a small amount of "gate money" or a place to sleep for a few nights. TTLG's unrealized aspiration to develop a transitional living program would have certainly helped to create the conditions of possibility for more women released or paroled to Seattle to become involved. Although TTLG's weekend ride-sharing program brought them in direct contact with prisoners' family members, the collective's cultural and political specificity curtailed the prospect of these primarily African American families becoming more active in the organization. By the mid-1980s, both *No More Cages* and *Through the Looking Glass* had ceased publication.<sup>144</sup>

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During the early years of the prison buildup, *No More Cages* and *Through the Looking Glass* played a crucial role in the making of an abolitionist feminism.



These newsletters served as switchboards, helping to generate communication and collaboration across disparate and uneven locations. They now provide us with archives of a translocal culture of opposition to gendered, racialized, and sexualized carceral violence. Moreover, print media not only documented activism; it helped to produce it. As this chapter has shown, imprisoned and free activists used these publications to compare conditions, exchange strategies, overcome isolation, recruit allies, and collectively generate theoretical insight. As Robin D. G. Kelley reminds us, “collective social movements are incubators of new knowledge.”<sup>145</sup> The counterpublic created by *No More Cages* and *Through the Looking Glass* put imprisoned women at the center of feminist antiviolence discourse, criticized the criminalization of survival and the institutional violence of incarceration, and affirmed an outlaw politics of affiliation and belonging. Moreover, it advocated alternatives to a criminal justice-centered approach to preventing sexual and domestic violence.

The next chapter moves us from women’s prison activism to street-level organizing. As activists confronted the role of police in sanctioning and committing violence against women of color, they called for and experimented with nonstatist strategies of emergency response and prevention that flowed from their intersectional understanding of power and oppression.

## 4. Intersecting Indictments

### *Coalitions for Women’s Safety, Racial Justice, and the Right to the City*

As Black women who are feminists we are struggling against all racist, sexist, heterosexist and class oppression. We know that we have no hopes of ending this particular crisis and violence against women in our community until we identify all its causes, including sexual oppression.

—Combahee River Collective (1979)

Black feminism has always sought to connect the dots. . . . In many ways, we really politicized the Rape Crisis Center . . . in terms of taking on the state, taking on the antiapartheid movement, taking on housing, taking on a whole lot of other issues that the gender lens didn’t necessarily see as women’s issues that we did.

—Loretta Ross (2005)

In August 1980 more than a hundred activists gathered in Washington, D.C., for the First National Conference on Third World Women and Violence. Organized by the black feminist-led D.C. Rape Crisis Center, the conference marked the first time that black, Latina, Asian, and Native American women working in rape crisis centers (RCCs) and battered women’s shelters in the United States convened both nationally and autonomously.<sup>1</sup> Over the course of the three-day event, conference attendees culled lessons from their experiences as antiviolence organizers in communities of color and as people of color working in majority-white RCCs and battered women’s shelters. Conference coordinators Loretta Ross, Nkenge Touré, and Deirdre Wright named “isolation, alienation, and racism” within feminist antiviolence organizations as a key rationale for the gathering and their larger goal of cultivating a new national network of women and men of color engaged