

“Southern Justice on Trial”: The  
Importance of Media, Public Image and  
Political Symbolism in the Trial of  
Joan Little (1975)

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On August 15<sup>th</sup>, 1975, Joan Little, her defense team, and her supporters standing outside the courthouse anxiously awaited the opinion of her jurors. Over one hundred newspaper representatives sat in the courtroom waiting to break the news.<sup>1</sup> Little, a poor, Black, criminally charged woman was on trial for the murder of Clarence Alligood, her jailer-turned-sexual assailant whom she had killed in self defense while serving time for a breaking and entering charge. The Court charged Little with first-degree murder and if convicted Little would be sent to death row and executed in the gas chamber as her sentence. Her situation had become a nationwide *cause celebre* for women's rights, Black liberation, and prisoners' rights activists who had worked together to create a "Free Joan Little" movement that garnered nationwide support, working to shape public feelings about her. Thanks to their efforts she had become more than a woman she was a symbol of radical sentiments, and justice, or injustice, in America. Ten seconds after noon, only an hour and 18 minutes after the jury had withdrawn to deliberate the decision was announced.<sup>2</sup> The verdict: not guilty. A normally stoic Little broke into tears of happiness and when asked how it felt to be declared innocent as she left the courthouse, "Feels good to be free"<sup>3</sup> she responded. With the help of her team's media strategy and the recreation of her personal image, Little had been acquitted against all odds. However, her victory would be short-lived. She remained guilty of breaking and entering, a charge that would still send her to jail, but was much less exciting to supporters.

Little sat at the crux of several identities that put her at a disadvantage in the North Carolina court system; she was a woman, she was poor, she was uneducated, she was already criminally charged, she had a bad reputation, and most significantly she was Black. For all

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<sup>1</sup> Genna Rae McNeil, "The Body, Sexuality, and Self defense in State vs. Joan Little, 1974-1975." *The Journal of African American History* (Spring 2008): 235-261.

<sup>2</sup> *The New York Times* (New York). 16 August, 1975.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

intents and purposes Little should not have stood a chance in the court system. Larry Little,<sup>4</sup> a supporter of Little, said, “North Carolina... has no intention of being fair with Miss Little [...] the state is one of the most racist in the country.”<sup>5</sup> But as historian Genna Rae McNeil writes, Little’s defense team understood the “necessary relationship between a visible, vocal, social movement and the outcome of the trial.”<sup>6</sup> Rather than turning Little into another invisible tragedy to the racist judicial system, her team and groups of activists banded together to make Little’s case one known in every household, carefully crafting Little’s image into one that everyone would care about. On a micro level they reshaped Little from a woman with dubious past choices into a respectable figure. On a macro they turned her into a symbol of anti-racist, anti-sexist justice, giving large swaths of people a name behind which to unify. Journalist Milton Jordan wrote “she has become a star. Feminist groups, prison reform and Black groups took up her cause. She has become a symbol for all that’s wrong with justice in North Carolina and America.”<sup>7</sup> Activists leveraged media to heighten the stakes of the trial for the nation. It was not just a murder trial, but stage to protest racism, sexism, classism and prison abuse. It did so in an intersectional way that brought disparate movements together under one name: The Free Joan Little Movement. To Joan Little’s supporters she was more than a woman on trial for murder. She was a symbol for their causes and a chance to give them a public victory. Little’s depiction as a symbol helped acquit her but once she was declared “not guilty” she served her symbolic purpose for these groups and lost her value. After the famous trial, her allies left her to handle her earlier criminal charge alone, abandoning her.

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<sup>4</sup> Larry Little is of No Relation to Joan Little.

<sup>5</sup> “N.C Called the Worst Racist State.” *New Journal and Guide* (Norfolk), 26 July, 1975.

<sup>6</sup> Emily Thuma. “Lessons in Self Defense: Gender Violence, Racial Criminalization and Anticarceral Feminism.” *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, (Fall/Winter 2015), 236.

<sup>7</sup> Jordan Milion. “Making of a National Symbol- Joan Little.” *The Baltimore Afro-American* (Baltimore), 23 August, 1975.

Since Little's trial in 1975, minimal scholarship has been devoted to her, a surprising fact considering the impact her trial had in both setting legal precedents about self defense against rape and in creating a strategy for supporting criminally accused victims of sexual violence. One journalist, Victor Okoroji wrote after the trial "Miss Little's trial and release have changed the life of the 21 year old woman [...] These are likened to the events that catapulted Angela Davis to fame."<sup>8</sup> But Little failed to receive even a fraction of the acclaim that Davis has today. The only author to do considerable scholarship on Little is historian Genna Rae McNeil whose works focus on African American women's support of Little and Little's own perception of herself. Although I will reference these works through my paper I seek to broaden the lens by looking not only at African American women's support of Little, but the public at large. I will investigate how Little's supporters created an image of Little as a revolutionary hero with the help of the media. Finally, I will argue it is because of the symbolization of Little that she was abandoned after her trial and is ignored by historians to this day.

Joan Little was 21 years old when she served time in the Beaufort Country jail for shoplifting, breaking and entering, and larceny. Little encountered the law many times in her early life but her time in Beaufort jail marked her first time actually being prosecuted for any of her crimes. She had been declared a truant by the state at age 15 and had been arrested for stealing before but had never been taken to trial for her criminal activity. Prosecutors would later point to her criminal history as proof of her guilt. On August 27, 1974 a night guard named Clarence Alligood entered her cell armed with an ice pick. Little testified "he said that he had been nice to me [Little] and it was time I be nice to him... to give him some."<sup>9</sup> She told the court that he had groped her, stripped her and then forced her to perform oral sex on him, which

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<sup>8</sup> Victor Okoroji. "Concern Growing Over Joan Little Original Charge: Joan Little is all Smiles." *New York Amsterdam News* (New York), 27 August, 1975.

<sup>9</sup> Defense Testimony of Joan Little: Testimony the Raleigh Court (1975) (Statement of Joan Little, Case Defendant).

she all complied with, seeing the ice pick. “I didn’t know what he was gonna do. I didn’t know whether he was gonna kill me or not”<sup>10</sup> she continued. During the assault Alligood lost his grip on the ice pick and Little managed to grab it. Fearing for her life Little hit him repeatedly and killed him in self defense. Anticipating the potentially deadly consequences if Alligood’s fellow guards found her over his body, Little fled, though she insisted that she had not known he was dead. In North Carolina, the “Outlaw Statute” declared that any fugitive of the law could be shot and killed by any citizen of the state making fleeing a dangerous risk. Though offered a route out of the country Little decided to remain in North Carolina to defend her actions. On September 3, 1974 she turned herself in to be taken to court.

Little’s assault fell into the historical pattern of the battering, brutalization and rape of Black women by white men. Since the first slave was brought to what would become the United States white men had used their positions of power and sense of ownership of Black bodies as an excuse for sexually assaulting Black women without repercussions. Black activist Angela Davis wrote in her article about Little that

a little more than a hundred years ago, there were few Black women who did not have to endure the humiliating and violent sexual attacks as an integral feature of their daily lives. Rape was the rule: immunity from rape was the exception.<sup>11</sup>

Davis wrote this practice was accompanied with the stereotype that Black women were “motivated by base, animal-like sexual instincts. It was therefore no sin to rape her.”<sup>12</sup> Thus, white men saw the Black female body as something to be exploited without consequences because it was not rape if the act was with a Black woman. One Beaufort County resident, Hardy Henry, expressed his doubt that Little was defending herself from assault claiming, “She wasn’t

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Angela Davis. “Joan Little: The Dialects of Rape.” *Ms. Magazine*, 1975, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 3.

defending her honor in that cell. She'd lost it years ago."<sup>13</sup> Many residents of Beaufort county believed, like Hardy, that because Little was a Black woman she could not be a victim of rape.

The prosecution of Little depended on these racist assumptions about Black "Jezebels" and promoted the idea that because of her disreputable past she could not be raped. The prosecution claimed that Little had not been acting in self defense; she had seduced Alligood and killed him in a cold-blooded murder to escape prison. They used her criminal record, and her sexual reputation including a rumor that she was a prostitute<sup>14</sup> as evidence that she was a sexual deviant who had planned to murder Alligood. This forced the trial to revolve around the question of whether Little an innocent woman defending herself or a calculating seductress. Debra Rowland, a woman's scholar, wrote, "woman have always been the 'true' suspects of rape."<sup>15</sup> This was certainly the case of Little who fought to challenge the belief that she could not be raped because of her past.<sup>16</sup> Her defense team and activist supporters also brought this assumption under scrutiny, developing a rhetorical strategy which anticarceral feminist scholar Emily Thuma calls "self defense." She writes, "More than a legal strategy, 'self defense' was a shared and galvanizing rhetoric that transected social movements of the era."<sup>17</sup> These two views were the central conflict during the trial, the right for all to act in self defense and the assumption of Little's premeditated seduction. According to McNeil, "The question on many people's minds was: 'Is Joan Little a person of such bad reputation and character that it justifies skepticism about her credibility? [...] To what extent did Joan Little's reputation and conduct as a sexually active, single Black woman affect her claim of self defense?'"<sup>18</sup> Little's legal team devoted extensive

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<sup>13</sup> Hardy Henry quoted by James Reston in "The Joan Little Case." *New York Times* (New York), 6 April, 1975: 9.

<sup>14</sup> McNeil, "Self defense," 241.

<sup>15</sup> Debra Rowland quoted in McNeil's "Self Defense." 240.

<sup>16</sup> Thuma, "Anticarceral," 239.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>18</sup> McNeil, "Self defense." 241.

time and energy into convincing the jury and the public through the media that the answer to the question was yes, Little was a credible defendant.

Little and her defense team were not the only ones invested in positively shaping her image to the public's view. As mentioned previously activists of numerous causes felt that Little's case was a chance to achieve a victory for their respective movements. Thuma writes, "Little was a survivor of southern racism; a victim of radicalized sexual violence' and a target of a racist, classist, draconian criminal justice system."<sup>19</sup> Due to the fact that Little was a victim of so many intersecting issues and her case could be interpreted through any of those lens her situation appealed to many activist groups. These groups mainly fell into three categories.

The first was the women's rights/ feminist movement. At times the women's rights movement was exclusionary of women of color, but in the mid 1970s many feminists began what would be called the "anti-rape" or "anti-violence" movement, which focused on patriarchal violence towards women, in particular rape and assault and issue which according to Thuma required, "an intersectional analysis of patriarchy and gender."<sup>20</sup> Journalist James Reston Jr. wrote, "Joan Little in the Beaufort County jail, late at night, as the only female prisoner is the epitome of the unprotected woman" that the feminist movement was trying to protect. If acquitted Little would also set the precedent that every woman had the right to defend herself against an attacker, a valuable legal tool that would come to be used in the future.

Prisoners' rights groups also supported Little as they saw her violation as part of an institutional abuse of those imprisoned. They pointed to her quality of life as other forms of violation. Little was always under surveillance in Beaufort county jail, even when she changed clothing, slept, showered and used the toilet. When she tried to fix this by putting a blanket over

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<sup>19</sup> Thuma, "Anticarceral," 56.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 53.

the camera guards took it away. For these activists “Little’s case brought new visibility to the issue of state sponsored sexual violence in US jails and prisons.”<sup>21</sup> She also gave them a chance to fight against the death penalty, which they opposed, giving them the opportunity to prove the racist numbers behind death row that was mostly made up of Black men.

Finally, Black anti-racist activists were invested in the trial of Little because of the institutional racism of the North Carolina court system. Discrimination in the courts and prisons against Black people was very evident, especially in rape cases. In the United States between 1930 and 1967, 405 of 455 men executed for rape were Black<sup>22</sup> meaning 90 percent of men executed for rape were Black. In North Carolina 95 percent of individuals on death row were Black.<sup>23</sup> This discrepancy of consequences was an issue that Black activists wanted to attack. Black activists like Angela Davis declared that Little was a victim of racist assumptions of Allgood and the racist courts. Davis writes, “Little may not only have been the victim of rape by a white racist jailer; she has truly been raped and wronged many times over by the exploitive and discriminatory institutions of this society.”<sup>24</sup>

But Little did not suffer from these injustices in individual vacuums. What happened to her was a result of being a poor, Black, woman in jail. Because these issues intersected, and built on one another different movements joined together in a coalition to make a statement through Little and her trial. By supporting her, shaping her image and securing her acquittal, activists were able to make a statement against all the institutional issues that had abused her. Journalist Jerold Footlick writes that Little’s defense team and her supporters, “put on trial Southern justice, racism, sexism and prison conditions as well...[they] had seized the trial to try to make it

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<sup>21</sup> Thuma, “Anticarceral,” 65.

<sup>22</sup> Davis, “Rape,” 3.

<sup>23</sup> “N.C Worst Racist.” *New Journal and Guide*.

<sup>24</sup> Davis, “Rape,” 4.



their own.”<sup>25</sup> In order to do this and turn the trial into a “political trial”<sup>26</sup> Little’s advocates knew they must stir up public sympathy for her. Starting with the Montgomery bus boycott, civil rights activists had learned that attaining national sympathy for a cause was key in its success and to get national sympathy the media must be on their side. Thus, the “Free Joan Little” coalition of feminists, Black activists and prison reformers created an image of Little for the media to promote, one that could become a symbol of justice in America.

The reshaping of Little’s image was a two-part process involving her personal image and her symbolic significance. McNeil writes, “If there ever was a ‘non-ideal,’ ‘non-respectable’ defendant it was Joan Little.”<sup>27</sup> She continues, “Little’s] reputation ran the gamut from ‘party girl’ to ‘prostitute’ possibly with venereal disease.”<sup>28</sup> Little was part of a “bad crowd” and lived with her delinquent boyfriend. She had a history of petty crime and drinking problems. This was a hard image to sell to the American public. Often activists had ignored “flawed” victims of civil rights abuses for fear that they would make the whole community look bad. They were meticulous about the types of people they tried to fight for, picking the cream-of-the-crop of Black society. But as movements got more radical and Black power doctrines became more powerful the idea of redemption, promoted by Malcolm X, became popular. Figures with flaws were more readily accepted and activists were more willing to take a chance on Little. Because she was defined by so many identities the risk to take her on was greater, but if they succeeded so was the reward. If they were able to reshape Little’s public image they could surpass the hurdle of her “criminal” identity.

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<sup>25</sup> Jerold Footlick and Vern Smith. “Defending Joan Little.” *NewsWeek* (New York), 28 July, 1975.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> McNeil, “Self defense,” 240.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

One of the ways Little's team worked hard to reshape her image was to adjust the way Little presented herself to the world, hoping to make her appear more sympathetic. Little needed to appear trustworthy so that her argument of self defense would be believed. One journalist, Milton Jordan, wrote during her trial,

Gone was the shrinking frightened women [...] She had been transformed into a young woman who spoke boldly and confidently as rallies and during interviews [...] Even her physical appearance has changed/ Gone were the bushy afro, the thigh length mini skirts, the knee high boots and the sexy slacks. She began wearing short straightened hair, longer, soft, silky dresses, and a quiet almost demure demeanor in the courtroom.<sup>29</sup>

Part of Little's new image was based off Karen Galloway, not only Little's only female lawyer but also her only Black lawyer. According to McNeil, "Paul [Little's head lawyer] emphasized adequate but not excessive rehearsal and some emulation of Karen Galloway's demeanor."<sup>30</sup>

Galloway was the perfect example of a "respectable" Black woman the defense team was trying to depict Little as. These changes made Little more relatable to the public and to her jurors. As Jordan continued, "you have to have someone they can identify with for them to show up,"<sup>31</sup> meaning that people needed to relate to Little in order to care. When she acted "respectable" there were fewer things to dislike about her, and more of a chance that people would trust what she was saying. Media outlets around the country noted the changes in Little's dress, look and general demeanor.

Another strategy of activists was to use religious language to discuss Little. One SCLC<sup>32</sup> leader, Golden Frinks, who helped start the "Free Joan Little" movement explained to people, "God has chosen this girl, with all her little shortcomings, to be the savior of Black women who

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<sup>29</sup> Milion, "Symbol."

<sup>30</sup> Genna Rae McNeil. "Joanne Is You and Joanne is Me: A Consideration of African American Women and the 'Free Joan Little' Movement, 1974-75." In *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement*, ed. By Bettye Collier-Thomas and V.P. Franklin (New York: New York University Press, 2001): 270.

<sup>31</sup> Milion, "Symbol."

<sup>32</sup> Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

are incarcerated.”<sup>33</sup> Frinks acknowledges Little’s flaws but still marks her as God’s chosen and a savior, positions of prestige and purity. The use of religious rhetoric was another strategy borrowed from the civil rights leaders, whose biblical language gave the movement holy connotations. Little’s supporters promoted an image of her as a woman redeemed, saved by God, given a divine opportunity to fight for justice. This rhetorical strategy played upon the Magdalene archetype, the redeemed woman, which starkly contrasted with the prosecutors use of the Jezebel stereotype. By attaching Little to the classic cycle of sin and redemption, a pattern clearly recognizable in the Bible and other literature, activists, through the media, were able to connect Little to Americans who would not otherwise be able to relate to her. Her many “shortcomings” as a defendant no longer appeared as a tragic flaw but as human mistakes. With the help of this rhetoric Little won the support of a strong contingent, African-American churchwomen whom McNeil writes, “viewed the case of Joan Little as one that required the attention of African American Church women and activists nationally.”<sup>34</sup>

Finally, Little’s supporters turned her into a political radical and revolutionary symbol that could be used to inspire intersectional activism around her. McNeil writes, “It would be an incorrect to view Joan Little as an African American motivated by political consciousness.”<sup>35</sup> But nevertheless Little was thrown into serving as a political symbol for everything that was wrong with the country and the potential to make things right. Emily Thuma said that Little’s campaigners created a “kaleidoscopic narrative of her case,”<sup>36</sup> meaning that they connected it to multiple, overlapping narratives that anyone could relate to, whether viewers of the case were feminists, Black radicals, left wing revolutionaries or average Americans. Activists like Angela

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<sup>33</sup> Reston, “Joan Little,” 9.

<sup>34</sup> Genna Rae McNeil, “African American Church Women, Social Activism and the Criminal Justice System.” *The Journal of African American History*, (Summer 2011): 378.

<sup>35</sup> McNeil, “Self defense,” 245.

<sup>36</sup> Thuma, “Anticarceral,” 57.

Davis connected her with a longer history of abuse against Black women calling her “the cultural grandchild of Cordelia Stevenson,”<sup>37</sup> and her rape a “vestige of slavery.”<sup>38</sup> She then wrote, “the content of the campaign must be explicitly anti-racist...but it would be incorrect to make light of the anti-sexist content of the movement. Racism and male supremacy have to be projected in their dialectical unity.”<sup>39</sup> People who connected to either the anti-racist or anti-sexist movements, or both could appreciate her rhetoric. Davis’s tying of Little’s assault made Little not only an assaulted, violated woman but a symbol of all violated women in the past. Journalist Terrence Maitland called her “a symbol for every degraded woman, every persecuted Black.”<sup>40</sup> Black media sources also helped bolster the image of Little. The popular Black magazine, *Jet Magazine* made her picture the cover of their magazine and the Black Panther Party named her the 1975 woman of the year.<sup>41</sup> These actions by the media marked Little as a symbol of the ideal radical Black woman. In an effort to connect Little to the greater trend of court inequality Little carried a copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird* to tie herself to the beloved American classic. This image helped tap into the empathy for Tom Robinson, the unfairly convicted and killed Black man in the novel who had already been a nationwide symbol of racial inequality that even apolitical Americans understood. Bernice Johnson, who supported Little, also helped connect with average Americans by writing a popular protest song “Joanne Little,” which sang Little’s tale while drumming up support for her from even non-radical Americans. The most popular lyrics were “Joanne Little she’s my sister/ Joanne Little she’s our mama/ Joanne is you/ and Joanne is me”<sup>42</sup> These words became a motto of the “Free Joan Little” movement and turned Little into an emblem of all

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<sup>37</sup> Cordelia Stevenson was an innocent woman who was raped and lynched by an angry mob.

<sup>38</sup> Davis, “Rape,” 2.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 3

<sup>40</sup> Fred Harwell, “Doubts about Joan Little Case,” *Boston Globe* (Boston), 11 May, 1980.

<sup>41</sup> Milion, “Symbol.”

<sup>42</sup> Bernice Johnson’s “Joanne Little,” quoted in McNeil’s “Joanne is You,” 275.

women, and her plight the issue of all. The creation of Little in the media allowed all Americans to connect to her, and feel support for her and the causes she represented.

According to Mark Pinsky, Jerry Paul, Little's head defender boasted, "you must orchestrate the press. This country works that way. And that fact is this country's weakness."<sup>43</sup> Little's team exceptionally orchestrated the press to promote the image of Little as symbol of justice. Nearly every article written about her case at the time included a mention of her as a symbol of something whether, "blatant racism,"<sup>44</sup> "the nation,"<sup>45</sup> marginalized groups and of course "southern justice."<sup>46</sup> The usage of news sources was key in shaping public opinion of Little. At the time of Alligood's murder only the *Beaufort County Times* was reporting on Little but by the trial it was on the front page of the *New York Times* and the subject of hot political debates. She was reported about so frequently that Pinsky wrote, "the Joan Little story has almost become a set piece in American Journalism."<sup>47</sup> Some embraced this rhetorical strategy eagerly printing stories about her symbolic importance while others were more political. Jerrold Footlick criticized how "militant feminists, Black activists and old-time left wing revolutionaries seized on the trial to make Little's cause their own"<sup>48</sup> calling their approach, "strategic ploys and shouted rhetoric."<sup>49</sup> One columnist Ethel Payne questioned Little's team's ethics in regards to their media strategy and mourned, "Joan Little seems to be taken over body and soul by who make a specialty of exploiting them."<sup>50</sup> Mark Pinsky reflected on the trial that many journalists

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<sup>43</sup> Mark Pinsky, "Reflections on Joan Little," *Columbia Journalism Review* (New York), 1 March, 1976.

<sup>44</sup> Jim Cleaver, "The Problem with the Joan Little Trial," *Los Angeles Sentinel* (Los Angeles), 31 July, 1975.

<sup>45</sup> Milion, "Symbol."

<sup>46</sup> Footlick and Smith, "Defending."

<sup>47</sup> Pinsky, "Reflections."

<sup>48</sup> Footlick and Smith, "Defending."

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ethel Payne, "The Plight of Joan Little." *New Pittsburg Courier* (Pittsburg), 20 December, 1975.

had taken advantage of it, not searching for truth but just using it for politics.<sup>51</sup> To him the trial had been abused.

In spite of these doubts the influence of the media did manage to influence Little's case positively. With the help of media outlets Little's supporters did achieve her acquittal, something which her supporters enthusiastically celebrated. The movement was marked as a success, the victory of an underdog. One feminist publication, *Off Our Backs*, wrote, "we know that Joanne is free, not because of the judicial system in this country but in spite of it."<sup>52</sup> *Off Our Backs* acknowledged that steps would still need to be taken to truly create justice in America but others declared that Little's case had redeemed the justice of the South. Little was asked about her feelings about the justice system after her release. She said, "The power of the people freed me."<sup>53</sup> Those people who had helped Little to freedom, including those on the jury were no doubt influenced by the media campaign that presented Little, the symbol.

But there were limits to her supporters' dedication. Little had fulfilled the role they had desired of her; she had fought against sexism, classism, racism, and had won. She had proved that the forces she had battled again were wrong. They had saved her life but she had given them more, a symbolic victory and a legal precedent of self defense. But Little had completed her part as the face of a movement and that movement had won. Much like Rosa Parks was abandoned, and lived in poverty after her part in the Civil Rights Movement so was Joan Little. In spite of her acquittal for the murder of Alligood Little was still charged with breaking and entering. Little was found guilty of this charge and taken back to prison. Joyce Egginton reported on this,

They [Little's supporters] went home still wearing their Joan Little T-shirts, and she went to the women's prison in Raleigh, North Carolina to serve the rest of her long house-breaking term. It does not seem to have crossed her supporter's minds that she might not

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<sup>51</sup> Pinsky, "Reflections."

<sup>52</sup> "Joanne's Plans," *Off Our Backs*, September-October 1975, 2.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

have too pleasant a time in jail at the mercy of prison guards whose colleague she killed.<sup>54</sup>

Egginton was right: after Joan had served her purpose her supporters rejoiced at their success and assumed she would be fine. However, she was sent back to prison. Not only had she killed a prison guard but also her case had aroused unwanted attention to North Carolina and its criminal system. Journalist John Reston wrote, “Here [North Carolina] her name has nothing to do with prison reform or the death penalty. Rather, she is the symbol of North Carolina’s embarrassment.”<sup>55</sup> This made her incredibly unpopular and vulnerable in prison, where she “asserted prison officials had harassed her, disciplined her unfairly and worst of all, failed to give her medical treatment for what could have been tuberculosis.”<sup>56</sup> When the Southern Poverty Law Center, which had provided much of Little’s legal support during her original trial was asked if they would help with her new plight they responded, “We haven’t been involved since her acquittal. We feel she is represented by her own counsel.”<sup>57</sup> Little’s loss of supporters shows the limitations of being valued for her symbolic importance rather than her personhood. Although she was still suffering at the hands of a sexist, racist, classist prison system her issues were not exciting enough to be a national, symbolic cause. She was no longer the emblem of battered women; she was just another Black woman serving time for breaking and entering. In June 1979, she was released at last but has live in anonymity ever since.

Luckily Little’s suffering was not all in vain and according to Thuma “played a pivotal role in inspiring new feminist antiviolence efforts that interrogated the systemic violence of

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<sup>54</sup> Joyce Egginton, “No Justice for on-the-Run Joan,” *The Observer* (1901- 2003), Feb 05, 1978.

<sup>55</sup> James Reston, “Justice and the Joan Little Case: Many Used Her as a Symbol and Now They Feel Let Down,” *Boston Globe* (Boston), 22 January, 1978.

<sup>56</sup> Nadine Cohades, “Southern Justice and the Case of Joan Little,” *New York Times* (New York), 6 January, 1978.

<sup>57</sup> Egginton, “No Justice.”

imprisonment.”<sup>58</sup> Her trial had been the experimental subject of her supporter’s rhetorical strategy and it had succeeded. This set the precedent that cases of women in color accused of crimes that had been committed for self defense against sexual violence could be won if the right media attention was gained. They learned that making these cases high profile could help shift the outcome in the defendant’s favor. Little’s case and the cases she influenced later “exemplified and publicly symbolized the ways which the state could compound rather than redress the violence in the lives of those enduring ‘the triple oppression of race, class and sex.’”<sup>59</sup> Three trials occurred within a few years of Little’s that clearly bore the influence of her activists’ strategies; Dessie Woods, who killed her attempted rapist, Yvonne Wanrow, who killed her child’s assailant and Inez Garcia who killed the men who raped her. Wanrow and Garcia especially managed to implement the “moral power and momentum”<sup>60</sup> that Little had started. Inez Garcia’s supporters even invoked Little and her success by adopting the slogan “Inez will be free because Joan is free!”<sup>61</sup>

These women and their judicial victories are the true legacy of the symbol of Little. Although her case could not fix all the faults of the racist, sexist, classist American court system she did manage to set the precedent that every woman had the right to defend herself against sexual violence. Her case also inspired strategies of future movements to support criminally accused, battered women. Little’s advocates were masterful in their manipulation of the media in reshaping her public image. They managed to make her appear as a respectable woman, a religiously redeemed figure, and a revolutionary symbol. This imagery helped garner support for Little from the nation in a trial where public sentiment and sympathy was key. But Little’s role

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<sup>58</sup> Thuma, “Anticarceral,” 59.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 57.



as a symbol left her vulnerable to being abandoned when she had served her purpose and she was forgotten. Today she belongs in the cannon of women like Patrica Bowman, Anita Hill, Christine Blasey-Ford and all the other women who stood up against those in positions of power to defend themselves against sexual violence. Perhaps in our current moment that seeks to bring sexual violence to the forefront, no matter how long it was in the past, Joan Little will finally get the recognition her courage deserves.

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