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**“Where are all the feminists?”¹
The Joan Little case and anti-rape activism during the 1970s**

A steady rain, sometimes pouring, fell over Raleigh, North Carolina on Monday, July 14, 1975. The bad weather didn't stop the 300 to 500 protestors, some of whom had travelled from Chicago, Richmond, Norfolk, and Baltimore, as they marched from the Women's Correctional Center, through the streets of downtown Raleigh, and finally gathered on the steps of the Wake County Courthouse. Flanked by police in riot gear, the demonstrators carried banners that read: “Stop Slave Labor in NC prisons,” “Black Panther Party demands freedom for Sister Joanne Little”, “Drop the charges,” and “Women have a right to self defense.”² The demonstrators had gathered for the first day of the Joan Little trial, a story that had exploded to nationwide and international attention over the previous 10 months.³

On August 27, 1974, 20-year-old black inmate Joan Little escaped from Beauford County Jail in the small town of Washington, North Carolina, after killing Clarence Alligood, a white officer at the facility. Another officer found Alligood dead in Little's cell, naked from the waist down with ejaculate on his thigh. Little was gone. When she

¹ Interview with Marjory Nelson, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College, Northampton, Mass.

² Hobgood papers, newspaper clipping, IMG 1175.

³ Little's first name was spelled differently depending on the source. Sometimes Joan, JoAnne, or Joann. The name is pronounced Jo-Anne.

turned herself in to the State Bureau of Investigation one week later, Little claimed that she had acted in self-defense, stabbing Allgood 11 times with an ice pick that he had brought into her cell so he could sexually assault her. The state of North Carolina charged Little with first degree murder; a crime that held a mandatory sentence of the death penalty.

With the prompting of Little's lawyer, Jerry Paul, a civil rights attorney who worked with the Southern Christian Leadership Council, the Joan Little story quickly gained nationwide attention. As a *Time* Magazine article explained, "What began as an obscure slaying in a small-town Southern jail has burgeoned into an expensive legal struggle and an emotional national controversy."⁴ By the time of the trial in July 1975, nearly every major newspaper in the country was covering it, dozens of demonstrations for Little's innocence had taken place across the country, and the case had even gained international attention.

The circumstances of the case resonated with three major social movements, all of which gave Little their most ardent support: civil rights, prisoner's rights, and women's liberation. (This paper will discuss civil rights and women's liberation) Joan was young, black, female, indigent, and imprisoned. Her attacker was white, male, and her captor. She had acted in self-defense against a sexual attack. Each of the movements politicized this rape case from their particular perspectives, eventually raising the case, and Joan herself, to a point of national celebrity. When Little was acquitted on August 14, 1975, it was considered a major victory for each of these rights-based movements.

⁴ "A Case of Rape or Seduction?" *Time* July 28, 1975.

The Little case serves as a window into how different groups conceptualized sexual violence; when and why varying social movements deemed rape particularly problematic and what they believed needed to be done about it. It is a particularly interesting case because feminists had been mobilizing since the early 1970s against rape and claimed the issue as their own. Thousands of women nationwide during the early 1970s created an active and effective anti-rape movement and sexual assault became a major feminist battleground. By the time of Little's trial in 1975, the women's liberation movement had firmly placed the issue of sexual assault into public consciousness.

While feminists may have deemed rape a "woman's issue" in the 1970s, civil rights activists also claimed sexual assault as a key issue in the black freedom struggle. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, civil rights activists rallied around cases of interracial rape, seeking justice for the historic and continuing suffering of black men who were wrongly accused and convicted of raping white women as well as championing the cause of black women who suffered from sexual violence by white men.

To the dismay of many feminists, racism (and not sexism) became the prevailing issue in this case, both in terms of the approach of the legal defense team and the media reporting. This paper argues that understanding the politics of rape in the 1970s requires us to look at both the newly emerged feminist understanding as well as the decades of rich analysis from the civil rights perspective that preceded it.

**"Southern Justice on Trial—Again"⁵
Civil rights and the defense of Joan Little**

Civil rights activists and organizations spearheaded the efforts to defend and acquit Little. Very quickly, the story of this young black prisoner who saved herself from

⁵ Mark Pinsky, "Reflections on Joan Little," *The Reader's Forum* (March/April 1976): 30.

her white jailer's attack and, in the week that followed, was hunted by Southern authorities as a fugitive, caught the attention of civil rights leaders.

From a civil rights perspective, the Little case symbolized the historic injustice of white oppression against blacks and, in particular, black women's struggle for justice against white male sexual violence. Black rights organizers cultivated an image of "Southern Justice on Trial"; an image which the media promptly picked up. Here was the story of a black woman defending herself against a white man in the South. For many, Little's story fit the scenario of a black defendant defenseless against the law in a stereotypically racist, small Southern town. One Beaufort County resident, who was resentful and somewhat mocking of this characterization, described the scenario:

She's there in jail, so defenseless, so innocent, and she gets raped and ravaged by this gross jailer, and all of a sudden, out of nowhere, she struck out, trying to defend herself. She had to kill the jailer, and now those ignorant old rednecks are gonna get their revenge on her. They're gonna make her pay for it with her life.⁶

Invoking this rhetoric of Southern justice, the *Chicago Defender* reported in March 1975, "Joan Little faces the wrath of a white community where to be black is a sin which no law of God or man can wash [a]way."⁷ Little's act of self-defense would therefore situate her within a legacy of response by black people against the white power structure.

**Power to the Ice Pick:
The women's liberation movement and the Little case**

When feminists (and others) rallied on the Wake County Superior Courthouse steps chanting "one, two, three, Joan must be set free! Four, five, six, power to the ice

⁶ James Reston, Jr. "The trial of Joan Little: Cause célèbre or curse?" *Chicago Tribune*, April 6, 1975.

⁷ "Case of Joan Little" *The Chicago Defender*, March 8, 1975, pg. 6.

pick,”⁸ they were confronting what they understood as two major failures of the criminal legal system. First, the legal system criminalized the victim in cases of rape and not the rapist. And second, the law did not support a woman’s right to self-defense.

Feminists criticized a criminal legal system that they believed criminalized the victim, not the attacker, in cases of rape. This was most obvious in cases where women used self-defense against their rapists and were then punished for doing so. In these self-defense cases, feminists argued that the real criminal was not the woman who fought back but the man who had raped, or attempted to rape, her. The Little case clearly resonated with this perspective.

Outside the Wake County Courthouse, women carried picket signs with the slogan: “Why have a trial – the criminal is dead.”⁹ According to the feminist perspective, the only crime committed was the rape and “the case had no business coming to trial in the first place.”¹⁰ The criminal legal system wrongly portrayed Little’s killing of Alligood as murder, rather than the act of self-defense that it actually was. Justice could only be served, therefore, if the trial was called off. This viewpoint was made clear in a petition circulated by The Chicago Women’s Committee to Free JoAnne Little, which urged the governor of North Carolina to drop all charges. The petition stated, “It is abundantly clear that the death [of Alligood] resulted from his own crime of attempted rape. The criminal is already dead.”¹¹ In the eyes of the law, the crime was the murder of Alligood. In the eyes of the feminists, the crime was the rape. As a November 1974

⁸ “A Case of Rape or Seduction?” *Time* July 28, 1975; Wayne King, “Joan Little Slaying Trial Starts Today” *New York Times* July 14, 1975, p. 51.

⁹ Wayne King, “Trial gives new twist to old racial issue” *New York Times*, Aug 12, 1975, p. 14.

¹⁰ Karen Lindsey, “Victory for Joanne,” *Off Our Backs* 5, no. 8 (Oct 31, 1975): 2.

¹¹ “Free JoAnne Little,” McCormick Library of Special Collections, Northwestern University Library, Women’s Ephemera Files (WEF), *Rape-Joann Little*.

article in the feminist newsjournal *Off Our Backs* simply explained, “In North Carolina JoAnne Little faces a first degree murder charge for defending herself against rape.”¹²

Rather than prosecuting the rapist, the legal system put the victim on trial.

“Sexism lost out to racism”¹³

Rape as a contested concept

Two days before the trial began, the *Washington Star* declared it, “the biggest civil rights trial of the ‘70s.”¹⁴ London Daily Mail journalist Jane Gaskell echoed this sentiment when she reported in the week prior to Little’s acquittal that, “the trial is one of the most controversial cases ever heard in America’s deep south.”¹⁵ This representation speaks to how much the case resonated with goals of the black freedom struggle.

Reflecting on the case 6 months following Little’s acquittal, Mark Pinsky, a free-lance journalist who helped break the story and closely covered the case for several major news services, commented that, “sexism lost out to racism in the reporting.”¹⁶

Many feminists, however, disagreed and argued instead that sexism was the prevailing issue in this (and all) cases of rape. Following Little’s acquittal, the Denver-based feminist news journal *Big Mama Rag* published an article titled “Little Freed, Feminism Raped.”¹⁷ Here the author commented, “The painfully obvious fact that she is a woman and was raped because she is a woman was not seen as part of Little’s situation.” Similarly, in response to Angela Davis’ analysis of the Joan Little case in the June 1975 issue of *Ms. Magazine* one reader from Reedsburg, WI wrote, “I must question Ms. Davis’ emphasis on racism as a primary factor in the act of rape. Rape is an act of

¹² Madeleine Janover, “Rape is a political act,” *Off Our Backs* 4, no. 11 (Nov 30, 1974): 8.

¹³ Pinsky, 30.

¹⁴ Lyle Denniston, “Joan Little Case: Biggest Civil Rights Trial of ‘70s,” *Washington Star*, July 13, 1975.

¹⁵ Jane Gaskell, “Judge saves girl in jail rape case from the death penalty,” *London Daily Mail*, August 7, 1975.

¹⁶ Pinsky, 30.

¹⁷ As quoted in Reston, 326.

aggression on the part of a man towards a woman and it seems to me, therefore, to be primarily a sexist act.”¹⁸

During the 1970s, different groups and rights-based social movements grappled with the meaning of rape. Cases like that of Joan Little highlight what a contested issue sexual violence had become, even amongst those who agreed that change was needed.

¹⁸ Anita M. Thayer to Ms. Magazine, June 4, 1975, Schlesinger Library, Carton 2, folder 49.