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### In Radical Defense of Themselves: Women Prison Organizing in the 1975 Raleigh Revolt

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History 091 Research Paper Seminar  
Fall 2013

In Radical Defense of Themselves:  
Women Prison Organizing in the 1975 Raleigh Revolt

Abstract:

As an intervention in the limited, male-centric historiography of prisoner organizing in the 1970s, this paper focuses on a weeklong revolt in the North Carolina Correctional Center for Women in 1975 in Raleigh, North Carolina. Developing out of the legacy of North Carolina's homegrown tradition of Black armed resistance throughout the rise and wane of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, the women of the Raleigh Revolt challenged the respectability politics of earlier, dominant forms of Black women's activism. The women inmates at NCCCW understood and articulated the modern day emergence of mass incarceration as a form of systemic and state-sponsored violence and physically revolted against these conditions in defense of their livelihoods and dignity. As poor and incarcerated women, their radical public assertion of subjectivity and humanity, documented in their self-produced zine *Break de Chains of US Slavery*, contests the scholarship of prison activism in which incarcerated women are portrayed as passive victims.

*“We are not animals. We are not machines. We are women. We are not “depraved criminals.””*  
-Suzan Andrews Stuart, *NCCCCW Prisoner*<sup>1</sup>

On June 15, 1975, over 150 incarcerated women performed a collective sit-in that escalated to a week-long action at the North Carolina Correctional Center for Women (NCCCCW). Initiated by the inmates themselves, hundreds of black and white women performed a sit-in inside the prison gates to assert a variety of concrete demands, including the closure of their laundry services due to horrific working conditions. While their resistance eventually met the force of hundreds of guards and local police,<sup>2</sup> women inmates did not remain passive. When cornered and physically forced to relocate inside the prison’s gymnasium, the inmates eventually broke down the main door, taking with them the guards’ riot sticks, bats, and broomsticks as they threw rocks at the police. Within minutes, as feminist newsletter *Off our Backs* reports, “police and guards were to be ordered to leave the premises of the prison.”<sup>3</sup>

The women prisoners’ moment of resistance, as well as their narrative and rationale for those events, however, has been contested both across their local media outlets as well as contemporary scholarship. During the moment of the revolt, the inmate’s voices competed against local and national media outlets, which carried political biases that characterized the action as senseless violence. Moreover, the riot occurred in a national political climate in which there was a waning interest and sympathy toward prison riots by the mid 1970s.<sup>4</sup>

Furthermore, their struggle—and its contestation—has diminished into oblivion across contemporary scholarship and even the memory of most of the Left. Similar to that of the Civil

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<sup>1</sup> Suzan Andrews Stuart, “The North Carolina...” *Break de Chains of Legalized US Slavery* (Durham: Prison Book Project, 1976) 64.

<sup>2</sup> “Sexism, Racism, Repression and Oppression: Four Ways to Better Understanding,” *Action for Forgotten Women* [Raleigh] Nov 1975: 1.

<sup>3</sup> “raleigh women lose,” *Off our Backs* [Washington DC] June 1975: 26.

<sup>4</sup> Eric Cummins, *The Rise and Fall of California’s Radical Prison Movement* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

Rights and Black Power, the prison movement cultivated a male voice; however, it generated a much smaller historical literature, in which women prison organizing is nonexistent.

The little scholarship that does exist tends to focus on female inmates' needs and the poor conditions inside women's prisons. In framing such women as victims rather than subjects, often scholars like sociologist Veronetta Youngs even outright deny that women organized and engaged in modes of resistance like their male counterparts.<sup>5</sup> However, as bodies of work that respectively focus on latina and AIDs activism in the Bedford Hills Facilities New York, Juanita Diaz-Cotto's *Gender, Ethnicity and the State* (1996) and *Breaking the Walls of Silence* (1998) were for some time the only two book length works that contested this assumption. Victoria Law's fundamental text, *Resistance Behind Bars*, is the first publication that attempts to create a cumulative history of women prison organizing, featuring the struggles in the 1970s at the height of the prison movement. However, with just three works across sociological and independent research, much remains to be expanded across scholarship. In effect, there still remains a strong void—and even an outright denial—of women prisoner organizing which, in addition to being historically inaccurate, furthers tropes of women as passive objects as opposed to the male subjects that participated in the 1970s prison movement. To resist the silence—this investigation will give name to the NCCCW action -- the Raleigh Revolt.

In Eric Cummins' historical monograph on prison organizing, *The Rise and Fall of California's Radical Prison Movement*, he traces the evolution of radical politics in prison to expanding opportunities for self-expression thanks to the access to books and personal writing; however not only does his case study focus solely on a males facilities, but in centering much of the work on iconized prison leaders like George Jackson, his research rests on archetypes of

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<sup>5</sup> Veronetta D. Young and Rebecca Reviere, *Women Behind Bars: Gender and Race in US Prisons*. (Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006) 2.

individual's "charismatic leadership" of the prison movement. Characteristic of much of the historiography of the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Movement, such an emphasis on "charismatic leadership," in effect, de-radicalizes the power of social movements by displacing a *mass* struggle onto an *individual* leader.<sup>6</sup> However, in working on a subject with such little scholarship, this investigation on the Raleigh Revolt presents an opportunity to develop a more horizontal historiography that captures the struggle at the NCCCW as the massive, radical mobilization that it was.

To honor both the struggle and radical potential of women prison organizing, this investigation not only seeks to visibilize this history but to do so in a manner that centers a diversity of women prisoners' voices—as embodied in Victoria Law's recent publication *Resistance Behind Bars*. As one of the first bodies of work that sought to create a history on women prisoner organizing, *Resistance Behind Bars* not only intervenes male-dominated prison movement scholarship and memory, but furthermore, by centering women's voices themselves, through personally conducted prison letter writing, the book is a work that intervenes traditional modes of academic research. Through such methodologies and intentions to incarcerated voices, Victoria Law presents incarcerated women as agents of change and resistance.

Inspired the work and methodology to center women's voices and struggles, this study utilizes various women grassroots organization's newsletters, interviews, and most importantly, a self-produced zine initiated by the incarcerated women at NCCCW entitled *Break da Chains of US Slavery*. Published a year after the Raleigh Revolt with collaboration of the Triangle Area Lesbian Prison project and North Carolina Hard Times Prison Project, the zine was a production

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<sup>6</sup> For further conversation on implications of "charismatic leadership" across historiography, consult Clayborne Carson's "Martin Luther King, Jr: Charismatic Leadership in a Mass Struggle."

initiated and written by the inmates involved in the Raleigh Revolt. In offering a counter-narrative of the actions at the NCCCW, the zine, through its diverse contributors, offers a rich impression of a multi-racial coalition of women both inside and outside prison walls.<sup>7</sup> Alongside this central document, this paper refers to two newsletters locally produced by the prison action organization, Action for Forgotten Women, and the national radical feminist magazine, *Off our Backs*. Collectively through such documents, this work centers women prisoners' voices to weave together a narrative of the Raleigh Revolt.

Through positioning these voices against the historical tropes of womanhood as well as the rising prison system they faced, the Raleigh Revolt offers a narrative about radicalized black womanhood and collective self-defense. In the context of North Carolina's homegrown legacy of Black self-defense and armed resistance during the Civil Rights era, Black citizens, and Black women especially, faced intense black lash through disproportionate and growing rates of incarceration. However, Black women's organizing during this era departed from an earlier "politics of respectability", emphasizing middle-class church values, towards centering poor and criminalized Black women's voices themselves. Consequently, the Raleigh Revolt, as seen across the zine, was beyond a spontaneous moment of physical *self-defense*. In understanding the NCCCW as a site of systemic abuse and profit, this revolt was an organized articulation of women in *radical defense of themselves*—as women with bodies and minds.

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For North Carolina, 1975 marked a turbulent year inside women's prisons. Before the Raleigh Revolt, the state was already under national spotlight for the Joan Little Trial—a case

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<sup>7</sup> Break De Chains of Legalized U.\$. Slavery 1.

that the *Chicago Tribune* called the “trial of the decade.”<sup>8</sup> Facing the death penalty, 21-year old black woman Joan Little was on trial for killing white security guard Clarence Allgood with an ice pick after his attempted sexual assault in her own jail cell. Inspiring a movement nationwide across black power and multi-racial women’s groups, the trial was a moment that brought forth spotlight and pressure from the outside and against the supposed “cosmopolitan city”<sup>9</sup> of the South—Raleigh, North Carolina. In the process, as historian Genna Rae McNeil writes, “the history of the South’s racial subjugation was put to trail” through the Free Joan Little Movement.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, Little was acquitted from one of the toughest state jail systems.<sup>11</sup> It was within this context that the Raleigh Revolt occurred shortly thereafter. Though the revolt did not hit nearly as many national media outlets, it was threatening locally as a collective action that challenged the entire prison system. While informed by national and local histories of black power and civil rights movements, the trial and the revolt presented a nuanced, radical image of black womanhood in an important moment in the rise and expansion of prisons.

As embodied across the movement that chanted “Power to the Ice Pick,” the Joan Little Movement grew from a history of local militant activism in North Carolina, that challenged the national nonviolent ethos of the Civil Rights Movement that pervaded the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. As detailed in Timothy Tyson’s *Radio Free Dixie*, Monroe North Carolina was the home of local NAACP president, Robert F Williams, who became one of the most influential black activists that engaged and advocated armed self-defense for black Southerners in the wake of the Civil

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<sup>8</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.” *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement*. (New York: NYU Press): 217.

<sup>9</sup> In contrast to its rural southern landscape, Raleigh self-promoted itself as the urban, culture “cosmopolitan city” of the South. Devin Fergus, *Liberalism, Black Power, and the Making of American Politics, 1965-1980*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009): 145 and 153.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, 225.

<sup>11</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.” *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement*. (New York: NYU Press): 260.

Rights Movement. While armed self-defense had been a long history in the deep south,<sup>12</sup> Williams not only continued this strategy to challenge white supremacy at the frontlines, but most importantly, he also *visibly* challenged Martin Luther King and the nonviolence ethos attached to mainstream Civil Rights Movement. Overall, the politics of self-defense and nonviolence would continue to be a tenuous issue throughout the Civil Rights Movement, and eventually in a post-1968 moment after the assassination MLK, this point of tension will rupture and fracture off to black nationalism and black power, a transition that is manifested in the fracturing of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the rise of Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. However, predating the escalation and new direction of the national Civil Rights Movement, North Carolina was an active site that practiced armed self-defense.

While both the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power Movement displaced women's pre-dated visible leadership that marked the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, women were still active agents on the grounds immersed and influenced by ideologies advocating armed self-defense. *Radio Free Dixie* alludes to women's activism in the black power circles in North Carolina. Not only did Robert Williams famously teach his wife Ellen Williams, who later saved his own life, to shoot, but as Robert Williams shared himself, "black women insisted that the men teach them to shoot...they had volunteered...and wanted to fight."<sup>13</sup> In fact, in 1976 a year after the Raleigh Revolt, a female inmate wrote in the zine about how she was part of the Black Vanguard—an armed self-defense group within the Raleigh area.<sup>14</sup> While the inmate's previous militant activity and the Raleigh Revolt may be seen as a belated militant practices of the national trajectory of

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<sup>12</sup> Timothy Tyson, "The Legacies," *Radio Free Dixie*, (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1999) 9-25.

<sup>13</sup> Timothy Tyson, "The Sissy Race of All Mankind," *Radio Free Dixie*, (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1999) 141.

<sup>14</sup> "The Court System, Fair or Unfair? An Inmate's View" *Break de Chains of Legalized U.S. Slavery*. (Durham: Prison Book Project, 1976) 33.



the black freedom struggle, such organizing and ideologies also were homegrown, rooted their local history.

With this strong history of practiced and advocacy of self-defense, the Joan Little movement presented an explicit departure of embedded tropes of womanhood which informed black women's activism. Before the Raleigh Revolt and the Joan Little Trial, black women, for instance, had engaged in women's prison reform efforts; however, in the spirit of "racial uplift" ideology that marked much of black activism in the first 20<sup>th</sup> century, middle-class women and churchwomen utilized their status as a mode to uplift the race both socially and morally. As Christina Green chronicles in her work *Our Separate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North Carolina*, there exists a rich local history of black and multi-racial women's group across the Durham-Raleigh area. In the moment the predated the revolts, there existed an organization called Women-in-Action which was a multi-racial organization begun by African American women, and as an extension of an earlier era of women's benevolence and civil activity, it denied taking on controversial political stances in order to facilitate dialogue and understanding on a variety of pressing issues across communities.<sup>15</sup> Alongside this interestingly early case of multi-racial work, historian Genne Rae McNeil in the article "African American Church Women, Social Activism, and the Criminal Justice System," also identifies the history of black women organizing from within the church around prison issues. Into the middle of the twentieth century, the local organization Women in Community Service created a unique collaborative and interracial community that focused on imprisoned women political prisoners in

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<sup>15</sup> Christina Greene, "Visiting Ladies: Interracial Sisterhood and the Politics of Respectability," *Our Separate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North Carolina*, (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2005) 196-197.

the area.<sup>16</sup> While women were central local figures for prison reform locally, tropes of black middle-class womanhood assigned their leadership in the moral and social uplift of the race.

Given this history of black women's positionality in the movement, the trial presented a new image of black womanhood that expressed a more radical ideology and strategy for racial equality under the judiciary system. While ideologies of racial uplift and respectable church women operated under the assumption that equality could be attained through performing and achieving respect from the larger white America, the movement that cultivated around Joan Little made militant strides characteristic of black power. Rather than modeling after respectable churchwomen, this movement inspired communities to chant "I Am Joan Little" which in effect pushed the masses to identify and *visibly* identify with a poor, formally uneducated black woman with a criminal record. As embodied across the famous "I am Joan Little" chant, defense of black womanhood became a radical vehicle to interrogate the systematic positioning of poor black women in America.

Across the Joan Little Trial and the Raleigh Revolt, the defense of black womanhood was particularly important given these actions were in a moment of a rising reactionary prison system. Independent scholar Dan Berger writes that the origins of our contemporary system of mass incarceration can be found—not with President Nixon's War on Drugs—but "in the repression of radical activism" of the later 1960s and 1970s. Interestingly, the North Carolina Corrections Center for Women prematurely affirms this correlation as seen across two separate reports on their facilities issued in 1972. According to "A Study in Neglect: A Report on Women Prisoners," the NCCCW was composed of 66% black women prisoners in a context where black North

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<sup>16</sup> Genna Rae McNeil, "African American Church Women, Social Activism, and the Criminal Justice System," The Journal of African American History 96.3 (2011): 375-376.

Carolínians made up just 24% of the state population.<sup>17</sup> Though Joan Little and the Raleigh Revolt predate our contemporary landscape of racialized mass incarceration, NCCCW was an earlier site in which the distribution of incarcerated females was in inverse, disproportionate relationship to the population.

In North Carolina, like many southern states, however, women prisons more disproportionately targeted black women, in comparison to their male counterparts. According to a 1972 report entitled “An Assessment of the Black Female Prisoner in the South,” there was a very high ratio of male to female prisoners in the southern justice system. In his analysis of the report, Laurence French explains this correlation as a product of chivalrous leniency in the south, in which male judges gave less harsh sentencing to women. This “chivalry,” however, was severely denied to black women given their vast overrepresentation inside the facilities. As the male correctional centers were made up of 55% black males, woman prisons- in holding 66% black women- illuminate a harsher systematic racialization across the judiciary system for black women.<sup>18</sup> As such, these numbers also attest to a systematic denial of womanhood for black women, since they were denied the chivalry given to their white counterpart. Consequently, Joan Little Trial was an important radical defense of black womanhood, given the state of incarceration rates particularly against black woman in the state of North Carolina.

Upon the end of the Joan Little Trial, however, Little’s defense attorney wrote in a local newspaper, “We have already seen a difference in the way women prisoners are held in North Carolina.”<sup>19</sup> While the Joan Little trial certainly represents a unique victory for black womanhood, it did not speak for the issues inside the prison movement, which largely took on a

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<sup>17</sup> Omar Hendrix, *A Study in Neglect: A Report on Women Prisoners* (New York: Women's Prison Association, 1972) 2.

<sup>18</sup> Laurence French, “An Assessment of the Black Female Prisoner in the South,” *Signs* 3:2 (1977): 486.

<sup>19</sup> “Women Jail Conditions Improve,” *Lakeland Ledger*, 27 July 1975: 12.

male voice that spoke and attested to male prisons. While Joan Little presented a case of momentous self-defense under a personal instance of sexual violence, the Raleigh Revolt was an instance in which women collectively organized against rising systematic violence and abuse committed by prisons. Given the scale and focus on fundraising and legal proceedings, the Joan Little Movement was largely organized within the legal system. However alongside this national moment, female inmates inside NCCCW did indeed resist outside the legal system and did organize with their own hands. In the shadows of waning media spotlight on North Carolina prisons, women inside NCCCW mobilized and challenged local authorities with force.

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As articulated and illustrated by the female inmates themselves in their self-produced zine *Breaking da Chains of Legalized US Slavery*, the NCCCW was a site of various systematic abuses. Treated barely as bodies, women inmates were subjected to severe living and working conditions inside prison. Medical coverage was scarce, if not entirely absent, with the exception of state-endorsed drug abuse. The women inmates were vulnerable to episodes of physical and sexual intimidation by the prison guards. However, as female subjects inside a prison run by the local North Carolina government, much of these conditions were be interpreted as systematic abuse and illegal neglect. The women involved in the revolt understood the abuses they experienced in NCCCW not as individual acts of victimization but as part of a larger system of state-sponsored abuse that they resisted.

Echoing the Joan Little case, NCCCW was also a site of physical and sexual abuse by security guards. A revealing example of this is articulated in the document written by inmate Alice Wise. After singing the famous freedom song “We Shall Overcome,” Wise was placed in

isolation inside the facilities by five male security guards. “Stripped of everything,” she was left naked without a mattress inside the cell. Eventually when given a foam mattress the following day, Wise, according to her account, was faced with a security guard Max Barber who, in front of two superintendents, “pulled out his knife and cut a piece of my mattress in the shape of heart, put his fingers across [her] lips and told me that I talked too much and I saw too much.”<sup>20</sup>

Through physical and sexual intimidation, security guards exercised systematic abuses that intentionally threatened the women prisoners’ physical wellbeing.

In addition to systematized and abusive tactics of intimidation, the neglected conditions within the prison alone subjected women to various degrees of physical abuse. This can especially be seen in their denial of medical care. With no full-time doctor on the premises, medical needs were often neglected if not outright denied. Three weeks after reporting severe stomach aches to administrators, for instance, an inmate was only examined after a life-threatening appendix rupture, which left her with an external bag attached for life. Similarly, inmate Edna Barnes was forced to have a hysterectomy as a result of a minor vaginal infection that remained untreated for four years. Another inmate, who had reported headaches for two years, was only delivered to a hospital in the midst of a stroke, from which she later died. In the few instances in which medical care was actually administered, the quality was poor and even illegally performed. For instance, an inmate received an eye operation illegally performed on prison grounds, and as a result of incorrect eye solution, she was left her with burns and bruises on her face for life. Denied even their most basic medical and bodily needs, NCCCW was a site of systematic abuse toward women prisoners.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Alice Wise, “Isolation Area of N.C.C.C.W.” Break de Chains of Legalized U\$ Slavery (Durham: Prison Book Project, 1976) 19.

<sup>21</sup> “Medical Care is Inadequate When...” Action for Forgotten Women [Raleigh] Nov 1975: 3.

Rather than administer inmates' requested medical and bodily needs, the prison administered practices of "behavior modification," as characteristic of prisons across the US. While sympathetic scholarship emphasizes the fact that many women entered jail on drug related charges, the prison was a site that administered and endorsed state drug abuse. For instance, inmate Bessie Boulter, in "The Four Questionable W's" in the zine, writes about fellow sixteen-year-old inmate Renee Lambright, a young victim of such drug abuse who was prescribed 600 mgs a day of thiorazine. Boulter described how the drugs affected her mind: "She sits day/night crying /laughing, talking to herself in one voice- answering in another. She knows not the time or day. She did not need thiorazine nor was she insane/crazy."<sup>22</sup> Across this account and other articles throughout the zine, this form of drug abuse was viewed as an attack on the mind. In the case of Lambright, Boulter wrote, "They are murdering her definitely. The system cannot cope with a mind of an individual who can think for herself."<sup>23</sup> As identified by the women's writing themselves, behavior modification was understood and analyzed as state-endorsed repression and drug abuse.

Unfortunately, however, Lambright was only one inmate of many facing forced drug abuse in the growing prison population, particularly in North Carolina. Starting 1955, thiorazine, also referred to as chlorpromazine, was one of the first generation of effective antipsychotic drugs that developed during the same moment as infamous medical practices like lobotomy that marked the rise of psychiatric hospitals. Though they were technically de-institutionalized after the 1960s, the 1970s marked the process of "trans-institutionalization"--the funneling of mental

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<sup>22</sup> Bessie Boulter, "The Four Questionable W's," Break da Chains of Legalized U.S. Slavery (Durham: Prison Book Project, 1976) 27.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

health patients from psychiatric hospitals to the prison.<sup>24</sup> In fact, within the same year of the Raleigh Revolt, there were plans for a \$13.5 million development project of the Federal Center for Correctional Research<sup>25</sup>—a site dedicated to behavior modification research on prison populations in Butner, just 30 miles north of Raleigh. With this in mind, these women not only bore the brunt of systematized drug abuse recently relocated across the prison system. Furthermore, their revolt posed a threat to federal investment in the growing mental health industry profiting inside prisons.

In addition to harassment and denial of medical coverage, the prison system's laundry was a site of physical abuse given its atrocious working conditions. Despite the high volume of women working there, the working conditions were extremely poor; there were no exhaust fans, floors were often wet slippery, there was no ventilation, often making rooms reach 120 degrees. Furthermore, women were not given protective clothing or gloves, and in working with heavy loads up to 175 pounds in faulty boiler system, many were left with harsh skin rashes and burns.<sup>26</sup> In a poem, an inmate described the working conditions: "three months later / body broken down/ treated like a dog-shit-cat-hole/ on the damn job."<sup>27</sup> As crystalized in an illustration of a black pregnant woman told to "work until they meet time for birth," the NCCCW was a site that not only forced pregnant women to work, but as such, it was denied the dimensions that come with womanhood.<sup>28</sup>

In a context in which over two thirds of the prison consisted of black women in such working conditions, women draw connections between this buses and the long histories of black

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<sup>24</sup> "Transinstitutionalization: How Prison Became the Primary Mental Health Institute of the US," Red White and Prison 12 June 2013<<http://redwhiteandprison.com/2013/06/12/transinstitutionalization/>>

<sup>25</sup> Charles E. Cobb, "Behavior Modification" in the Prison System," Black Scholar 5.8 (1974): 41-44.

<sup>26</sup> Action for Forgotten Women. 1.2. (1975): 4.

<sup>27</sup> Greta Gordon, "Work Release." Break de Chains of Legalized U\$ Slavery. (Durham: Prison Book Project, 1976) 56.

<sup>28</sup> Cartoon Illustration of Pregnant Inmate and Guard Break de Chains of Legalized U\$ Slavery (Durham: Prison Book Project, 1976) 58.

women as washerwomen. Jacqueline Jones's *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow* writes in great detail about the invisible labor of black women, such as washing, since slavery. While such histories are abused into stereotypes, Black women continued to work as washerwomen post emancipation as it provided one of the few sources of labor available in the moment and even later across the industrializing landscapes with the rise of laundromats. Historian Arwen P. Molhun confirms across *Steam Laundries*, stating that "into the twentieth century the black washerwoman was not only a pervasive cultural stereotype but also a social reality."<sup>29</sup> In reflecting on the laundries in the NCCCW, Dessie Boulder criticized such conditions, and in outlining the array of issues inside the prison, she wrote "N.C. has been extremely anti-labor with scab/slave labor conditions."<sup>30</sup> As seen across the women's metaphors to slavery, these women were putting for an analysis that saw the prison laundry performance and its horrific work conditions as racialized and exploitative—growing from racial, exploitative histories.

Furthermore, the prison and local government services profited from this abuse. According to "Open Letter to the Taxpayers of North Carolina" in the inmates' zine, the Corrections Department by its own figures admitted to making over \$13 million in the fiscal year of 1974-1975 from forced labor of convicts within this state.<sup>31</sup> Records that might confirm this claim about these specific women's facilities are limited; however, certainly, they performed services for local governments, as the women inmates not only washed the prison's clothes but the laundry for a nearby hospital as well as the four male prisons across North Carolina.<sup>32</sup> An inmate in a separate article within the same zine also comments that it was usual for security

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<sup>29</sup> Arwen Molden, "Laundries in Black and White." *Steam Laundries: Gender, Technology, and Work in the United States and Great Britain, 1880-1940* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1999) 173.

<sup>30</sup> "Laundry = Unhealthy and Inhumane Working Conditions," *Action for Forgotten Women* [Raleigh] Nov 1975: 4.

<sup>31</sup> Susan A Stuart, "An Open Letter to the Taxpayers of N.C." *Break de Chains of Legalized U\$ Slavery* (Durham: Prison Book Project, 1976) 49.

<sup>32</sup> "Sexism, Racism, Repression and Oppression: Four Ways to Better Understanding," *Action for Forgotten Women* [Raleigh] Nov 1975: 1.



guards to leave their laundry for the inmate to wash. Even before the landscape of privatized prison systems that we face today, women inmates presented structural economic analysis of the prison.

However this analysis is significant because it also aligns the women's experience in such labor as extensions of custodial prisons –not reformatories—which were prevalent across prisons in the first half of the twentieth century. While prison reform movement upon the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century focused on developing separate institutions for women through reformatories, which were “overwhelmingly institutions for white women,”<sup>33</sup> women of color – as subjects historically denied of their womanhood- were often resigned to custodial prisons. While reformatories sought to rehabilitate their white counterparts of their womanhood, custodial prisons, as structural extensions of infamous chain gains, put black women to work often alongside their male counterparts.<sup>34</sup> Eventually, the two models will dissolve into today's punitive prison system. Nonetheless, in comparing their work as stolen enslaved labor, women analyzed the prisons as site of enslaved, sexist labor. In understanding exploitation as also forms of systematic abuse, prisoners, like inmate Barbara Bouler, offer a feminist analysis as seen in their call to mobilize local forces to their struggle: “How long will you let them continue? They abuse our bodies as well as use our bodies for personal gain. When will you put a stop to this torture they take us through?”<sup>35</sup>

In analyzing prisons as sites of abuse, women inmates, however, displaced discourses of victimhood to concentrate on these issues as systematic abuses toward women—particularly black women. As inmate Majority Marsh writes in the conclusion of the zine:

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<sup>33</sup> Nancy Kurshan, “Women and Imprisonment in the US History and Current Reality” Prison Activist Resource Center <<http://www.prisonactivist.org/>>.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Bouler, Break de Chains of Legalized U\$ Slavery (Durham: Prison Book Project, 1976) 27.

“We do not cry for pity/sympathy/hand that tremble; we seek hands that will teach us and learn from us; hands that know no boundaries in the/our bid for total liberation.”<sup>36</sup>

In displacing attention from victimhood, the women inmates through the printed word recognized themselves as agents subjected to larger systematic abuses. Under analysis of structural abuse, women inmates’ mobilization, as seen across their zine, called to the public for solidarity.

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Despite a lack of acknowledgement across historical scholarship or even in the memory of the Left, women inmates initiated and organized collective modes of resistance against the prison system, making both radical demands and challenges. While the Attica Rebellion of 1971 is hailed as one of the most remembered prison riots, women also engaged in moments of resistance across the country as chronicled in Victoria Law’s comprehensive work, *Resistance Behind Bars*. For instance, during 1974-1975 alone, there was an “August Rebellion” in which women inmates at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility in New York protested the beating of a fellow prisoner and fought off guards, holding seven hostage and taking over sections of the prison;<sup>37</sup> later in 1975, there was the “Christmas Riot” in which women inmates protested the cancellation of family holiday visits and packages, culminating in prisoners gathering all across the prison and setting afire the Christmas trees in a “solidarity” protest. In the case of the NCCCW, women had previously filed complaints, particularly regarding the poor medical conditions; however after the failure of the authorities to meet their demands, after failure to see action on the part of administration, women organized themselves into action in a multifaceted period of resistance on the grounds of the NCCCW from June 15<sup>th</sup> to June 20<sup>th</sup> 1975.

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<sup>36</sup> “Conclusions” *Break de Chains of Legalized U\$ Slavery* (Durham: Prison Book Project, 1976) 65.

<sup>37</sup> Victoria Law, “Overview,” *Resistance Behind Bars: The Struggles of Incarcerated Women* 11.

While the term riot connotes histories of senseless violence, the women inmates of NCCCW were organized from the start of the revolt, as seen most clearly in their publicized multi-faceted platform. Upon the eve of the action, women of the prison published six main demands that marked their action, which found their way into various leftist newsletters such as the feminist magazine *Off our Backs*. First, they demanded the abolition of the laundry. Second, they called for the reappointment of Manager of Institutions Morris Kea, the only black administrator of the prison.<sup>38</sup> Third, the inmates called for the elimination or improvement of the diagnostic center, which had been the intake and classification system, which resulted in improper and often racist placement of prison inmates. Fourth, they demanded the immediate improvement of medical care and treatment. Fifth, they called for an investigation of drug abuse administered by staff. And sixth, they called for the dismissal and replacement of all security personnel for open and abusive racist practices.<sup>39</sup> Many of these issues--particularly those concerning medical needs—had been demanded previously. This was the first time, however, that these demands were organized into an action and the first time that those demands were put in print and brought into circulation before the public.

Initiated and organized first by the inmates, the women performed a sit-in outside and inside NCCCW on Sunday, June 15, with the support of two local organizations, Action for Forgotten Women (AFW) and the Triangle Area Lesbian Feminists (TALF). Of the 435 women in the NCCCW, an estimate of 150 women were heavily involved in performing the sit-in inside the prison with the support of 20 members from the two outside groups. Across both sides of the prison fence, there was a white and black coalition of women holding signs, conversing, and singing freedom songs. While TALF was a political collective of lesbian feminists, AFW was a

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<sup>38</sup> Anne C Willet, "In Our Peaceful Struggle." Break de Chains of Legalized U\$ Slavery (Durham: Prison Book Project, 1976) 3-5.

<sup>39</sup> mecca reliance, marsha segerberg, and anne williams, "raleigh women lose." Off Our Backs. July 1975: 26.

multi-racial coalition of women that formed in the moment of the Joan Little Trial and worked to make visible the conditions of the NCCCW.<sup>40</sup> Collectively, these two organizations played vital roles in spreading the news of the inmate's struggle to the local and national community. The Action for Forgotten Women's newsletter actually began its first publication at the moment of the Raleigh Revolt, and TALF played a central role in the later publication of the zine, *Break da Chains of Slavery*. Aside their eventual roles in media outreach, they were vital instruments in the moment of the revolt as outside witnesses of the eventual violence and confrontation with NCCCW staff and local law enforcement.

Peacefully performing the action, the inmates soon meet confrontation. Initially, Director Morris Kea and WL Kautsky Deputy Director of the State Prison came to the action, however, they demanded the women's return to their respective jails with no offer of immediate solution to the inmates' own declared demands. Later at five in the morning on Monday, police from the male maximum-security section accompanied director Kautsky began and arrived "wearing helmets and carrying 3 -1/2 riot sticks."<sup>41</sup> Though he had promised there would be no violence, he had also explicitly "refused to put it in writing."<sup>42</sup> According to Action for Forgotten women newsletter published the following week, a total of "450 male guard were called in from the local male correction center armed with clubs, tear gas, pepper gas, canine dogs, and riot gear."<sup>43</sup> Additionally, 150 state highway patrol, and 50 city policemen with an undetermined amount of national guardsmen were present.<sup>44</sup> Given the amount of enforcement that eventually cornered the women from three directions and directed them into the gymnasium, the outside support

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<sup>40</sup> Resources for Community Change. Women Behind Bars: An Organizing Tool 24

<sup>41</sup> "Sexism, Racism, Repression and Oppression: Four Ways to Better Understanding," Action for Forgotten Women [Raleigh] Nov 1975: 1.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

groups of women proved to be vital witnesses that saw and heard “sounds of breaking glass, screams, and pounding noises.”<sup>45</sup>

In the face of massive, armed prison guards and local law enforcement, women engaged in a powerful moment of collective self-defense. Though outnumbered, the women from inside the gymnasium broke the door down, entering back outside in the prison yard, “. . . armed with riot sticks, bat and broomsticks.”<sup>46</sup> While the women had been cornered for a moment, the women’s force and self-defense not only pushed security out the gymnasium, but it prompted the police and guards to be ordered to leave the premises of the prison.<sup>47</sup>

Following the confrontation, the inmates boycotted the laundry for five days, and along with the support and mediation of AFW, they began a series of negotiation with the prison administration. Over the course of five days, three meetings brought together all three parties—the prison administration, outside prison activist Celine Chenier from Action for Forgotten Women, as well as a group of five prison inmates. However, these meetings did not amount to meet their demands. And by the fifth day, prison guards ended the action through repression and a divide and conquer strategy that relocated 30 identified “ringleaders” of the action to the male maximum security in Morgantown NC and 60 into solitary confinement inside NCCCW.<sup>48</sup> Through such repressive strides, administration ended the action. Eventually, the prison hired medical investigation, which brought little change.<sup>49</sup> Consequently, inmates months after their

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<sup>45</sup> mecca reliance, marsha segerberg, and anne williams. “raleigh women lose.” Off Our Backs. July 1975: 27.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> “raleigh women lose,” Off our Backs [Washington DC] June 1975: 26.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid

<sup>49</sup> Marjorie Marsh, “Contradiction.” Break de Chains of Legalized U.\$ Slavery. (Durham: Prison Book Project, 1976) 17.

confinement, with little success, attempted to file a lawsuit on the grounds of the continued horrific, abusive conditions.<sup>50</sup>

While the zine does not provide further documentation and insight about the organizing that followed the revolt, the official history of the correctional facilities, surprisingly, concludes the revolt with one of the most successful concrete facets that resulted from prison revolts—the closure of the laundry. According to the website of the NCCCW, it officially states: “An eventual result of the event [the revolt] was that the laundry was permanently closed.”<sup>51</sup> While there exist more details to interrogate—this statement directly affirms women prisoners’ agency and impact on NCCCW prisons for achieving a demand that fought for in the Raleigh Revolt.

Through this success and documented course of action, this narrative debunks tropes of incarcerated women as passive as well as tropes that mark modes of prisoner resistance as senseless violence. As demonstrated across the articulated demands and laundry boycott, this prison revolt was not only organized, but as manifested in their physical confrontation, women inmates *organized with force*.

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Given the historical tropes of womanhood and the systemically abusive prison state that the women faced, the revolt represented a radical moment of women inmates in defense of themselves. Beyond the episode of physical self-defense in the gymnasium, inmate Susan Stuart explained this revolt as a transformative moment in which women defended themselves for the sake of themselves:

“These women, being the timid, house-broken ladies they were dubbed as by society, crouched back and took this treatment until the pig made his most fatal mistake--he

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<sup>50</sup> Marjorie Marsh, “The Enemy Speaks.” Break de Chains of Legalized U.S. Slavery. (Durham: Prison Book Project, 1976) 30.

<sup>51</sup> “North Carolina Correctional Institution for Women,” North Carolina Department of Public Safety: Prevent, Protect, Prepare, 6 Oct 2013 < <https://www.ncdps.gov/index2.cfm?a=000003,002240,002371,002383,002281>>

started to try to strip the women of their identity--he wanted to take away the only incentive that kept the women alive; to live for themselves and oppressed political societies everywhere.”<sup>52</sup>

By attacking this abuse as systematic, these women embarked on a larger conversation about the oppression they faced as female inmates. Consequently, this study identifies these women as engaging in actions and thought that concern and demand physical self-defense to secure their survival. As seen across the zine, the Raleigh Revolt was organized articulation of women in *radical defense of themselves*—as women with bodies and minds.

Across an extended, articulated listed of demands printed in the zine, the incarcerated women articulated and defended their right not just to survive but live as human beings with individuality and community. Published in the zine, the document was originally sent to the Rev W.W. Finlator and Members of the NC Advisory Committee to the NC Commission on Civil Rights.<sup>53</sup> In referring to the needs of the “prisoners’ community,”<sup>54</sup> the women demanded their specific requests to allow family visitations, personal clothing, and personal work pay for laundry.<sup>55</sup>

In defending their bodies across their medical demands, the women inmates, across the same document, make demands about treatment of their bodies and importance of choice and consent. In calling for the entire replacement of the medical department, the women demand a system in which “prisoners should be seen by doctor at the time they are sick.” Furthermore, upon discussion across mental and medical needs, women write “prisoners should see the

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<sup>52</sup> “Sexism, Racism, Repression and Oppression: Four Ways to Better Understanding,” Action for Forgotten Women [Raleigh] Nov 1975: 1.

<sup>53</sup> “Proposal,” Break de Chains of Legalized U.S. Slavery (Durham: Prison Book Project, 1976) 36-39.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, 36.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, 36-37.

psychiatrist alone if they choose” and “a doctor at the time they are sick.”<sup>56</sup> In introducing themes of choice and consent, women were in self-defense of their choice over their bodies.

Furthermore, the Raleigh Revolt illuminates strides of defense for themselves as women of minds and agency. This is particularly illustrated in the first article within *Breaking da Chains of Legalized US Slavery* entitled “In Our Peaceful Struggle.” There, inmate Anne C. Willet writes at length about the prison as racist, capitalistic site and mode of repression punishment and isolation, which relocated 30 identified “ringleaders” of the revolt to the male prison institution. In the narrative, Willet saw the security guards as “cowardly oppressors” and declared that the prison system “cannot deal with our intelligence.”<sup>57</sup> While this anecdote largely serves to illuminate the unjust aftermath of the Raleigh Revolt, it also illustrates how the women inmates, struggled in defense of themselves as incredible agents of minds that stood above the systematic hypnosis of the prison state.

As seen across their self-produced illustrations inside the zine, women also defended the image of black womanhood. In a similar fashion to most media outlets covering the Raleigh Revolt, *St. Petersburg Times*’ coverage of the Raleigh Revolt reduced the moment to a photograph of a female inmate on a stretcher with the short caption “women get hurt after riot.”<sup>58</sup> While this in effect reduced the agency and power that the women had exerted against the prison and the three hospitalized guards, women across the zine offered very contrasting images. One illustration entitled “Revolution in Our Time,” for instance, depicts an armed group of multi-racial women with a black woman with an afro at its center.<sup>59</sup> Not only does the document- as a self-produced illustration- defend the inmates as creators. But furthermore, as a production

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Anne C Willet, “In Our Peaceful Struggle,” *Break de Chains of Legalized US Slavery* (Durham: Prison Book Project, 1976) 3-5.

<sup>58</sup> “Women Get Hurt After Riot,” *St. Petersburg Times*. 20 June 1975: 2A.

<sup>59</sup> “Revolution in Our Time,” *Break de Chains of Legalized US Slavery* (Durham: Prison Book Project, 1976) 43.



published a year after the revolt, the illustration defends their image against those published in media outlets like *St. Petersburg Times*. Through their own defense and creation, they re-defended and re-empowered the image of radicalized black womanhood.

Given the histories of organizing efforts in the black freedom struggle, much of the radical nature of the revolt lied in the initiation and collectively led effortson the part of the women inmates. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, for instance, black activism was articulated and expressed by notions of “racial uplift” in which middle-class women, as mothers of the race, were to morally and socially uplift the race.<sup>60</sup> While occupying a leadership position, their activism—as a role anchored in motherhood—was informed in the name of service of others beyond themselves—a gendered dynamic that carries into civil rights movement and black power. As Tyson briefly captures across *Radio Free Dixie* when discussing women’s place in the black power movement, “black women frequently placed race and family ahead of their own problems with gender inequities.”<sup>61</sup> As agents who historically did not find the space to organize for themselves in earlier moments of the black freedom struggle, the women in the Raleigh Revolt—as inmates who had been systematically separated and denied of kinship and motherhood—represent a radical moment in which women were fighting in self-defense for the sake of themselves.

While the initiation and central role of the incarcerated women radically departed from histories of women’s former activism, the meeting procedure after the height of the revolt offer as well as the general content of the zine collectively offer an impression of a prison mobilization that had radical horizontal values across its organizing—a facet that departs from much of the

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<sup>60</sup> For further discussion on the evolution of black women’s organizing, consult Deborah Gray White’s *Too Heavy a Load*.

<sup>61</sup> Timothy Tyson, “The Sissy Race of All Mankind,” *Radio Free Dixie*, (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1999) 141.

black freedom struggle in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the moment of the revolt, this is manifested in the manner in which women inmates were not only initiated Raleigh Revolt, but furthermore in the ways in which they were central actors in official meetings with state prison administrations after the height of action, as seen in the manner in which prisoners made up the largest party around the negotiation table. Furthermore, this value is also embedded across the historiography of the revolt in the zine. Not only does it feature over 30 women inmate voices in just a 65 page volume, but the zine made “absolutely no ‘editorial’ changes...not even changing the spelling or grammar” in efforts to present “exactly what the sista did/felt.”<sup>62</sup> As demonstrated across how women chose to represent themselves across the negotiations and their own narrative, the revolt and the incarcerated women organizers rested upon actualized horizontal organizing values that honored multitudes of voices.

In centering their voices and reclaiming their identity as women—and largely as poor, formally uneducated women—the Raleigh Revolt presented a moment in which female inmates were actualizing and defending a radicalized, collective image of black womanhood introduced by the Joan Little Trial. Departing from the standards of moral and social respectability, Anne C. Willet writes:

“we, sistas/comrades, are the carriers of future generations: we are the ones that give birth to human life. Our role must be one of aggression...Let us show these capitalists we are proud of our womanhood and will fight to to keep it.”<sup>63</sup>

Through centering and defending their womanhood, these women inmates offers structural critiques of their “imperialists” that formulated the prison and larger society.

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<sup>62</sup> Jinni M. Stroman. “We view this...” Break de Chains of Legalized U.\$ Slavery (Durham: Prison Book Project, 1976) 2.

<sup>63</sup> Anne C. Willet, “Comrades/Sistas/Women...” Break de Chains of Legalized U.\$ Slavery (Durham: Prison Book Project, 1976) 44.

Consequently, the incarcerated women's voices illuminate the revolt as more than a collective action of physical self-defense behind prison walls. But rather, in articulating systematic critiques across their own defense of womanhood, they illuminate the Raleigh Revolt as a *radical* defense of themselves.

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In a contemporary moment in which prisons have reached unprecedented heights, it is imperative to understand the roots of the prison system in the country. Much like that of the prison movement in the 1970s, however, conversations about incarceration assume a male voice today. For instance, as a remark to anchor the fact that more than 2.3 million people are imprisoned nationwide, the fact that 1 in 3 African American men are incarcerated has become a particular favorite statistic to reference.<sup>64</sup> However not only is that a disservice to the general prison population and crisis that is also exponentially criminalizing women and transgender communities, however, it is also losing sight of the whole landscape of the prison system.

As a narrative that presents incarcerated women in radical defense of themselves in the face of the rising prison system, the Raleigh Revolt not only debunks historical tropes of passive incarcerated women through its defense of a radicalized black womanhood. However, as an organized prison revolt with its own institutional memory, the 1975 Raleigh Revolt offers both *analysis* and *insight about prisoner agency* from the critical historical moment and geographic site in which mass incarceration originally began.

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<sup>64</sup> Pew Center Report, "One in 100: Behind Bars in America 2008," 6.

For instance, the systemic critiques articulated by the women of the Raleigh Revolt parallel rising contemporary analysis about how mass incarceration intersects with issues of abuse and trauma. While general literature on today's mass incarceration allocates a root cause toward the termed "school-to prison pipeline,"<sup>65</sup> contributor writer of the RH Reality Check: Reproduction & Sexual Health Justice Yasmin Yafa pushes beyond this discourse in her article "Invisible Prisoners." In discussing the rising statistics of juvenile women entering prison, she centers research that affirms that "73 percent of girls in juvenile detention have previously suffered from some form of physical or sexual abuse."<sup>66</sup> Consequently, she calls for a new discourse beyond the "school-to-prison pipeline"—one that she coins the "abuse-to-prison pipeline." As seen across this investigation and *Break de Chains of US Legalized Slavery*, women were already engaged in thought that found systemic abuse across US society, but furthermore, they analyzed prisons as systematic site of such abuse.

While the exclusion and silence of women prison organizing—like the Raleigh Revolt—speak to some degree of the nature 1970s prison movement and its masculine projections, it is important to recognize that the local and national government benefited *and continue* to benefit in silencing a moment of great resistance and agency on the part of incarcerated women. As a physical confrontational against the NCCCW, the self-defense of the women at NCCCW *provoked* the same issues that galvanized the wide coalition that created the Joan Little Movement. However, as seen across their zine, this self-defense *articulated* structural critiques of the prison system and in doing so challenged the very pillars under which this country rests

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<sup>65</sup> An analysis of the current moment of mass incarceration, the "school to prison pipeline" highlights the disturbing national trend wherein children are funneled out of public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice system. For more concise information refer to Catherine Kim's *The School to Prison Pipeline: Structuring Legal Reform*.

<sup>66</sup> Yasmin Yafa, "Invisible Prisoners: Why Are So Many Children, Especially Girls, Placed in Solitary Confinement?" RH Reality Check: Reproductive & Sexual Health and Justice. N.p., 18 June 2012. Web. 10 Sept. 2012. <<http://rhrealitycheck.org/article/2012/06/18/girls-in-juvenile-justice-an-invisible-population/>>

upon. Consequently, the story of the Raleigh Revolt is not only imperative to sculpt a more representative scholarship on this radical history of the prison movement. But furthermore, the study provides analysis of the roots of mass incarceration, and the narrative—as one in defense of black womanhood—reintroduces prisoners as powerful and even threatening subjects to the state.

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