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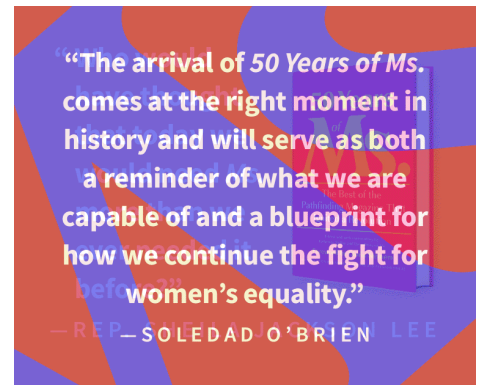
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HERSTORY, VIOLENCE & HARASSMENT

Black Herstory: “The Trial of the Decade”

2/21/2012 by **JAMIA WILSON**



I
recall
my

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grandmother and father telling me, when I was about 10, about a relative who courageously fought back against and killed a white jailer who attempted to rape her. I did not hear the story again until I read about [Joan Little](#) in graduate school. It was only then that I learned that Joan's fight for survival had made national headlines and transformed U.S. attitudes about racialized sexual violence and victims' rights.

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Before I was old enough to grasp the intricacies of Little’s case, I understood that the tales about her were a lesson about our family values—about preserving one’s honor and dignity in the face of pervasive racism and sexism. Now that I know the full story, I know that Little advanced those values on a larger scale than I’d ever imagined: Her case galvanized a diverse movement of activists across the nation to band together and demand justice for Joan, as well as for other women of color, sexual assault survivors and victims of police brutality.

After growing up in challenging circumstances of racism and economic inequality, Little was arrested for breaking, entering and larceny in Washington, N.C., in 1974. Later that year, the 20-year-old Little was charged with using deadly force against Clarence Alligood, her white jailer and would-be rapist. Little escaped from prison following the assault and disappeared for a week—during which time local officials called for her to be shot—then surrendered and was quickly indicted.

Throughout the case, various whites and even Blacks in the community opined that Little was guilty of seducing and then killing Alligood in order to escape jail. Her detractors denied Little’s innocence because of her criminal background, so-called “fast” lifestyle and rumored “immorality.” For some, Little could never be a rape “victim” because she did not meet their standards of social respectability. The prosecution capitalized on these attitudes, characterizing Little as a depraved seductress. They were “[more] interested in sending Black women to the gas chamber than the truth,” Little later recalled. In spite of all this, Little remained self-possessed and maintained her plea of self-defense.

Historically speaking, the odds were against her. Only a few decades earlier, in the 1940s, it had been “nearly impossible for Black victims of sexual violence to receive justice in the



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courts," writes Danielle L. McGuire in her landmark history, *At The Dark End Of The Street*. In 1944, Rosa Lee Ingram had been given the death penalty by an all-white jury for killing a white man in self-defense in Georgia.

However, in the intervening years, the "ritualistic rape and intimidation" of Black women by white men had become one of the catalysts for the civil rights movement. Over the course of the 1940s, 50s and 60s, thousands of Black people mobilized to defend women's bodily integrity and dignity.

Throughout 1974 and 75, women of color, civil-rights advocates and the [Black Panther Party](#) rallied to Little's cause. Mainstream feminist groups also called for her freedom in the name of sexual assault victims' rights. Thousands of Americans demonstrated on Little's behalf, bearing witness and creating a spectacle that the *Chicago Tribune* named "[the trial of the decade](#)." The African American all-women's acapella group [Sweet Honey in the Rock](#) penned a [song of solidarity](#) in 1975 called "Joanne Little":

*I always walked by the golden rule, steered clear of
controversy ...*

Till along come this woman, little over five feet tall

Charged and jailed with breaking the law ...

*First-degree murder she was on the loose, Joanne ...What is
she to you?*

*Joanne Little, she's my sister. Joanne Little, she's our mama.
Joanne*

*Little, she's your lover. Joanne's the woman who's gonna
carry your*

child...

This is 1975 at it most oppressive best.

North Carolina state, the pride of this land, made her an outlaw...

Tell me what she did to deserve this name?

Killed a man who thought she was fair game.

When I heard the news, I screamed inside.

Lost all my cool. My anger I could not hide. ...

Joanne is you. Joanne is me. Our prison is the whole society

'cause we live in a land that'll bring all pressure to bear

on the head of a woman whose position we share.

Acknowledging the power of the movement that rallied around her, Joan said during her trial, "My life is not in the hands of the court. My life is in the hands of the people."

Largely due to her massive grassroots campaign of support, Joan was acquitted, escaping being executed in a state of North Carolina gas chamber or languishing in prison for defending herself from sexual violence.

Despite being born into a system that did everything to strip her of her bodily integrity, undermine her personhood and limit her access to resources, Joan dared to resist and assert her humanity. Joan Little's story imbues me with continued hope about the power of people bearing witness, holding policy makers and law enforcement accountable and supporting each other in the face of threats to our human