

“Break de Chains of Legalized U\$. Slavery:” Zines as a Site of Feminist Resistance, 1965-1980

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“We the third world People also have a dream. Tho not like Bro Martin Luther King. Our dream is to expose/destroy the Oppressor scheme. And get justice by necessary means. Be it negotiations or M-16!”¹

The tumultuous years of the 1960s not only fostered a rights revolution for many groups throughout the country, but spurred activism within prisons regarding gendered, racial, and humanitarian reform. The social climate ignited inmate activism as prisoners sought to harness public recognition and legislative gains. Organizing through prison zines, prisoners disseminated information not only to other prisoners, but to those outside who were also energized by calls to social and prison reform of the 1960s. Prior to the 1960s, popular narratives regarding prisons centered around their position as slaves of the state, a notion coined in the *Ruffin v. Commonwealth* case in 1871. Since then, prisoners were subjected to dehumanizing conditions throughout the country, particularly in the South, but it was not until the 1960s that prison reform garnered national attention and prisoner activism peaked as a result of collaborative zines.

In recent years, scholarship has largely focused on male prisoners as the central focus for critical prison studies. Very few center women in their discussions of prisoner activism, especially women of color. Scholars Dan Berger and Toussaint Losier in *Rethinking the American Prison Movement* published one of the most comprehensive accounts of prisoner activism in the latter 20th century, yet it focuses on both men and women, rather than isolating women and their unique experiences as prisoners. The last few years have brought more recognition to the plight of incarcerated women, with several scholars publishing works on

¹ *Break de Chains of Legalized U\$ Slavery*, (Durham, NC: North Carolina Women’s Prison Book Project, 1976), 12, https://freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC510_scans/Prisons_Women/510.PrisonWomen.BreakdeChains.pdf.

women's prisoner activism, such as Christina Greene and Victoria Law. Due to the scant research centering women in carceral studies, this work seeks to illuminate the lesser known experiences and activism of incarcerated women.²

Various groups throughout the 1960s rejected the constraining culture of the 1950s and lobbied socially and politically for equal rights. Known as the rights revolution, the activities of the 1960s produced landmark legislation, changed social norms, and advocated for numerous groups such as women, Black Americans, queer Americans, and Native Americans. The work of women and Black activists, particularly in the Black freedom struggle of the 1950s, was comprised of foundational work from which subsequent groups drew great inspiration. One of these groups were the incarcerated who, inspired by the work of civil rights activists, Black Power activists, and feminists, lobbied on a new scale for increased visibility to the American public and a recognition of human rights violations within prisons. The prisoners' rights movement vied for equal treatment between genders, the ending of inhumane conditions within prisons, and lobbied against prison overcrowding, racial segregation, and sexual and physical abuse. Numerous prisons across the United States protested these conditions, leading to an unprecedented number of riots. According to scholar Robert T. Chase, "there were five prison riots in 1967; fifteen in 1968; twenty-seven in 1970; thirty-seven in 1971; and forty-eight in 1972- the most prison riots in any year in U.S. History."³

² Dan Berger and Touissant Losier, *Rethinking the American Prison Movement*, (New York: Routledge, 2018); Christina Greene, *Free Joan Little: The Politics of Race, Sexual Violence, and Imprisonment* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2022); Victoria Law, "Resistance Behind Bars: The Struggles of Incarcerated Women" (New York: PM Press, 2009);

³ Robert T. Chase, "We Are Not Slaves: Rethinking the Rise of Carceral States through the Lens of the Prisoners' Rights Movement," *The Journal of American History* 102, no. 1 (June 2015), 74, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44286137>.

Prisoner activism was fostered through and publicized by zines, which have provided a rich history of prison activism for contemporary scholars. Women's zines in particular captured the nuances of the reality of being an incarcerated woman. Incarcerated women's activism is often overlooked in historical memory, as men's activism takes the center stage. These women, cognizant of their unique situation, lobbied for different reforms that addressed their specific circumstances. In addition to physical punishment at the hands of male guards, women were more likely to face "sexual attacks," "forced drugging," and "the threat or reality of cutting off family visits."⁴ The circumstances of incarcerated women inspired many prisoners across the South to collaborate with one another through zines. They used zines to foster community, lobby those outside the prison's walls, bring recognition to current events within prison, and protest. Zines functioned not only as a community-wide platform, but as a site of feminist resistance to prison conditions, capitalism, racism, and sexism within America's incarceration system.

Prisons of the South during the late 20th century remained particularly notorious, as many functioned as sites of agricultural labor. Scholars since have contended that the vestiges of slavery were evident throughout the South, as prisons were known to be segregated, racially demeaning, and particularly brutal. However, lawsuits filed by prisoners in the South brought the most comprehensive and drastic reforms seen in the 20th century and the gains made during these suits set the stage for activism to follow.

In a study of Atlanta's prison farm, egregious human rights violations were found. Inmates were overworked, underfed, and abused, both physically and emotionally. Investigations in the 1960s and 1970s into the conditions of the prison were illuminating, with investigators

⁴ Dan Berger and Touissant Losier, *Rethinking the American Prison Movement*, (New York: Routledge, 2018), 125.

finding “a thousand prisoners” living in the prison, despite its “comfortable capacity of 400 prisoners.”⁵ In 1969, prisoners went on strike twice due to unsanitary or inadequate food, but these conditions were not ameliorated. The prison administration “promised to raise cook wages and hire a new cook,” but there is no evidence of this.⁶ Strikes at the Atlanta prison farm continued just two years later for similar grievances. Into the 1980s these abuses continued. In addition to horrific abuses present, inmates were also forced to labor for meager, if any wages. In the 1970s, prisoners were supplying the city’s inmates with the majority of food, specifically dairy and in the 1980s, although they halted the practice of farming, prisoners still provided meat for themselves but also the city jail.⁷

One of the most notorious prisons of the South, Mississippi State Penitentiary, has been known for its extensive human rights abuses perpetrated since the late 19th century and continuing well into the 21st. Known as Parchman Farm, Mississippi State Penitentiary was established shortly after the Civil War and functioned as a plantation-style prison, with many convicts performing back-breaking agricultural labor from sunup to sundown. In the 1970s, Mississippi State Penitentiary came under fire once again as a result of allegations of abuse. The cries for reform came from prisoners, county residents, lawyers, and Justice Department officials, leading to the infamous *Gates v. Collier* case of 1973. In the years of Parchman’s operations, evidence has accumulated that inmates “have been stabbed, raped, beaten, and

⁵ “A Brief History of the Atlanta City Prison Farm.” *Atlanta Community Press Collective*, 25, <https://defendtheatlantaforest.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/OAPF-history-zine.pdf>.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

subjected to brutalities “ like “being forced at gunpoint to labor until exhaustion.”⁸ In one instance, a convict reported his rape to a guard, stating he could not work the following day due to his injuries. In retaliation, the guard placed him in solitary confinement for two weeks. The aforementioned court case alleges that Parchman’s activities violated the 8th and 14th Amendments. Interviewee Roy Haber was familiar with the abuses that happened at Parchman stating, “What they really need to do at Parchman is build a prison. They really don’t have one. What they have is a farm with slaves.”⁹

As in Mississippi, Louisiana’s prisons have come under consistent fire from human rights groups and organizations. In the 1960s and 1970s, Angola, a particularly notorious prison located in a city by the same name, faced serious issues with overcrowding. At one point, “over 3,000 prisoners were housed in 50-year old facilities built to accommodate 2,000.”¹⁰ Inmates at Angola faced racism at the hands of guards, usually impoverished whites from around the area. Violence at Angola was unprecedented, with “guards or inmates killing as many as 40 prisoners” and stabbing and wounding “over 150.”¹¹ The legacy of slavery lived on at Angola where farming was the primary form of work prisoners engaged in. Inmates labored under mounted guards who “occasionally [taunted] them by firing rifle shots over their heads.”¹²

⁸ Roy Reed, “Pressure Mounts for Prison Reform in Mississippi,” *New York Times*, September 18, 1973, 39, *New York Times*. September 18, 1973. <https://www.nytimes.com/1972/09/18/archives/pressure-mounts-for-prison-reform-in-mississippi.html>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ John Vodicka, “Prison Plantation,” *Facing South*, December 1, 1978, <https://www.facingsouth.org/prison-plantation>.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

For women, prison activism centered not only on the amelioration of dehumanizing conditions, but also the recognition of and justice for sexual assault. In many cases reluctant to publicize and discuss these abuses, assault on women went underreported and under recognized, particularly if the women in question was a person of color. Zines reported on these anonymous cases and also publicized ongoing trials between sexual assault victims and their perpetrators. One of the most illuminating cases regarding the treatment of women, specifically Black women, within prisons was that of Joan Little. At the time of her rape and subsequent trial, Little was 20 years old serving a sentence for breaking and entering. At one point, she was the only woman in the jail and was largely separated from the other inmates. The version of events, recounted by an officer is described as follows. In the early morning of August 27, 1974, the officer found a guard on Little's bunk with his pants removed and injuries consistent with a stabbing. Conditions of the prison, especially Little's experiences, were soon illuminated and revealed a potentially vulnerable situation. Little was forced to shower, use the restroom, and change under the watchful eye of a video camera that captured the entire bathroom unobstructed. To turn on the water for the shower, Little had to request the help of a guard and the shower lacked a curtain. In the subsequent trial, Little was charged with 1st degree murder and held in Raleigh, N.C. The trial was less than fair, with the jury declining to confer with the county medical examiner who would testify that evidence of sexual assault was present. The case soon gripped the nation, with various news outlets, lawmakers, and organizations investigating the case. Organizer for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) Golden Frinks stated that "God has chosen

this girl, with all her little shortcomings to be the savior of black women who are incarcerated.”¹³

As evidenced in this quote, many across the nation felt the jury’s decision impacted various areas such as race relations, gendered activism, and prison reform. For Black women, Little’s trial was a moment of change. The trial represented more than Joan Little, it represented centuries-long state-sponsored abuse of Black women. For some, it codified a “woman’s right to defend herself against sexual assault,” publicized the history of Black women’s “anti-rape activism,” and highlighted the “racial bias in capital punishment cases nationally, and especially in North Carolina.”¹⁴

In a case in Kentucky, Lori Johnson, a 24-year-old woman, filed a suit against her rapist, a prison guard. Like many others, Johnson’s case illustrates the public rhetoric thrown at victims of sexual assault in prisons and the difficulty of obtaining justice in a broken system. After being assaulted, Johnson filed a lawsuit alleging sexual assault and “medical and administrative negligence” with a district court in Lexington, Kentucky.¹⁵ Instead of receiving the much-needed medical and emotional care, Johnson was put into solitary confinement and blamed for having intimate relations with the prison guard. While the perpetrator was placed on administrative leave for several days, Johnson was transferred to federal prison in Virginia where she was treated for her injuries. The perpetrator then went to court, suing Johnson for defamation. The zine in which this was published noted this discriminatory treatment, highlighting the sexist

¹³ James Reston, “The Joan Little Case,” *The New York Times*, April 6, 1965, <https://www.nytimes.com/1975/04/06/archives/the-joan-little-case-in-a-small-southern-town-the-night-jailer-is.html>.

¹⁴ Christina Greene, “She Ain’t No Rosa Parks:’ The Joan Little Rape-Murder Case and Jim Crow Justice in the Post-Civil Rights South,” *The Journal of African American History* 100, no. 3 (Summer 2015): 429, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5323/jafriamerhist.100.3.0428>.

¹⁵ Mary Klein, “Raped Behind Bars,” *Off Our Backs* 10, no. 3 (March 31, 1980), 21, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25793330>.

treatment that victims of rape endure following a confession, stating it is likely the male judges will not believe Johnson. The author ends the article with a call for others to support their fellow women if justice is ever going to be served.¹⁶ Sexual abuse, particularly by prison guards, represented a point in which incarcerated women would rally around and a point in which their experience differed from incarcerated men. Facing vastly different conditions, women departed from the prisoner organizing strategies aligned with male prisoners and crafted their own rhetoric that was cognizant of their unique experiences.

Historical memory tends to overlook incarcerated women's successful and outspoken efforts for prison reform. In addition to fighting for justice for sexual assault victims, prison activists rallied against other abuses, such as "abominable health care, compulsory labor for low wages, and lack of due process at all levels of the criminal justice system."¹⁷ Others rejected the rehabilitative notion put forth by the prison administration and government at large, stating "rehabilitation is the pacification program of liberalism," and it will "not end poverty or racism."¹⁸ In addition to activism on the outside, incarcerated women effectively lobbied for different demands and performed successful protests. At the prison in Alderson, West Virginia, women protested for one week following the Attica prison rebellion. They demanded adequate medical staff and treatment, an increase in wages, and an improved working environment. Eventually their peaceful protest was cut short, with many women being transferred to another prison; however, soon after, "150 feminists gathered outside the prison in protest at this

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Berger and Losier, *American Prison Movement*, 75.

¹⁸ Ibid., 96.

retaliation.”¹⁹

Within women’s prisons in the South, national media attention to the abuses was markedly less than attention given to male prisons. In response to the lack of media attention, women in the South used zines to garner support and establish a collective consciousness regarding prison reform. Prison zines functioned as a site of both resistance and organization to combat racism, sexism, and human rights abuses. Scholar Olivia Wright published an article regarding women’s prison zines in which she argues that by way of zines, women established “a feminist ‘collective autobiography’ that redefines the female incarceration experience against dominant media narratives” and encourages women to “seek authority through camaraderie.”²⁰ As stated previously, prison activism and by extension zines, were intimately tied to the social movements of the 1960s, with influence taken from women’s and Black freedom movements. Women’s zines provided a new outlook on 20th century feminism and the intersections of race, gender, and incarceration. Women in particular sought parity with their incarcerated male counterparts who they believed were given better working and living conditions. The strategy of filing suits alleging gender discrimination proved to be a novel and effective way to increase recognition and legislation on behalf of their abuses. Wright states the importance of zines cannot be overlooked. They are both a method of organizing and protest, but also a “vocalisation of a struggle/trauma/injustice that is then shared with others in order to educate, unite, and ultimately resist.”²¹

¹⁹ Ibid., 97

²⁰ Olivia Wright, “Freedom in Her Mind: Women’s Prison Zines and Feminist Writing in the 1970s,” *Journal of International Women’s Studies* 19, no. 1 (January 2018): 6-8.

²¹ Ibid., 12.

The Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women's zine "Society of Forgotten Women," exemplifies the power of zines in fostering both activism and community. A topic present in most zines is that of education. In "Society of Forgotten Women," a page is dedicated to an academic program which will prepare students for the GED examination, instruct them in adult basic education, and provide information about an upcoming program, one that partners with LSU regarding continuing education. Other educational programs include upholstery, sewing, and clerical courses with hopes to include cosmetological, welding, and food service programs in the future.²² One woman in "The Inside World," details the welding program at Mississippi State Penitentiary, highlighting its significance for incarcerated women there, as many women did not have a trade in which they could market after their release. She is empowered by her newfound skill, stating that welding used to be a man's job, but it is now available to women, like many other professions. Men, she says, "better watch out or us gals will soon be doing your jobs."²³ The subsequent issue of "Society of Forgotten Women" also introduces educational programs, such as Operation Upgrade, implemented to foster literacy within inmates and complete with individualized tutoring sessions.²⁴ "Belles and Bars" zine published by the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women also includes information regarding educational programs, with information about the recently begun business classes. Here, students learn secretarial skills and technical skills, similar to what would be taught in vocational school. The women exemplify

²² "Society of Forgotten Women," *LCIW Newsletter* 1, no. 10 (Jan/Feb 1979): 4-5, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.35529159>.

²³ "The Inside World," *Mississippi State Penitentiary* 26, no. 4 (June 1974): 41, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.34807005>.

²⁴ "Society of Forgotten Women," *LCIW Newsletter* 1, no. 9 (Sep/Oct 1978): 11, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.35529166>.

enthusiasm for the educational programs, encouraging other women to pick up skills to use once they are no longer incarcerated. One student exclaims, “Now instead of complaints of nothing to do, its UGH, Homework!!!”²⁵

Other zines seek to bring awareness of prison conditions to the outside world, speaking directly to readers, lobbying for audience recognition, asking for donations, or the continuance of subscriptions. One woman cites the zine as their “vehicle of outside communication for expression.”²⁶ Others rally the audience behind them, stating that the outside world is also imprisoned and will continue to be until they “awaken to the cold bare facts of imperialism.”²⁷ She requests their cooperation, asking them to “become united with us to overthrow this racism/fascism/kapitalism.”²⁸ Susan A. Stuart, incarcerated in North Carolina, seeks to encourage the audience to gain an awareness of what their “tax money is supporting,” stating the women incarcerated here “will continue to struggle for [their] basic human rights,” but they “believe that the taxpayers of this state also have the right to demand to see proof of where their hard earned dollars go.”²⁹ M. Marsh, conversely, calls for more hands-on support, stating “we do not want your sympathy, nor outstretched hands that tremble,” instead “we want strong hands extended to

²⁵ Belles and Bars,” *Louisiana Correctional Institution for Women* 1, no. 5 (May 1974): 3, [https:// www.jstor.org/stable/community.35524342](https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.35524342).

²⁶ “Society of Forgotten Women,” no. 9, 3.

²⁷ *Break de Chains*, 26.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 50.

join us in the Inevitable Revolution.”³⁰

Within zines, women are also given the space to theorize current scholarship and discourse. In the “Belles and Bars” May 1974 edition, women discuss the prominent Black Power movement, encouraging “self-discovery and self-awareness” as “part of the development of power for black people.”³¹ Crediting Marcus Garvey, Walter White, and others for the development of “Black Power Plus Black Consciousness,” this woman sees and states the significance of “what young black people are seeking to do.”³² Tarishi Maisha of the North Carolina Correctional Center for Women cites current figures such as George Jackson, Fred Hampton, and Malcolm X, asking whether they were killed for “fighting for justice in a racist/fascist/sexist/kapitalistic kountry? Seeking equality? Daring to make all people free? Struggling for all oppressed people?,” or, as she suggests, “being Black???”³³ Marjorie Marsh echoes a similar sentiment, entwining capitalism with colonialism and racism, stating “we/the oppressed people of the world must recognize the various attempts to break the already established unity and come together in one common bond to defeat one common enemy- ‘Racist Kapitalism.’”³⁴

Zines also provided space for women to write opinion pieces regarding current events. In “Society of Forgotten Women,” one article discusses “the myth of violent women.”³⁵ Within the

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ “Belles and Bars,” 4.

³² Ibid.

³³ *Break de Chains*, 25.

³⁴ Ibid., 51.

³⁵ Society of Forgotten Women,” 6.

article, author Eulah Z. Hudgins posits that the view of a rising tide of violent women is likely due to an increase in violence perpetrated by men and the trend of women being more likely to fight back. Rather than women being more violent, there is instead “a new attitude towards women within the criminal justice system” that places the blame of violence against women on the women themselves.³⁶ One woman incarcerated in North Carolina demands that her and her fellow inmates be treated like women, “not animals,” or “machines,” or “depraved criminals.”³⁷ Unfortunately, according to her, impoverished people are overlooked outside of the prison walls, and it is much “easier” to “neglect sick, poor women in a prison, where [their] only chance for help is from the outside.”³⁸

Women’s zines theorize and call for prison reform, with some calling for a rehabilitative rather than punitive focus, and others calling for the abolition of the current prison system as a whole. The “Belles and Bars” zine published by Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women echoes the calls for prison reform, specifically for a system that focuses on rehabilitation rather than punishment. The system as it currently stands does not accomplish this rehabilitation, as many first-time offenders either do not come “out alive,” or become a “hardened criminal” who is “corrupted” by the abuses happening inside the prison’s walls.³⁹ The “Bar None” prison zine states similar findings, intertwining their prison experiences and human rights abuses with the

³⁶ Ibid., 6.

³⁷ *Break de Chains*, 64.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ “Belles and Bars,” *Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women* 1, no. 4 (March 1974), 4, www.jstor.org/stable/community.35524331.

experiences as persons of color and women. They state that their peaceful protest at the North Carolina Correctional Center for Women, which they term “the kamp,” was met with physical violence, from “cuts and bruises” to “miscarriages” and “illegal transfers to the men’s unit in Morganton, N.C.”⁴⁰ Some women faced charges of “insighting [inciting] a riot” after the “unarmed women were attacked by male-guards, armed with loads of riot gear.”⁴¹

Continuing with the conversation of rehabilitation versus punishment is “The Society of Forgotten Women” zine of Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women, published in 1979. In an article entitled, “Is Rehabilitation Possible During Incarceration?,” Eulah Z. Hudgins discusses the constraining environment that is incarceration. As Hudgins states, “you avoid breaking any of their rules and do as you’re told. Your only rewards are hassles, harassments, and being looked upon as if you are inhuman.”⁴² Despite this and despite the overwhelming urge of incarcerated women to speak up for themselves, reject abuse, and demand respectful treatment, they continue on, going “straight” to “rehabilitate.”⁴³ Other women share in this sentiment. Women writing in “Belles and Bars” state “women’s institutions are more effective as schools of crime than rehabilitative centers.”⁴⁴ Ellen Amana Porter, incarcerated in North Carolina, “firmly [believes] that all that is gained NOTHING BUT ANGER AND HATE!”⁴⁵

⁴⁰ “One Year Later: From the Hole,” *Bar None* no. 7 (1975), 16, https://freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC510_scans/Prisons_Women/510_Prison_Women_BarNoneNo7.pdf.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁴² “Society of Forgotten Women,” no. 10, 7.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁴ “Belles and Bars,” no. 5, 5.

⁴⁵ *Break de Chains*, 34.

Aside from expressing anger and discontentment with their experiences, some women put forth proposals for changes within the prison. In North Carolina, Marjorie Marsh outlines a plan addressing the women's grievances. Some of the proposed changes include eliminating male guards, allowing the prisoners to wear civilian clothes, increasing wages, eliminating "vaginal searches," limiting the prescription of "mind-controlling drugs," and conducting the prison "as much like the out community as possible."⁴⁶

Other women seek to bring awareness to the unique circumstances of incarcerated women, with one woman, Bonita Duval, protesting the segregation of genders in America's penal system. Duval cites the issues that arise within America's current system which generally situate men within larger institutions and women within smaller institutions. This system essentially fosters a degree of separation and isolation within women's institutions, but a more collaborative and reform-focused environment within men's institutions. In addition, the lower number of women's institutions are "diverse in terms of offense, sentence, and age," which influences "prison programs, security arrangements, and administrative policies."⁴⁷ Others protest the generalizations made regarding women who are incarcerated, citing the media's image of a "new woman criminal" who is generally thought to be "a prostitute and/or drug addict."⁴⁸ The author dispels this narrative, saying this offender is "a small scale, petty thief" who is motivated due to economic inequalities- "her problem is neither drugs nor sexual deviance. It's unemployment."⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Ibid., 37.

⁴⁷ "Belles and Bars" no. 5, 5.

⁴⁸ "Society of Forgotten Women," no. 9, 7.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

Anne, incarcerated at North Carolina's Correctional Center for Women, criticizes the prison system as a whole, citing the quote, "you can determine the humanity of a society by entering it's prison."⁵⁰ She states, in America, the reality of "Racism/Fascism/Police brutality/Capitalistic Slave Labor/and the legalized murder of the poor-oppressed people" is evident.⁵¹

Using zines to detail their experiences and garner awareness toward their situations, other women turn to crafting literature, poetry, or other forms of writing. One woman, M. Marsh, writes, "No one's perfect everyone's done something wrong! You've just been slipping and dodging all alone. Just keep on truckin' - one day you'll get caught, and know what it means to wear this 'MARK' (12345)."⁵² She ends her poem with, "Give us the break we want and need, label it 'YOUR GOOD DEED.' Is kindness too much to give? All we want is a decent chance to live."⁵³ In an "Open Letter to Amerikkka," one woman eloquently contrasts the rhetoric of freedom in America to the experience of the incarcerated. Noting that North Carolina's license plates state "First in Freedom," the author puts forth statistics regarding the carceral state, charging that North Carolina has "88 persons on death row out of 149 in the U.S." Perhaps, she states, the license plates should say "last in freedom/life."⁵⁴

The women of North Carolina's Women's Correctional Center, after staging a peaceful

⁵⁰ *Break de Chains*, 60.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 12.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 8.

protest in the front law on June 15, 1975, sought to detail their experiences, specifically the subsequent brutality they faced at the hands of the guards. Disagreeing with what prison administrator Ralph Edwards told the media, the women say they were physically assaulted by the prison guards. Rather than submitting to the demands of the state and administrators, the women “offer” themselves up “as guinea pigs, to be used as the tools of the people” and to bring an end to the corruption within the department of corrections.⁵⁵ By recounting their experiences, the women hope that the state-sponsored violence toward them, “the representatives of the oppressed,” will inspire those outside the prison to “counter-attack and seek justification for [the administration’s] murderous deeds.”⁵⁶ One author in *Break de Chains of Legalized US Slavery* likens the “Korrectional” center to the Auschwitz Germany “konzentration kamp,” stating, “I’ve been exposed to all your wickedness” and “I’ve been enslaved by your inhuman zoo keepers, been beat and tortured by them.”⁵⁷

Following the tumultuous years of the 1960s and 1970s, prison reforms were made in some areas, but continued to lack on the whole. Setbacks include *Bell v. Wolfish* (1979) in which the Supreme Court ‘upheld a prohibition on receiving books and magazines from any other source from the publisher’ and mandating invasive body searches.⁵⁸ Despite such setbacks, the court offered prisoners wins in the *Johnson v. Avery* (1969) case in which the Court declared

⁵⁵ Ibid., 6.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 9.

⁵⁸ James B. Jacobs, “The Prisoners’ Rights Movement and Its Impact, 1960-1980,” *Crime and Justice* 2 (1980), 430-31, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1147419>.

prisoners the right to assist others with legal services if the prison does not provide them. In Alabama in the 1970s, lawsuits were brought against the Department of Corrections and the current governor, George Wallace. The courts found that Alabama's prisons were inhumane and sought the federal government's assistance in addressing the constitutional violations. Judge Johnson who presided over the case states if these reforms were not implemented, "he would have several of the prisons closed."⁵⁹ Similar wins were found throughout the South during the last 30 years of the twentieth century. These lawsuits ended the trustee system, in which inmates are able to serve as guards, racial segregation, bolstered the ability of the federal government to intervene in the state's prison systems, and sought to combat prison overcrowding.⁶⁰ After *Cooper v. Pate*, which ruled that prisoners can file lawsuits with Federal courts, lawsuits filed from prisoners "increased from 218 in 1966 to almost 18,477 in 1984," and the majority of state prison systems in the South were ruled unconstitutional and were subject to "federal ownership."⁶¹ In 1972, landmark case *Gates v. Collier* was filed on behalf of Nazareth Gates who was incarcerated at Parchman Prison. Roy Haber, attorney for Gates, charged that Parchman "was the 'last vestige of state-sponsored slavery.'"⁶² Eventually filed in 1980, but begun in 1972 was *Ruiz v. Estelle*, which "[demanded] that Texas outlaw" the trustee system, combat overcrowding, provide healthcare to inmates, and allow inmates to procure "legal

⁵⁹ Kala Bhattar, "The Ongoing Alabama Prison Crisis: A History," *The University of Alabama at Birmingham*, <https://sites.uab.edu/humanrights/2022/12/07/the-ongoing-alabama-prison-crisis-a-history/>.

⁶⁰ Chase, "We Are Not Slaves," 76.

⁶¹ Ibid., 77.

⁶² Ibid., 78.

representation.”⁶³

In the South, much of the suits centered around racial segregation and the trustee system. Continuing on a nationwide scale was the American Bar Association’s *Tentative Draft of Standards Relating to the Legal Status of Prisoners* published in 1977. The Association advocates for “a right to minimum wages for prisoner labors, a right to form prison organizations, and a limited right to privacy.”⁶⁴ Ending the reforms made from 1965 to 1995 was the Prison Litigation Reform Act (PLRA) which “[discouraged] frivolous and abusive prison lawsuits,’ [and] restricted the power of ‘liberal Federal judges.’”⁶⁵ Despite these gains in the reform of prisons, the rate of imprisonment has steadily increased with many states drastically increasing their incarcerated population from 1990 to 1995, and the federal system increasing their population by 53% during this time as well. Since 1996, the U.S. prison population has hovered around 1,500,000.⁶⁶ The rise of carceral studies and the broader recognition of the need for prison reform around the country have sparked both academic and public interest, yet substantial changes are yet to be seen.

Despite the dismal outlook on the current condition of the carceral state, the activism of the 1960s and 1970s can provide crucial evidence of the effectiveness of community organization and activism. The most effective reforms will take into account the experiences of

⁶³ Ibid., 78.

⁶⁴ Jacobs, “Prisoners’s Rights Movement,” 439.

⁶⁵ Chase, “We Are Not Slaves,” 84.

⁶⁶ Ashley Nellis, “Mass Incarceration Trends,” *The Sentencing Project*, January 25, 2023. <https://www.sentencingproject.org/reports/mass-incarceration-trends/>.

the prisoners themselves, and these experiences lie within zines. As evidenced above, women's prison zines operated as a site of resistance to abusive prison conditions, racism, sexism, and physical and sexual abuse, providing an outlet for community organizing, activism, and public recognition of these issues. Zines detail the firsthand experiences of the incarcerated and provide historians with a mechanism by which to recognize the progression of feminist movements, Black freedom movements, and prison reform activism, as well as a starting point for current and future prison reform.

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