

“Can’t I Have A Dream.” Race, Repression, and Resistance in Women’s Prisons, 1877-1980.

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Abstract

This thesis traces the experiences of incarcerated women from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, focusing on the ways that the prison operated as a microcosm of larger society in the molding of social norms regarding gender, race, and sexuality. It seeks to document a lesser studied aspect of carceral history while focusing on the role the penal system plays in enforcing societal norms. Women convict laborers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were subjected to public opinion that was harshly divided along racial lines, representing Jim Crow ideals of womanhood, especially white womanhood. Into the twentieth century, incarcerated women faced more public scrutiny, particularly as a result of Cold War anxieties surrounding gender and sexuality. In the mid-twentieth century, incarcerated women publicized their experiences through zines and garnered significant public attention as they explored the meanings of gender, race, and incarceration in America. This research explores the ways in which the prison system makes, refashions, and enforces societal norms regarding race, gender, and sexuality. This thesis holds contemporary significance in the conversation regarding the mass incarceration of women, specifically women of color, and the failure of the prison system and society as a whole in accounting for the impact of gender and race on experiences of incarcerated women.

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Introduction

Female incarceration in the United States, and particularly Oklahoma, has reached record highs over the last few decades. A 2021 study by the Bureau of Justice Statistics found that Oklahoma had the third highest female incarceration rate with 106 women per 100,000 residents.¹ Such a trend is consistent with that of the U.S. as a whole in which women have come to represent a significant proportion of the carceral state. Incarcerated women now number 180,684 compared to 26,326 in 1980, an increase of over 585%.² Such numbers do not account for women in jail, many of whom (60%) have yet to be formally charged with a crime.³ Furthermore, such statistics do not account for the secondary victims of the mass incarceration of women in the United States. Over 80% of women in jail have children, a large percentage of which are the sole guardians of their children, and over 60% of imprisoned women have minor children.⁴ The majority of these children will be removed from their families and placed in foster care, further “reinforcing cycles of family disruption,” as “1 in 10 women in state prison were in the foster care system themselves.”⁵ Nor do these numbers reflect the systemic issues of mental and physical health, or physical and sexual abuse in the causation and exacerbation of the mass incarceration crisis. In fact, nearly two in three women in state prisons have experienced some form of abuse, three in four women have mental health issues, and a majority have a history of

¹ E. Ann Carson, “Prisoners in 2021-Statistical Tables,” *Bureau of Justice Statistics* (December 2022), 15.

² Kristen M. Budd, “Incarcerated Women and Girls,” *The Sentencing Project* (July 24, 2024), <https://www.sentencingproject.org/fact-sheet/incarcerated-women-and-girls/>.

³ Aleks Kajstura and Wendy Sawyer, “Women’s Mass Incarceration: The Whole Pie 2024,” *Prison Policy Initiative* (March 5, 2024), <https://www.prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2024women.html>.

⁴ Kajstura and Sawyer, “Women’s Mass Incarceration.”; Budd, “Incarcerated Women and Girls.”

⁵ “The Issue,” Still She Rises, <https://stillsherises.org/the-issue>.

drug dependence.⁶ As a result of drug offenses, in fact, the percentage of women prisoners has doubled. In Oklahoma specifically, “52.6% of women entering [the prison system] in 2013 were arrested for a drug offense.”⁷ Furthermore, Oklahoma incarcerates a disproportionate amount of Black women who comprise 20% of the prison population but only 7.7% of the entire population.⁸ The United States prison population as a whole also overrepresents minority women. The current experiences of women, especially women of color, in prison are largely shaped by the following eras in question. This thesis argues that prison, operating as a microcosm of larger society, serves to enforce societal norms regarding gender roles and simultaneously refashions the very meaning of gender as it relates to punishment.

Chapter Two details the meaning of gender and race in the South’s convict labor system, using public media and administration records to examine the ways in which Black women were often separated from the category of “woman” at this time. Black women, doubly marginalized as both Black and female, were masculinized in the Jim Crow South as a way to uphold white supremacy and enforce notions regarding true womanhood and femininity. More specifically, the societal othering was necessary to continue to exploit and harm them during their sentences as convict laborers. This chapter explores the different ways womanhood applied to Black and white women and how the meaning of womanhood was reinforced or erased depending on one’s race. I assess the role of the penal system in constructing and refashioning the meaning of gender to uphold the New South’s racial hierarchy upon which Jim Crow was predicated.

At the same time, I sought to learn more about the experiences of incarcerated women

⁶ “The Issue,” Still She Rises.

⁷ “The Issue,” Still She Rises.

⁸ “The Issue,” Still She Rises.

during the twentieth century, attempting to trace the progressions and regressions in prison conditions. More specifically, I analyze the meaning of gender and sexuality in prisons and the role of the penal system in reinforcing “acceptable” expressions of womanhood and heterosexuality. As I continued my research, I found an entire subgenre of prison films that focused on incarcerated women. Despite the conservative Cold War attitudes condemning same sex sexual relations as deviant and “un-American,” these films exploited, fetishized, and romanticized the young, innocent woman being coerced into homosexuality by a more aggressive, senior prisoner. Regardless of the media’s salacious portrayal of female prisoner’s sexuality, sociologists, politicians, and post-Cold War society itself had anxieties about the fluidity of sexuality, especially after Alfred Kinsey confirmed that sexual fluidity was more common than once thought. The female prisoner, specifically those who engaged in same sex sexual relations but had historically straight relationships, represented these fears well. Grappling with the changing gender roles and the desperate desire to cling on to the “family values” of older times, conservative Americans during the Cold War were fascinated, disturbed, and all too interested in what prison sexual behaviors meant for sexual fluidity and the state of the country in the fight against communism.

Chapter Three seeks to answer the following questions: How did Cold War panic manifest itself in the prison? How did Americans view sexuality in the twentieth century and how did incarcerated women constitute an anomaly for them? What can the preoccupation with prison sexual relations, particularly between women, tell us about the nature of societal opinions of sexuality? How do prison movies portraying queer relationships fit within society’s conceptions of sexuality, deviance, and crime? It details the repressive climate of the Cold War,

the ties between sexuality, prisons, gender roles, and the media's portrayal of incarcerated women. I ultimately argue that the prison operated as a microcosm of society and represented the concerns surrounding gender, crime, and sexuality in the mid-twentieth century, while simultaneously working to enforce gender and sexuality norms.

While Chapters Two and Three detail how the prison defeminizes women who transgress the law, Chapter Four explains how the prison operated as a venue to challenge patriarchal society and more broadly, social norms. These women, usually women of color, were triply marginalized on the basis of race, sex, and criminality. Despite cultural constraints and the rise of conservative thought in the late 1960s and early 1970s, these women espoused radical feminist, Marxist, and antiracist views, both attempting to change current culture but also return agency to themselves in the conversations surrounding prisons. These ideas mirror the sentiments from the rights revolution in which larger society fought against discrimination on a wide scale, bringing about significant social change. Much of the source material comes from "zines," informal magazines that were made and distributed by incarcerated women. These zines detail the inner workings of the prison, from education to religion and provide information on upcoming events, current news, and other academic work. In addition, some women write about their experiences and frustrations being an incarcerated woman through poems, short stories, or even long essays. This chapter provides examples of activism and resistance to incarceration through a gendered lens. Chapter Four answers the following questions: How did women resist their incarceration? How did their activism spur change in the prison system itself? How did women fight back against gender and sexual norms and resist the conformist nature of the prison? Their unique experiences are well-documented in the zines and provide invaluable insight into the bravery of

these women during the 1960s and 1970s.

All three chapters seek to trace how the overarching social climate of the era played a role in the experiences of incarcerated women. Whether these women were products of the New South and firmly placed in Jim Crow ideals of gender and race; or products of the Cold War and representative of the fears around social disrepair; or, whether they were influenced by the activism of the 1960s and fought injustice in prisons, leading to mass changes in the carceral system and a reexamination of the methods of punishment in the United States. This thesis argues that prison enforces and recasts societal norms, mirroring larger societal trends.

Chapter One

Incarcerated Women: Historiography of the Imprisoned Woman in the Twentieth Century

In recent decades, historians and scholars have taken a new interest in the experiences of incarcerated women in the twentieth century, particularly in the South. These writers have analyzed the need for forced labor after the end of the Civil War, the conditions of Progressive Era prisons, Cold War era prisons, and prisons of the rights revolution. The twentieth century brought much reform to the prison system, moving from a focus on agricultural labor to a shift toward domestic centers entrusted to produce women who conform to societal norms regarding womanhood. Scholars have worked to unravel the inner workings of the mid-century women's prison and have analyzed feminist prison resistance during the rights revolution of the 1960s. These three periods of the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century can provide comprehensive views of the lives of incarcerated women and explain how prisons operate as both a site of defeminization as well as an institution for cultivating and reinforcing gender conformity.

In contrast to the significant amount of source material available to scholars examining male prisoners, their female counterparts are often left in the historical shadow. Unfortunately, for the majority of the twentieth century, the only record of women prisoners is that of state or local documents. It was not until the Civil Rights and Black Power movements that women prisoners understood the impact of their voice and the reforms that could be initiated as a result of resistance. Through zines, which are examined in the fourth chapter, incarcerated women were finally able to voice their unadulterated perspectives. Their work as prisoners, predominantly

domestic, and their activism in prison, frequently overlooked, has not yet solidified itself in history books in the same way that male prisoners' stories have. Upon a review of the relevant literature, there is a noticeable gap in the availability of research focusing on incarcerated women in any aspect, from convict laborers, to subjects of Cold War suppressions, to agents of change and activism.

Prior to the 1950s, scholarship on female convicts was negligible. Historians and other scholars sparingly discussed them when discussing the postbellum prison, the Cold War-era prison, or the prison of the radical era of the 1960s. The most recent decades have seen a slight increase in the amount of literature focusing on women convict laborers and incarcerated women activists, yet many overlook the role of the prison in creating, maintaining, and altering the meaning of gender in regards to race, class, and punishment.

Many of the earliest scholars were also activists and wrote about their experiences in the field, fighting for the rights of convicts, also in tangence with racial rights. These include W.E.B. DuBois, George Washington Cable, Julia Tutwiler, and Rebecca Latimer Felton. Their scholarship was expanded upon by historians of the mid-twentieth century, particularly those influenced by Michel Foucault and Norbert Elias, who took a more "revisionist" approach. The field gained wider popularity just before the turn of the century, with scholars producing expansive and novel works on the prison system, prison labor, and the relationship between race and criminal justice. Matthew Mancini, Mary Ellen Curtin, Telitha LeFlouria, Sarah Haley, Christina Green, Estelle Freedman, and Ann Ciasullo have greatly expanded the field of female incarceration history and set the stage for future scholars who, no doubt, will continue to delve

into lost or forgotten source material.

George Washington Cable was one of the first scholars to discuss prison labor and the plight of Black Americans in the criminal justice system after the Civil War. In his 1885 work *The Silent South*, Cable took a scathing view of southern prison systems, providing a rare critique of the South during this period.⁹ Despite the novelty of his work, he still propagated notions consistent with the time, “[conceding] that the master-slave relationship had often been marked by a ‘really tender and benevolent sentiment of dependency and protection.’”¹⁰ Such sentiments are repeated frequently among early twentieth-century scholars who fail to provide an adequate critique of the system. Just a few years later, in 1890, Julia Tutwiler, a prominent activist and reformer, presented a work at the National Education Association entitled “Our Brother in Stripes, in the School Room,” in which she discusses her endeavors to integrate schooling into prison, but also the leasing system.¹¹ She describes how “large numbers of newly enfranchised blacks ‘suddenly freed from all restraints’ had fallen into crime” after the war, leaving “the bankrupt southern states” with no choice but to turn to convict leasing.¹² Again, despite her progressive outlook for the time, she still put forth harmful ideas, as did reformer Rebecca Latimer Felton. Felton was an activist in Georgia who recognized the plight of laboring convicts yet still “viewed black men as naturally dangerous- ‘ravenous beasts at heart,’ according

⁹ Paul M. Pruitt, “Convict Lease System and Peonage,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*, (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 51.

¹⁰ Paul M. Pruitt, “The Trouble They Saw: Approaches to the History of the Convict Lease System.” Review of *Black Prisoners and their World: Alabama, 1865-1900*, by Mary Ellen Curtin, *Reviews in American History* 29, no. 3 (September 2001), 395.

¹¹ Pruitt, “The Trouble They Saw,” 395.

¹² Pruitt, “The Trouble They Saw,” 395.

to her biographer.”¹³ Despite their misinformed ideas regarding race and labor, these scholars and activists provided some of the earliest discussions on prison labor, prison conditions, and the economic landscape of the New South, which, in turn, necessitated convict labor.

Later in the twentieth century, two scholars presented works that laid the groundwork for how current and future scholars would discuss and conceptualize the prison system. Michel Foucault and Norbert Elias are foundational scholars for historical discussions regarding criminal justice and provide a basis for future scholars to discuss the justice system and, more specifically, the prison system. Both scholars were active in the mid-twentieth century, publishing numerous works. Foucault’s *Surveiller et Punir*, published in 1975, is heavily focused on power, a central theme in discussions of the penal system.¹⁴ Elias, while never explicitly discussing the prison system, has provided scholars with a framework to analyze its development. Many scholars use his 1939 work on the “civilizing process” to engage in discussions around criminal justice reform.¹⁵ On the other hand, Foucault explores the prison’s rise with discussions surrounding the carceral system in Europe and early prison structures, particularly “Philadelphia’s Walnut Street Prison.”¹⁶ Revisionist criminal justice scholars who have taken inspiration from Foucault include David Rothman and Michael Ignatieff, who posit that rather than a product of the successes of activists and reformers, “penal change was a response to or part of political or economic

¹³ Pruitt, “The Trouble They Saw,” 395.

¹⁴ Michael Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, (Vintage Books, 1977); Peter Spierenburg, “Punishment, Power, and History: Foucault and Elias,” *Social Science History* 28, no. 4 (Winter 2004), 619.

¹⁵ Spierenburg, “Punishment, Power, and History,” 610.

¹⁶ Spierenburg, “Punishment, Power, and History,” 611.

transformations.”¹⁷ Such a position would directly apply to the changing prison system directly after the Civil War, as it was necessitated by the South’s massively changing economy. Both Elias and Foucault prioritized the study of historical change over time, using natural progression, stagnation, or regression to make claims about contemporary society.¹⁸ Foucault and Elias “converge to the extent that they both acknowledge the omnipresence of power and prefer large historical explorations” while seeking a “high level of generalization.”¹⁹

One of the earliest works on prison labor is Paul Foreman’s 1938 article, “A Short History of Mississippi’s State Penal Systems,” which gives the audience a history of the prison system, beginning in 1809 and ending around World War I. Rather than making an argument regarding the inception of the convict lease system and the prison system’s relation to slave labor, Foreman attempts to give an objective account of how the prison system had changed from 1809 to the early or mid-twentieth century. Like other scholars, he stresses how prison labor and penal farms aided in the rehabilitation of the South’s economy. In his analysis of the conditions of the prison and the laborers themselves, he states the condition of convict laborers is worse than slavery, with prison laborers operating without “any safeguards.”²⁰ Similar in scope and subject matter to Paul Foreman, Jane Zimmerman’s article, “The Penal Reform Movement in the South During the Progressive Era,” published in 1951, is one of the earliest and most notable of

¹⁷ Spierenburg, “Punishment, Power, and History,” 615.

¹⁸ Spierenburg, “Punishment, Power, and History,” 619;

¹⁹ Spierenburg, “Punishment, Power, and History,” 632.

²⁰ Paul B. Foreman and Julien R. Tatum, “A Short History of Mississippi’s State Penal Systems,” *Mississippi Law Journal* 10, no. 3 (April 1936), 264.

its kind. Providing a comprehensive view of the prison system from the end of the Civil War to the end of World War I, Zimmerman touches on how the prison system has changed, both literally and in the minds of the American public. She discusses how the prisons transformed after the Civil War, relying on convict leasing and prison farming. She then examines chain gangs and, finally, prisoner rights, a movement that gained hold shortly before World War I. In these prison reform and prisoner rights conversations, constituents and lawmakers alike were concerned about education, rehabilitation, and recidivism. She ends her discussion with the idea that southern prisons began to model themselves more after northern prisons, moving away from forced labor and forced farming. Like the scholars who came before her, Zimmerman does not focus heavily on the context of these prison systems and how they related to the postbellum need for labor. Unlike contemporary scholars, she does not compare forced prison labor to the labor of enslaved persons prior to the Civil War and does not mention race in discussions of prisoners and prison conditions. Zimmerman's work, however, is notable in its comprehensiveness and depth, focusing on a less-studied aspect of American history and the justice system.²¹

Around the same time, scholars Gene Kassebaum and David Ward published one of the first studies focusing on incarcerated women, titled "Homosexuality: A Mode of Adaptation in a Prison for Women."²² However, rather than return agency to these women or highlight the atrocities they faced while in prison, Kassebaum and Ward sought to examine sexuality through the lens of female prisoners. Completing this study during the Cold War and subsequently after Alfred Kinsey's report on human sexuality, Kassebaum and Ward were heavily influenced by the

²¹ Jane Zimmerman, "The Penal Reform Movement in the South During the Progressive Era, 1890-1917, *The Journal of Southern History* 17, no. 4 (November 1951), 462-492.

²² David A. Ward and Gene G. Kassebaum, "Homosexuality: A Mode of Adaptation in a Prison for Women," *Social Problems* 12, no. 2 (Autumn 1964) 149-177.

Cold War and the repressive and skeptical nature of sexual deviance. They sought to both make sense of incidences of sexual relations among women in prison, but also to understand sexual fluidity among incarcerated females, many of whom had husbands on the outside and subsequently returned to a heterosexual lifestyle.²³

Between early literature and the post-revisionist scholars of the later twentieth century, prison reform became more prominent in the minds of the American public. The social uprisings and activism of the 1960s and 1970s included conversations regarding prisoners' rights. Intertwined with the work and activism of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Black Panther Party, prison reform activism largely grew out of conversations surrounding racial discrimination, mass incarceration, and abuses of power in American penal institutions. During these tumultuous years, disturbances and uprisings in prison walls became much more common. One uprising, in particular, gained national attention. The 1971 Attica Prison Rebellion resulted in the deaths of 19 inmates and 10 correctional officers after numerous inmates took hostages in protest of the horrendous prison conditions. The hostage situation resulted in police officers storming the prison, firing "indiscriminately" at the inmates.²⁴ The McKay Commission, erected to investigate the events of the riot, stated that "the state police assault which ended the four-day prison uprising was the bloodiest one-day encounter between Americans since the Civil War."²⁵ As a result of the very public riot and its resolution, prison reform was increasingly discussed among both the general public and scholars of history and criminal justice. The post-revisionist

²³ Ward and Kassebaum, "Homosexuality."

²⁴ Lucien X. Lombardo, "Attica Prison Revolt," *Britannica*, November 9, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Attica-Prison-revolt>.

²⁵ Lombardo, "Attica Prison Revolt."

historians began more fruitful, comprehensive work after these uprisings, taking new positions and finding new avenues to research regarding prison reform, mass incarceration, and racial discrimination in the American legal landscape.

Women prisoners also produced some of the most damning pieces of evidence regarding the prison system. Prison zines published throughout the South not only gave women a way to communicate with each other, but also a voice to the outside world. In these zines, they detail the atrocities in prison, from sexism to racism to sexual and physical violence. Scholars Christina Greene and Tiana Alexandria Williams have drawn increased attention to the ways in which incarcerated women challenged and upended the system in which they resided. However, much of the information useful to the study of their experiences comes from the women themselves.²⁶

Most beneficial in connecting the early prison system to the current issues being fought by criminal justice reformers is Matthew Mancini's 1996 work, *One Dies, Get Another: Convict Leasing in the American South, 1866-1928*. Beginning his discussion of convict leasing, Mancini connects the penal reforms of the early twentieth century to the issue of mass incarceration in the latter twentieth century. Mancini sets the stage by describing the economic outlook of the South as bleak due to the loss of property, farmland, and those who tilled it. In contrast to previous and subsequent historians, Mancini takes a holistic look at the South, neglecting to divide his subject matter by state. As he posits, "state studies have dominated this field," leading them to be "rather

²⁶ Christina Greene, "'She Ain't No Rosa Parks': Jim Crow Justice in the Post-Civil Rights South," *The Journal of African American History* 100, no. 3 (Summer 2015), 428-447; Tiana Alexandria Williams, "Locked Down: The Hidden History of the Prisoners' Rights Movement," *Department of Cinema and Digital Media, UC Davis*.

insular in outlook and interpretation.”²⁷ While these historians look at prison labor in the New South as a state-by-state case, Mancini states the true essence of his work is noting the similarities between southern prisons, saying, “the commonalities that bound the Southern states together, and that distinguished their prison practices were far greater.”²⁸ Viewing the South as a common region in the ways that it handles convicts is a key feature of his work. In his own words, *One Dies, Get Another* is an “attempt to put between the covers of a single volume, for the first time, both a narrative of the diverse histories of leasing in the Southern states and an analysis of the system as a whole.”²⁹

While Mancini’s work appears comprehensive in its scope, it does not address the experiences of women in any significant capacity. Three scholars, Telitha LeFlouria, Mary Ellen Curtin, and Sarah Haley remain at the forefront of discussions regarding women convict laborers at the beginning of the twentieth century. Not only do they examine the conditions of the prisons and the work they endured, but they detail the meaning of race and gender in the penal system. These scholars discuss the societal perceptions of womanhood and detail the ways in which womanhood was not extended to Black women in the same way it was extended to white women. During the convict labor era, white women were often seen as vulnerable, in need of protection, and inherently innocent. LeFlouria, Curtin, and Haley juxtapose the language used to describe white women with the language used to describe Black women, using public opinion to guide their narrative on racial differences in the convict lease system.

²⁷ Matthew J. Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another: Convict Leasing in the American South, 1866-1928*, (Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina Press, 1996), 3.

²⁸ Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another*, 3.

²⁹ Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another*, 3.

Writings on prison labor, the penal system in America, the impact of the Cold War, gender, and sexuality on women prisoners, the activism of women prisoners, and the racial discrimination present in the legal landscape have changed significantly over the last century. Pioneering scholars focused on providing a general overview of the prison system, neglecting to place it in context with past events, such as the necessitation of forced labor after the abolition of slavery. Even fewer scholars center women in their discussion of forced labor or provide them historical agency in discussions of activism. Revisionist scholars began to look at these aspects more closely, making claims about the horrendous conditions of prison labor, the prisons themselves, and the lack of legal and ethical rights of the prisoners. Post-revisionist scholars, a product of the 1960s and 1970s movements for prison reform, Civil Rights, and racial justice, began to take a more pointed view of the prison system, examining it in context with the New South's economic order, the need for forced labor after the Civil War, and the historical connections between prisons in the Progressive Era to mass incarceration of the late twentieth century. More contemporary scholars have recognized the unique place women occupy in relation to the penal system and have sought to examine the many ways in which women were affected by and yet also affected the prison system.

Writings on women convict laborers specifically are largely found in the works of Telitha LeFlouria, Mary Ellen Curtin, and Sarah Haley. Mary Ellen Curtin published *Black Prisoners and their World, 1865-1900* in 2000, one of the first of its kind to examine female convict laborers.³⁰ Curtin's work traces prisoners in Alabama, but does not solely focus on women. Instead, Curtin recognizes the historical silencing of women convict laborers, examining the

³⁰ Mary Ellen Curtin, *Black Prisoners and their World, 1865-1900*, (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2000).

scant sources available and including them in a chapter of her work. While it is not as comprehensive as more contemporary scholars' work on the gendered aspect of convict labor, it does represent one of the first attempts to include women in the narrative.

LeFlouria has written extensively on the experience of women convict laborers, publishing *Chained in Silence: Black Women and Convict Labor in the New South* and "'Under the Sting of the Lash: Gendered Violence, Terror, and Resistance in the South's Convict Camps.'" ³¹ *Chained in Silence* and "'Under the Sting of the Lash'" follows women through the convict system, finding their stories through diaries, public articles, or administrator records. Like Curtin's work, LeFlouria focuses on one state, Georgia, as the site of the most atrocities in the convict lease system and in her words, builds on Mary Ellen Curtin's previous work. LeFlouria not only examines the experiences of women convict labors, but their resistance to and activism within the system. She explores in depth the meaning of violence against Black women and the ways the New South's convict lease system exploited and violated the bodies of Black women.

Sarah Haley, like LeFlouria, focuses on women and the meaning of gender in convict lease camps. Her work, *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity*, discusses how "gender is constructed by and through race, and that the production of woman and other stable gender categories required violence."³² Similarly in her article "'Like I Was a Man: Chain Gangs, Gender, and the Domestic Carceral Sphere in Jim Crow Georgia,"

³¹ Telitha LeFlouria, *Chained in Silence: Black Women and Convict Labor in the New South*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); "'Under the Sting of the Lash: Gendered Violence, Terror, and Resistance in the South's Convict Camps," *The Journal of African American History* 100, no. 3 (Summer 2015), 366-384;

³² Elaine Frantz Parsons, Review of *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity*, *Journal of the Civil War Era* 7, no. 3 (September 2017), 501-503.

Haley discusses the “production of women in the U.S. South” and the effect of the carceral system, labor, and race on the different categories of gender.³³

Scholars such as Telitha LeFlouria, Mary Ellen Curtin, Sarah Haley, and Matthew Mancini, have pioneered the most contemporary discussions regarding the prison of the 20th century, focusing on numerous specific prisons throughout the South, differences in the experience of men and women, and the interconnectedness between race, labor, and gender. Undergirding their discussion of women convict laborers and the ever-present discussions of race and Jim Crow society are the writings of feminist scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw who discuss the double- or triple-marginality of Black female convicts. Along with Crenshaw, scholars such as Frances Beal, Pauli Murray, Jill McCorkel, and Angela Davis, have explored, in some capacity, the idea of intersectionality. Jill McCorkel in *Breaking Women: Gender, Race, and the New Politics of Imprisonment* examines the changing image of the female prisoner of the late 20th century and the new methodology in prisons which seek to break down and “rid” the inmate of what was thought to be a disease of criminality. Also explored in *Breaking Women* is the 20th century racial and gender stereotypes of female prisoners, particularly alongside the rise of mass incarceration as a result of the war on drugs. Female prisoners began to occupy two distinct categories, the “good girls” and the “real criminals,” a distinction that was marked by overt racial undertones.³⁴ In the following discussions of Black women convict laborers and their experiences in the Jim Crow South, intersectionality becomes an important framework through which to view both their experiences and societal opinions. The term and associated idea coined

³³ Sarah Haley, ““Like I Was a Man:” Chain Gangs, Gender, and the Domestic Carceral Sphere in Jim Crow Georgia,” *Signs* 39, no. 1 (Autumn 2013), 53-77.

³⁴ Jill McCorkel, *Breaking Women: Gender, Race, and the New Politics of Imprisonment* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 217.

by Kimberlé Crenshaw in her 1989 article “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics” argues that feminist theory and race theory cannot accurately capture the injustices committed and experienced by Black women. In essence, feminist theory operates through the lens of white women and race theory operates through the lens of Black men, who, as Crenshaw states are “the most privileged group members.”³⁵ Crenshaw focuses heavily on the effects of “double discrimination— the combined effects of practices which discrimination on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex” in the justice system.³⁶ Shortly before the publication of Crenshaw’s 1989 work, Angela Davis published *Women, Race, and Class* in 1981, in which she, largely focusing on Black women’s experiences during slavery, examines the impact of Black womanhood on experiences of both historical and modern-day discrimination.³⁷ Frances Beal, in her 1970 article “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female” articulated an early version of intersectionality, underscoring the ways in which Black men and white women cannot understand or identify with Black women in the fight for racial and gender equality.³⁸ Even earlier was Pauli Murray’s *Jane Crow and the Law: Sex Discrimination and Title VII* published in 1965. Murray coined the term “Jane Crow” to describe the ways in which the laws of the Jim Crow South doubly marginalized Black women.³⁹ The preceding scholars’ work on the experiences of Black women inform much

³⁵ Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1, article 8 (1989), 140.

³⁶ Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,” 149.

³⁷ Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1981).

³⁸ Frances Beal, “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female,” in *The Black Woman: An Anthology* by Toni Cade Bambara (New York: Washington Square Press, 1970).

³⁹ Pauli Murray and Mary Eastwood, “Jane Crow and the Law: Sex Discrimination and Title VII,” *George Washington Law Review* 34, no. 2 (December 1965), 232-256.

of the analysis on the experience of women convict laborers and the notion that Black women were masculinized within the convict lease system as a way to uphold white superiority in the Jim Crow South.

Writings on the experiences of women imprisoned in the mid-twentieth century largely appear in relation to other topics, such as sexuality, race, and deviance. Formative scholars in the field include Regina Kunzel, Erica Rhodes Hayden, Theresa R. Jach, and Ann Ciasullo. Each scholar focuses on the horrors experienced by women in prison, their gendered experience in prison, and the ways in which these women resisted their oppression.

Erica Rhodes Hayden and Theresa R. Jach, editors of *Incarcerated Women: A History of Struggles, Oppression, and Resistance in American Prisons*, attempt to compile a comprehensive history of incarcerated women from 1800 to the present. Two chapters, which center on the mid-twentieth century, written by Ilse Denisse Catalan and L. Mara Dodge focus on the imposition of gender norms in prisons. During this time, rather than doing manual labor such as in the convict camps of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, women were taught virtues of “womanhood.” They were expected to be polite, learn to sew, cook, clean, and do other duties administrators deemed appropriate for their gender.⁴⁰

Regina Kunzel in *Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of Modern American Sexuality*, examines historical attitudes toward sexual relations in prison and how administrators, the public, and society as a whole worked to explain same sex sexual relations in Cold War America. She traces the climate of the mid-twentieth century, particularly the effect of the Cold War and the publication of Alfred Kinsey’s report on sexuality and compares it to the

⁴⁰ *Incarcerated Women: A History of Struggles, Oppression, and Resistance in American Prisons*, edited by Erica Rhodes Hayden and Theresa R. Jachs, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017).

societal scares of prison sexual fluidity. Through this, Kunzel is able to parallel the experiences of Cold War America to the American prison, theorizing the prison as representative of these fears.⁴¹ Scholars of incarcerated women in the mid-twentieth century can further their discussion of the same-sex prison experience through an analysis of the media. The popular subgenre and stereotype of the prison lesbian seen in movies, comics, novels, and other mediums not only represents a curiosity, but also a fetishization of women in prison, a notion that seems entirely contradictory to the Cold War obsession with deviance.

Following the Civil Rights era, prisoners began to operate on a wider scale, staging massive riots or other acts of resistance. While male prison riots have been heavily documented, especially those at Attica, women's prison resistance remains in historical silence. Scholars such as Christina Greene and Olivia Wright focus on incarcerated women's experiences in the mid to late twentieth century and further return agency to these women by examining them through their own words.

Christina Greene, in “‘She Ain’t No Rosa Parks’: The Joan Little Rape-Murder Case and Jim Crow Justice in the Post-Civil Rights South,” examines Joan Little's experience both in prison and during trial, using the case to represent the horrors that women, especially women of color, faced in prisons and the stereotypes and dismissals they were faced with when they confronted abuse, racism, or sexism. Greene further discusses the prevailing stereotypes of the late 20th century that Black women were lascivious, a “Jezebel,” as she states, and could rarely

⁴¹ Regina Kunzel, *Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of Modern American Sexuality*, (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2008).

receive justice, even if they were as “innocent” as Rosa Parks.⁴²

Despite the few works on incarcerated women, many overlook the importance of the prison in enacting and enforcing societal norms. Prisons of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries served to masculinize Black women while at the same time protecting and strengthening the notion that white women represented a different status of womanhood. Literature on Cold War-era prisons also do not examine the role of the penal system in pushing societal conformity as it relates to sexuality and gender roles. Likewise, the works on the activism of the mid-twentieth century lacks commentary on the role of the prison as a site of gendered resistance. This thesis seeks to make such an argument, further analyzing the role of prisons in making and reinforcing acceptable expressions of gender and power.

⁴² Christina Green, “‘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), 428-447.

Chapter Two

Women Convict Laborers: The Importance of Race, 1877-1917

Following the Civil War, the U.S. South sought to control a population of formerly enslaved peoples through a combination of new laws, a restructuring of the carceral system, and the inception of convict labor to both ameliorate the failing economy of the South after the war and provide the much needed agricultural and infrastructural workforce. While historical studies have long focused on male convict laborers, few center women in the overview of neoslavery in the Progressive era South. The historical record continues the silencing, as Black women's experiences were far from thoroughly documented. However, in the historical record, rhetoric regarding race and gender was applied to white women convict laborers, especially in relation to their Black counterparts. These records show how Black women in the South's carceral system maintained a vastly different position than white women. While white women epitomized a "woman," Black women were thought of as a gendered "other."⁴³ The prisons of the Jim Crow South are representative of the changing meaning of Black womanhood in the New South and the repercussions Black women faced as a result of these societal norms. Black women had to fight stereotypes that claimed they could not be innocent victims in the same way white women were. White women were thought of as innately innocent, in need of protection, and generally a victim of exigent circumstances which led them to prison in the first place. Black women did not receive this same sympathy and instead their criminality was largely seen as a character deficiency— something inherent. In this sense, the penal system of the U.S. South operated as an

⁴³ Numerous authors have written pivotal works on intersectionality. The most notable is: Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989).

institution in which Black women were stripped of the protections of “womanhood” while at the same time white women were given a status of superiority *because* of their status as women.

In discussing women convict laborers and the differences in their experiences as a result of race, it is necessary to separate the experiences of Black women from white women. While white women in the convict lease system were discriminated against because of their gender, they were afforded a position of superiority because of their race. Black women, on the other hand, were doubly marginalized. Historical record and subsequent analysis of Black women’s experiences in the convict lease system must account for the “unique compoundedness of their situation,” taking caution to avoid that the “nature of their experience” not be absorbed into the “[margins] of the feminist and Black liberationist agendas.”⁴⁴

Undergirding the discussions of female convict laborers is an analysis of how the Jim Crow South worked to solidify stereotypes of Black women in order to maintain racial hierarchy. As Priscilla Ocen states, “the (1) masculinization of Black women, (2) the devaluation of Black women as mothers, (3) the casting of Black women as dangers, and (4) the construction of Black women as sexually deviant” were necessary to continue the exploitation and the violence committed against Black women both in the convict lease system and southern society as a whole.⁴⁵ Public records such as newspaper articles, political speeches, and other public commentary provide the most complete picture of this juxtaposition of Black women and white women in the New South. Consequently, the story of women convict laborers, especially those of color, is likely to come from public sources who often viewed these women with disdain. The

⁴⁴ Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,” 150.

⁴⁵ Priscilla A. Ocen, “Punishing Pregnancy: Race, Incarceration, and the Shackling of Pregnant Prisoners,” *California Law Review* 100, no. 5 (October 2012), 1259.

use of hostile sources to detail Black women's experiences in the penal system remains one of the only ways to understand how they were dehumanized both through incarceration and again through public opinion.

Women experienced numerous horrors, including physical and sexual abuse, malnourishment, sickness, and death in the prisons of the South. Women performed physical labor, ranging from farming to brick making to sewing, and continued with domestic duties such as cooking. Women were expected to "in general...do everything."⁴⁶ Some states required that women do both agricultural labor alongside men, while others confined women to "feminine work," such as cooking, cleaning and sewing. Administrators whipped women for trivial offenses, worked them until exhaustion, forced them to labor while sick or injured, and kept them in small cells infested with insects. Despite being aware of these situations, prison administrators and state leaders refused to confront the horrid conditions. The availability of convict laborers and lack of material investment in them inherently made each woman more susceptible to violence, sickness, and death. The phrase common during neoslavery, "if one dies, get another" accurately describes the brutal nature of the convict lease system.⁴⁷

At Camp Heardmont, Georgia's female convict labor camp, women "plowed fields, sowed crops, [and] paddled through rivers of cotton" while also performing domestic duties, such as cooking and cleaning.⁴⁸ One report states that inmates were subjected to "indiscriminate

⁴⁶ Sarah Haley, *No Mercy Here: Gender, Punishment, and the Making of Jim Crow Modernity*, (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 72.

⁴⁷ Matthew J. Mancini, *One Dies, Get Another: Convict Leasing in the American South, 1866-1928*, (Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina Press, 1996).

⁴⁸ Talitha LeFlouria, *Chained in Silence: Black Women and Convict Labor in the New South*, (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2015), 12.

beating, being worked in the rain... and drunken guards.”⁴⁹ In one instance, doctors were found guilty of “the grossest neglect of duty” for ignoring the request of medical assistance from one of the camps.⁵⁰ Rather than make them face criminal charges, the jury advised the doctors be fired, and after learning of the dismal conditions at the camps, the jury “[recommended] the main building, in which are confined the colored convicts” be “repaired at once.”⁵¹

While in convict camps or working in chain gangs, women faced numerous injuries and administrators forced them to work despite them. Lessees were financially motivated to extract as much physical labor out of the laborers as possible, as their financial value lay in their ability to continue working and rebuilding the South’s economy. Administrators and authorities were “concerned that ‘idle’ female convicts would drain the state financially.”⁵² Medical assistance was rarely given, if at all, to women with severe injuries while working in the convict camps.

One report by *The Wilmington Messenger* echoes the idea that as much value as possible be extracted from the women, stating women convict laborers were economically useless because they cannot be used for road building and maintenance. In order to ameliorate this, the reporter posits it may be better to have them perform agricultural labor so “they could be kept constantly at work during the crop season.”⁵³ Mary Washington, a convict laborer at one of Georgia’s female convict camps, suffered a finger injury leading to amputation. Fannie Drinks,

⁴⁹ Haley, “‘Like I Was a Man:’ Chain Gangs, Gender, and the Domestic Carceral Sphere in Jim Crow Georgia,” *Signs* 39, no. 1 (Autumn 2013), 65, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/670769>.

⁵⁰ “Gross Neglect of Duty Charged to County Physician and Dismissal Urged by Jury,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, April 2, 1906, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/26864019>.

⁵¹ “Gross Neglect of Duty.”

⁵² Mary Ellen Curtin, *Black Prisoners and their World, Alabama, 1865-1900*, (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 2000), 120.

⁵³ “House of Correction,” *The Wilmington Messenger*, September 4, 1904, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/53163944>.

after suffering an infection from a cut on her arm, saw her arm amputated. Other women “suffered lacerated hands, boils, and sprains.”⁵⁴ At the Chattahoochee Brick Company, women gathered clay, took it to the kiln, and fired it, resulting in burns and dangerous working conditions.

Like their male counterparts, administrators punished women for refusing to work, not producing desired results at work, or resisting prison authority. They rendered punishment under the lash and, as many historians posit, under the threat of sexual violence as well. Women were at the mercy of prison guards that sexually and physically abused them. This abuse was often in the presence of others in an attempt to publicly shame them.⁵⁵ In a letter written by a woman convict, she describes the experience of women under male guards, saying the guard never sexually assaulted them but did “[force them] in a nude state to bathe before him.”⁵⁶ Sexual violence in convict camps is largely lost to the historical record. In fact, much of the only evidence of sexual violence is the rate of pregnancy and childbirth among convict laborers, which suggests sexual assault was indeed a threat and Black women were the most likely victims.⁵⁷ In a routine investigation by the Board of Charities and Public Welfare in North Carolina, employees found a 17-year-old Black woman resting with a head injury, the result of the previous days’ punishment by the prison guards. The report also detailed that, despite the

⁵⁴ Haley, *No Mercy Here*, 75-76.

⁵⁵ LeFlouria, *Chained in Silence*, 12.

⁵⁶ Frank Tannenbaum, *Darker Phases of the South*, ” (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1924), 106, <https://archive.org/details/darkerphasesofth009898mbp/page/n127/mode/2up>.

⁵⁷ Haley, *No Mercy Here*, 104.

abolition of flogging in several states in the South, North Carolina still permitted it.⁵⁸ One county commissioner stated “swearing is not allowed on the chain-gangs in his county,” and should swearing occur, they will be whipped.⁵⁹

Whippings were common forms of punishment, with several women being whipped “til whelps were raised,” for trivial offenses such as “quarreling, fighting, and ‘sassing.’”⁶⁰ Essie Coleman and Hazel Lewis “received six lashes each for disobedience,” and a 13-year-old was whipped while “wearing only two thing undergarments” by prison administrator “R.M. Clay.”⁶¹ Administrators whipped Flora Adams “for dancing while the preacher was [at the camp] on a Sunday,” suggesting that whipping was used both as punishment, but also as a form of physical and psychological control.⁶² At Georgia’s Camp Heardmont, guards sexually assaulted one young women numerous times until she “died in childbirth in camp.”⁶³ The Chattahoochee Brick Company’s convict laborers reported “at least five black women” who “gave birth to children conceived at the site.”⁶⁴ Several women’s pregnancies, however, are documented only because they had interfered with their ability to perform physical and domestic labor.

Female convict camps, despite not making explicit the racial disparities existent in them, were largely composed of Black women. Of the accounts of white woman convicts, many signify

⁵⁸ “A Study of Prison Conditions in North Carolina,” *The Bulletin of the North Carolina State Board of Charities and Public Welfare* 6, no. 1 (January-March 1923).

⁵⁹ Haley, *No Mercy Here*, 15.

⁶⁰ Curtin, *Black Prisoners*, 121.

⁶¹ Haley, “Like I Was a Man,” 65-6.

⁶² Curtin, *Black Prisoners*, 121.

⁶³ W.E.B. DuBois, *Notes on Negro Crime, Particularly in Georgia*, (Atlanta, GA: The Atlanta University Press, 1904), 4-5, <https://repository.wellesley.edu/object/wellesley30826>.

⁶⁴ Haley, *No Mercy Here*, 106.

the South's prevailing notion of white women's delicacy and respectability. White women were thought to be too delicate for the realities of prison. In stark contrast, Black women were assigned the master status of "hardened criminals." Such views of Black women as "sub- or nonhuman" then "justified a separate set of governing principles" that helped "[maintain] racial dominance and white supremacy."⁶⁵ Not only did the prisons of the Jim Crow South simultaneously define gender along racial lines but they also reinforced the defeminization of Black women which made them vulnerable to further exploitation within the convict lease system. White woman convict laborers often found sympathy and compassion from the public in ways Black women did not, as they represented what many concerned citizens saw as antithetical to the South's image of respectability. This "denigration of Black women on one hand and the valorization of white women on the other formed the basis for state-sponsored or state-sanctioned violence, including lynching, rape, and segregation."⁶⁶ This violence was rampant throughout the convict camps and upon release, and the preceding sentiments regarding race are seen throughout discussions of female convict laborers in newspapers and other public commentary in the South.

A reporter in Georgia in 1892 who witnessed "a carload of women convicts" commented that "there is not a white woman convict in Georgia."⁶⁷ An 1897 report echoes the same, stating Camp Heardmont's female lessees will be ordered to "[plow] and [pick] cotton" and all of them

⁶⁵ Ocen, "Punishing Pregnancy," 1259.

⁶⁶ Ocen, "Punishing Pregnancy," 1268.

⁶⁷ "A Carload of Women Convicts," *The Rock Hill Herald*, February 24, 1892, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/754850875>.

are Black women.⁶⁸ At a convict camp in Atlanta in 1900, all of the convicts were Black, and in 1904, “three of the forty-seven women in the almshouse convict camp were white, but only one white woman lived in the convict camp barracks.”⁶⁹ *The Macon News* reported in 1904 that after the governor pardoned white woman Lena Wilkinson, there were no white women incarcerated in the Mississippi penitentiary. The article praises the current governor for his “chivalrous regard for the white women of Mississippi,” a result of his worry that white women would be in the company of “hardened criminals.”⁷⁰ The governor’s distinction between Black and white women, especially in such a drastic way, represents the fluid meaning of gender as it relates to race. Black women, in order to uphold the racial hierarchy of the Jim Crow era, must be seen at odds with white womanhood. For white women, their womanhood denoted special treatment and an inherent virtue. For Black women, their womanhood was often overlooked and instead, their race was the most important factor in determining their treatment at convict labor camps. Rather than experiencing racism or sexism, Black women experienced “discrimination as Black women — not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women.”⁷¹

At Camp Heardmont, one of Georgia’s female convict camps, a white woman stated that administrators only made her do domestic work such as sewing, not agricultural or infrastructural labor.⁷² One woman, R.B. Hill, was described by administrators as “an ‘unfortunate white

⁶⁸ “The State of Georgia,” *The Democratic-Herald*, September 23, 1897, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/316136015>.

⁶⁹ Haley, *No Mercy Here*, 80.

⁷⁰ “Not a White Woman Convict Now,” *The Macon News*, December 27, 1904, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/823334311>.

⁷¹ Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex,” 149.

⁷² Haley, *No Mercy Here*, 82, 84.

woman' and a 'pitiable object,'" and, therefore, according to the administrators, should not be made to labor on a chain gang.⁷³ Mattie White, a white woman at a racially integrated convict camp, attracted national attention as a "woman of rare beauty."⁷⁴ Such a statement only serves to reinforce the differences between Black womanhood and white womanhood which further solidified the distinction between those who should be protected and those who should be exploited.

Outrage prevailed when the public learned of a white woman performing labor or being punished while imprisoned. In the case of white woman Mamie De Cris, this racially charged language is particularly evident. De Cris garnered national attention after news of her being whipped swept newspapers across the country. De Cris functions antithetically to the Black woman laborer whose violations are seen as an innate character flaw, while many view De Cris's experiences as a decline in the respectability of the South and humanity as a whole. As reported by *The Washington Post* and numerous other newspapers throughout the country, the warden's wife whipped Mamie De Cris repeatedly for disobeying her. She whipped De Cris over forty times, substantially more than what is normally given to other prisoners, even those with more serious offenses. The governor expressed outrage at the event, stating it is "the most outrageous" situation that has ever occurred in the state's prison and townspeople warn that the warden and other participants will surely be lynched if they attempt to come into the town.⁷⁵ As a result of Mamie De Cris's treatment, papers around the country began calling for the abolition of

⁷³ Haley, *No Mercy Here*, 75.

⁷⁴ Haley, *No Mercy Here*, 80.

⁷⁵ "Lash for a Woman: Georgia Indignant Over Outrage in Prison Camp," *The Washington Post*, August 10, 1903, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/1037688923/?match=1>.

whipping, in any circumstance, calling the case “revolting to the extreme!”⁷⁶ Once again, the image of white women being punished was what ultimately angered the public. The author of the article asks, “how much more so ought we to be outraged in this enlightened day when a delicate, refined white woman is put beneath the lash, a victim to brutal anger?”⁷⁷ Several other similar instances occurred across the South around the same time. White woman, Anne Clare, was alleged to have been whipped over “110 times” by a warden, resulting in his “[summoning] for trial before the state prison commission.”⁷⁸ White woman Ella Reese, who was sentenced to labor on a chain gang, sparked national outrage. The mayor eventually dismissed her sentence “after a crowd of suffragettes had declared they would attack [him] in his home” if she was forced to labor.⁷⁹ An unnamed white woman found compassion from Judge Andrew Calhoun in Georgia after she was set to be “the only white woman on the chain gang” and would therefore be “forced to associate with” Black women.⁸⁰ One article by the *Columbus-Enquirer* represents this demeaning discourse, stating these women “never think of striking a lick of work or earning an honest penny,” therefore, in order to put them to better use, they are tasked with agricultural labor and menial work.⁸¹ After viewing a female chain gang in Jackson, Mississippi, a reporter

⁷⁶ “Georgia Papers Comment on the De Cris Affair,” *The Atlanta Journal*, August 16, 1903, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/969483225>.

⁷⁷ “De Cris Affair.”

⁷⁸ “White Woman Is Given 110 Lashes,” *Fort Worth Star Telegram*, September 14, 1910, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/634056968>.

⁷⁹ “Suffragette Threat Wins,” *The Tampa Tribune*, August 15, 1911, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/326096493>.

⁸⁰ “White Woman May be Freed,” *The Atlanta Constitution*, October 3, 1912, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/26784020>.

⁸¹ “Female Chain Gang,” *The Columbus-Enquirer*, September 11, 1897, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/851954729>.

describes the scene as “interesting,” as these “wenches who never earned an honest dollar in their lives [were] made to take a hoe and get right down to work.”⁸²

For white women, gender was an immutable characteristic and indicative of a protective status. For Black women, this characteristic was taken away, refashioned, and transformed until the concept of Black womanhood was antithetical to white womanhood. In the circumstances that convict laborers were white women, their conditions were marked by less brutality, punishment, and inhumane treatment. Fierce criticism came from the community when brutality was enacted against white women, as seen in the case of Mamie De Cris. Often seen in these public outcries was the defenses of white womanhood, where the public defined white women as soft, delicate, and victims. On the other hand, brutality committed against Black women laborers was hardly met with the same outrage. Prison administrators and southern society alike viewed Black women as lazy, prone to crime, “lascivious, negligent, and grotesque,” descriptions necessary for the maintenance of a gendered order that placed white women as the image of respectability.⁸³ The functioning of this system and racialized gender categories is significant in the maintenance of the South’s system of punishment.⁸⁴ The carceral system of the South was predicated on the idea that Black women were inherently “deviant,” a sentiment necessary to uphold the racial order that sought to “[devalue] and [dehumanize] black life.”⁸⁵ Not only did the use of convict labor aid the South financially, it also upheld social norms and reinforced

⁸² “Letter from the Capitol,” *The Canton Times*, August 27, 1897, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/366530859>.

⁸³ Haley, *No Mercy Here*, 4, 8.

⁸⁴ Haley, *No Mercy Here*, 2.

⁸⁵ Haley, *No Mercy Here*, 3.

ideals regarding the positions of Black women and white women, and cemented the “symbolic rationale for Jim Crow: the protection for white women’s bodies.”⁸⁶ The ascription of womanhood, or lack of, to Black women is both arbitrary and exploitative, robbing them of agency.

After the inception of chain gangs to replace the convict lease system, the racial differences between convict labor only worsened. In some instances, administrators made Black women work despite state law forbidding the use of female convicts in certain areas of labor. Even after the gradual abolition of prison labor, Black women were often made to work as domestic laborers in the homes of white people throughout the South. In addition to being assigned housework while in prison, it was also a form of parole. In such instances, Black women were subject to “constant surveillance and the threat of return to the prison camp for any transgression,” in effect turning “private individuals” into “police and warders.”⁸⁷

Despite the horrific experience of Black female convict laborers, they were able to retain agency and protest racism, sexism, and brutality in convict camps. They operated on both an individual level and a cooperative level in hopes to maintain personal dignity, but also to defy prison authority and the system itself. Black women convict laborers deserted the camp, resisted authority, “fought camp guards, cursed their superiors, and destroyed property,” while others “resorted to burning their stripes,” a common way to resist bondage and protest the stripping away of humanity, individuality, and dignity.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Haley, “Like I Was a Man,” 53.

⁸⁷ Haley, “Like I Was a Man,” 54.

⁸⁸ LeFlouria, *Chained in Silence*, 13-14.

As evidenced in the analysis of the language and attitudes commonly applied to female convict laborers, white women's bodies were seen as weaker and in need of protection, while Black women's bodies were able to be exploited. Such a view stems from and reinforces Jim Crow ideals of gender and race. The discrepancy in the treatment, sentences, and images of white women compared to Black women show that the delicacy of womanhood was only valid when applied to white women. Black women were not able to occupy the same status, and the penal system reinforced the idea that Black women were not seen as women in the same way white women were. In an examination of female convict laborers in the South following the Civil War, it is imperative to view the differences in the experiences of and language applied to white and Black women. Such an analysis highlights the role of convict labor and the carceral system as a whole in upholding a Jim Crow social order that sought to position white women as a category of woman to be protected and Black women as a category of woman to be exploited.

The use of convict labor and chain gangs continued well into the twentieth century. It was not until the mid-twentieth century that chain gangs were abolished in some southern states, although many continued some form of road maintenance by incarcerated individuals. The eventual involvement of the United States in World War II and the subsequent Cold War began to reinforce the ideal that women were best suited for domestic housework and could better perform "feminine duties" while incarcerated. It was also around this time that the majority of incarcerated women were beginning to be held separately from incarcerated men due to the threat of sexual activity or violence. However, once separated from men, the threat of illicit sexual activity did not go away. Instead, women became the subject of Cold War anxieties regarding gender and sexuality, representing the idea that sexual fluidity and the rejection of the

nuclear, heteronormative household were un-American and deviant in nature. Society turned its attention to the maintenance of strict gender roles and sexual norms in prison. Eventually, this preoccupation with sex and gender in the women's prison became popular subject matter for 1950s-era pulp fiction, movies, and novels. Such media reflected both the fascination and the preoccupation with women's sexual "deviance."

Chapter Three

Cold War Tensions, Homosexuality, and Prison: Media as an Outlet for Concerns of Female Sexuality in Prison

Following World War II and the Cold War, the United States ushered in a new era full of skepticism, conformity, and rigidity. The idea of the nuclear family was placed on a pedestal as the ultimate symbol of “freedom” in America. Conservative society juxtaposed the values and ways of life in the United States to that of the Soviet Union. Religion, traditional gender roles, marriage, and family were of utmost importance to mainstream society. The media, as an outlet for the social concerns, trends, and fascinations, heavily mirrored the climate of the country, producing films that depicted the newfound values of the U.S. One of those subgenres was that of the prison lesbian. After World War II, anxieties about communists, sexually fluid persons, and others deemed “un-American” was at an all-time high. The pursuit of the ideal “normal” became part of the broader conservative cultural effort so much so that prison analysts, social commentators, and citizens alike looked upon the prison lesbian with both contempt and curiosity. On the other hand, films and books sensationalized the experiences of women prisoners and several works were produced in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s that centered around this very topic. In this era, the prison operated as a site in which to enforce normalcy regarding gender and sexuality, a topic that was simultaneously horrifying and titillating for conservative Americans.

While the postwar years are largely known for its repressive and conservative viewpoints, such a broad generalization obscures the changes happening behind the scenes. Sexual fluidity, especially during the war, brought new conceptions of sexuality which were only heightened by

Alfred Kinsey's research at the time. Furthermore, the conservative ideals during the 1950s were not clear cut. Sexual conservatism was supported by those who "hoped to 'contain' or eliminate" it, but "they did not necessarily agree on exactly what needed to be contained or why."⁸⁹ Despite more conservative cultural efforts to hold on to sexual and relational views of older times, the postwar years also ushered in subcultures that "expanded, celebrated, and defended" the new sexual order with the consumption of "sexual services, products, and fantasies."⁹⁰

Moreover, conservative culture commentators, such as those seen in the following discussions of prison sexual fluidity, largely continued to operate from the lens of a sexual binary. The idea that incarcerated women could defy sexual norms within prisons represented a point of contention and confusion for this sect of society. These women, however, defied sexual norms and represented tangible resistance against the rigid views of sexuality. Thus, the following discussions of incarcerated women's sexuality are reluctant to label or assign a sexual identity to the subjects in question despite the insistence of researchers and social commentators at the time to construct new sexual identities for these women as a result of their behaviors.

In prisons, little is known about the conditions that women endured or were subject to as a result of their gender. Yet recent scholarship suggests that women inhabited that same run-down and neglected facilities that their male counterparts did. In fact, the intense "surveillance of women within their small living units was much more intense and invasive" than in male

⁸⁹ Joanne Meyerowitz, "The Liberal 1950s? Reinterpreting Postwar U.S. Sexual Culture," in Karen Hagemann and Sonya Michel, eds., *Gender and the Long Postwar: Reconsiderations of the United States and the Two Germanys, 1945-1989* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2014), 297.

⁹⁰ Meyerowitz, "The Liberal 1950s?," 310.

prisons.⁹¹ Around this time as well, certain states began to segregate their inmate population by gender, fearing illicit sexual activity. Women, rather than doing manual or agricultural labor like men or women of earlier decades, often were tasked with “traditional” domestic duties such as sewing, cooking, and cleaning. In contrast to the earlier prisons, administrators housed women in smaller quarters, with some prisons operating as quasi-dormitories.

In addition to being divided along gendered lines, administrators ideologically separated women by race, as Black women occupied a much different position than white women. As was the norm in the early 20th century, the remnants of Jim Crow worked to solidify that Black womanhood was vastly different compared to white womanhood. Prison staff denied Black women the same emotions or physical experiences of white women, with many penitentiary staff and public alike believing that it was impossible for Black women to be thought of as victims.⁹² As evidenced by the discussions of double marginality in the preceding chapter, prison administrators discriminated against Black women both because of their gender *and* their race. They often placed Black women in inferior quarters, subjected them to harsher labor, and more frequently punished them than they did white women. Judges rarely prosecuted white women, and administrators often housed them in “underused quarters,” rather than overcrowded, rundown buildings like Black women.⁹³ Like male convicts, physical, and sometimes sexual, violence as punishment was common, with corporal punishment remaining “even after the

⁹¹ *Incarcerated Women: A History of Struggles, Oppression, and Resistance in American Prisons*, edited by Erica Rhodes Hayden and Theresa R. Jach, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 101.

⁹² Natalie Rech, “Three at Angola: African American Women Seeking Freedom in Jim Crow Louisiana,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 65, no. 2 (Spring 2024), 175-6.

⁹³ Rech, “Three at Angola,” 176.

governor signed a December 1944 executive order that forbade ‘floggings or other mistreatment of prisoners.’”⁹⁴

Other inmates and prison guards sexually assaulted women and these transgressions often went unpunished. Many of the instances of sexual violence were committed against Black women. Should such an act happen to a white woman, public scrutiny would soon bring local attention to the case. For Black women, however, societal ideas of race and the dehumanization of Black women left them vulnerable to sexual assault. Such “sexualization of women’s prison life only perpetuates the degrading images of black women as ‘unnatural,’ dirty, sick, and sinful.”⁹⁵ As was the case in the late 19th and early 20th century, “Black women were denied womanhood as it was defined in the South” and seen as “‘fallen women’ in need of rehabilitation.”⁹⁶

The prison environment consisted of “a poor diet, and overcrowded rundown quarters” with “only Sundays off, which was barely enough to get rested for the following week.”⁹⁷ One article from 1938 details the horrendous conditions in the prison, stating the inmates had been subject to “dirty rat-infested cells, diseased and degenerate cell-mates... [and] male prisoners or male jailers carrying keys to the women's cells.”⁹⁸ Administrators tasked Angola’s female inmates with completing the laundry for every inmate and staff member. In addition,

⁹⁴ Rech, “Three at Angola,” 178.

⁹⁵ Breea C. Willingham, “Black Women’s Prison Narratives and the Intersection of Race, Gender, and Sexuality in US Prisons,” *Critical Survey* 23, no. 3 (2011), 61.

⁹⁶ Rech, “Three at Angola,” 180.

⁹⁷ Rech, “Three at Angola,” 184.

⁹⁸ William M. Pinkerton, “U.S. Inspectors Uncovered First Known Case Women Prisoners Running a ‘Kangaroo Court,’” *The Vicksburg Post*, June 19, 1938, 2.

administrators did not offer the same educational, vocational, or recreational opportunities either. This could also be due to the fact that rates of female incarceration were significantly lower. For example, in the Louisiana State Penitentiary, women represented less than 5% of the total prison population.⁹⁹ Their crimes ranged from small property crimes to violent crimes.¹⁰⁰ In Natalie Rech's pivotal profile of three incarcerated women at Angola, one can begin to formulate an idea of the conditions women, especially women of color, faced. These three women, Rosa, Stella, and Sylviana were incarcerated at Camp D, nicknamed "the Forbidden City," a title denoting its separation from men.¹⁰¹ Stella, in 1940, was punished for allegedly "making false charges" against two white men, an infraction for which she would receive twelve lashes and the two men, nothing.¹⁰² Such an event was common for Black women, especially in the South. In one article published in 1951, "Negro women were whipped with leather belts for infractions of rules" and one was only seventeen.¹⁰³

After World War II, public discourse of gender roles, sexuality, the characteristics of being American, and, alternatively, the state of being against communism touched almost every aspect of society. The crime panic of the 1930s and the increased preoccupation with women's crimes, particularly sex work, was only exacerbated in the Cold War era United States. The early twentieth century saw the vilification of sex workers as the main type of female sexual

⁹⁹ Rech, "Three at Angola," 172.

¹⁰⁰ Rech, "Three at Angola," 172.

¹⁰¹ Rech, "Three at Angola," 174.

¹⁰² Rech, "Three at Angola," 175.

¹⁰³ "Angola's Women Prisoners 'Disturb' Penitentiary Equilibrium, Citizen Investigating Group Says in Report," *Enterprise Journal*, March 13, 1951, 1-2.

“deviance,” while female sexual fluidity was largely unnoticed.¹⁰⁴ It was not until the late 1940s and early 1950s when prison administrators began to obsessively police women’s relations in prison. Such shifts could be due to “increased arrest for prostitution during World War II and consequent prison overcrowding.”¹⁰⁵ Exacerbating the anxiety around sexuality was Alfred Kinsey’s publication of *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953).¹⁰⁶ Conservative society was alarmed by the idea that incidences of sexual fluidity were more common than previously thought. The notion that sexuality was no longer seen as a binary amplified fears about social actors who may undermine America’s place in the world, especially against the Soviet Union.

Thus, prison administrators began to take more notice of inmate relationships upon hearing of this new modality for classifying sexuality. Separated from their families and desiring companionship, female inmates became the new site for Cold War fears regarding gender roles and sexuality. Americans had long been fascinated by the prison and the Kinsey Scale intensified this fascination, fostering “anxieties about the indeterminacy of sexual identity” and eventually becoming a metaphorical site of sexual mobility.¹⁰⁷ Prison administrators and society alike believed that “homosexuality was catching.”¹⁰⁸ The idea of prison as a breeding ground for sexual fluidity “resonated loudly for Americans anxious about the links between sexual and

¹⁰⁴ Estelle B. Freedman, “The Prison Lesbian: Race, Class, and the Construction of the Aggressive Female Homosexual,” *Feminist Studies* 22, no. 2 (Summer 1996), 397.

¹⁰⁵ Freedman, “The Prison Lesbian,” 403.

¹⁰⁶ Alfred Kinsey, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1948); Alfred Kinsey, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1953).

¹⁰⁷ Regina Kunzel, *Criminal Intimacy: Prison and the Uneven History of Modern American Sexuality* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), 7.

¹⁰⁸ Kunzel, *Criminal Intimacy*, 87.

political contagions that threatened to weaken the national body.”¹⁰⁹ The prison soon came to be regarded as a site for sexual deviance, turning once gender and sexuality conforming individuals into “deviants.” Society saw this as the slow unraveling of social order and prison lesbians “became a symbol of social disorder, not unlike the prostitute of an earlier period.”¹¹⁰ The “obsession” with sexuality in prison was situated as a microcosm of the broader climate, representing, on a small scale, the ability of sexual fluidity to contaminate and spread.¹¹¹ Like other social concerns of the Cold War, “deviant” behavior was considered contagious in some aspects. The obsession with normalcy was felt everywhere and every instance of abnormality was thought to be a stepping stone to social disrepair. The prison functioned as a manifestation of this anxiety. Historian Estelle B. Freedman and John D’Emilio attribute this fear to the loosening of sexual norms for heterosexual partnerships, thus turning attention toward sexual fluidity.¹¹²

Pivotal studies of prison sexuality were completed by Ward and Kasselbaum in 1965, Giallombardo in 1966, and Hefferman in 1972. Their studies found that, in contrast to sexual relations in male prisons, women's relations were intimately tied to family. Inmates attempted to define gender roles in prison and establish a pseudo-family, representative of their outside lives in order to cope with the pains and stressors of imprisonment.¹¹³ Conservative commentators equated the female prisoners who engaged in sexual activity with “liberal [reform]” and “being

¹⁰⁹ Kunzel, *Criminal Intimacy*, 87.

¹¹⁰ Freedman, “The Prison Lesbian,” 416.

¹¹¹ *Incarcerated Women*, 117.

¹¹² *Incarcerated Women*, 117.

¹¹³ Donne Rowe, “From the Inside Out: Women Writers behind Prison Walls,” (PhD Dissertation, University of Maryland College Park, 2004), 9.

soft on perversion, as on communism.”¹¹⁴ In one administrator’s words, “Lesbianism was the greatest violation of all,” and required “personally surveilling and recording inmate friendships and interactions, regularly placing notes in women’s files concerning whom they sat next to at special events or walked with on their way to assignments.”¹¹⁵ In an article published by the *Montgomery Advertiser*, “J.M. McCullough, prison system director, said there are 25 confirmed hardened homosexuals in the prison system and a number of lesbians.”¹¹⁶ New York’s Women’s House of Detention dealt with allegations of sexual activity among inmates for many years, with inmates alleging attacks and a grand jury recommending the “isolation of known lesbians.”¹¹⁷ Administrators stated they were “well aware of the problem of homosexuality” and were working to “keep it under control.”¹¹⁸ Also in New York, Irene Perry testified in an investigation into the Women’s House of Detention, regarding “lesbian activity” and her experience with a “woman doctor [making] a sexual advance at her.”¹¹⁹

Differentiating between male and female same sex relations, administrators, sociologists, and criminologists alike likened the incidences of female sexual fluidity to “emotional deprivation and lack of experience in fending for oneself.”¹²⁰ Helen Bryan, who details Lizzie

¹¹⁴ Freedman, “The Prison Lesbian,” 405.

¹¹⁵ *Incarcerated Women*, 102.

¹¹⁶ Joe Azbell, “Prison Sex Perverts Closely Watched,” *The Montgomery Advertiser*. August 6, 1954, 17.

¹¹⁷ Norma Abrams, “Report on ‘Hellhole’ Urges Less Crowding, More Docs,” *Daily News*, December 7, 1965, 360.

¹¹⁸ Abrams, “Report on ‘Hellhole,’” 360.

¹¹⁹ Sydney R. Schanberg, “New York Jail ‘Snakebite,’ Ex-Inmate Woman Testifies,” *Dayton Daily News*, April 14, 1965, 8.

¹²⁰ David A. Ward and Gene G. Kassebaum, “Homosexuality: A Mode of Adaptation in a Prison for Women,” *Social Problems* 12, no. 2 (Autumn 1964), 166.

Nelson's experiences being incarcerated, states sexual fluidity in prison can be attributed to "the need for recognition, the pressing demand for something out of the ordinary, [and] something exciting to break the monotonous routine" rather than indicating a change in sexual preference.¹²¹ Researchers Kassebaum and Ward found that "inmate roles in the female prison community are differentiated primarily along sexual lines."¹²² In fact, they detail "the process of *turning out*, the dynamics of prison love affairs, the principal homosexual roles and the extent to which this type of adaptation has been made."¹²³ They differentiate between women who arrive in prison who generally thought of themselves to be heterosexual, known as "the *jailhouse turnout* or *J.T.O.*, in contrast to the true homosexual, who has her introduction to homosexuality in jail or prison."¹²⁴ Ward and Kassebaum thought that the majority of sexual encounters in prison involved women who "had their first affair in jail or prison."¹²⁵ Such a phenomenon baffled researchers who could not reconcile their beliefs about the "homo-heterosexual binary" with women's prison experiences.¹²⁶ In Virginia McManus's account of sexuality in prisons, she states about one half of the inmates were lesbians and the other half "accepted homosexuality" during their prison stay.¹²⁷ In one sentence, she represents the concerns of Ward and Kassebaum:

¹²¹ Kunzel, "Criminal Intimacy," 99.

¹²² Ward and Kassebaum, "Homosexuality," 166.

¹²³ Ward and Kassebaum, "Homosexuality," 166.

¹²⁴ Ward and Kassebaum, "Homosexuality," 166.

¹²⁵ Ward and Kassebaum, "Homosexuality," 167.

¹²⁶ Ward and Kassebaum, "Homosexuality," 167.

¹²⁷ Virginia McManus, "Love Without Men in Women's Prison," *Confidential*, September 1959.

“There was the 50-year-old woman, separated from her husband for the first time-starved for his love and affected and, especially comfort- who was seduced by a lesbian for the first time.”¹²⁸

At the end of the decade, many equated sexually fluid women prisoners who once engaged in sexual behavior with other women with threats to sexual and social norms. The preoccupation soon turned to fascination before becoming a cultural obsession. Despite the questions that sexual fluidity in prison raised for researchers, the public grew more and more interested in the topic. Sexual fluidity in prisons simultaneously worried the American public but also represented a fascinating subject for films and novels. This fueled a demand for prison lesbian films and novels that skyrocketed in the 1950s and 1960s, eventually becoming a staple of popular culture for these two decades. Despite cultural constraints and a return to traditional values after World War II, popular culture depicting prison lesbians was risqué, often implying sex in movie posters or book covers. The 1940s-1960s was “flooded with lesbian fiction in the form of lesbian pulp novels, mass-market paperbacks with explicitly lesbian themes and sensationalized that enjoyed widespread distribution and millions in sales.”¹²⁹ Even since the 1960s and in current research, researchers have been fascinated by the cultural obsession with sexual fluidity in prison, especially due to the lack of other material relating to incarcerated women's experiences in the mid-century.¹³⁰ As mentioned previously, sociologists and criminologists of the time, and some in recent years, viewed prison sexual relationships through the lens of “heteronormativity,” as a “response to the ‘pains of imprisonment’ and the deprivation

¹²⁸ McManus, “Love Without Men.”

¹²⁹ Yvonne Keller, “Was It Right to Love Her Brother’s Wife So Passionately?’: Lesbian Pulp Novels and U.S. Lesbian Identity, 1950-1965, *American Quarter* 57, no .2 (June 2005), 385.

¹³⁰ Hayden, *Incarcerated Women*, 117.

of ‘natural’ heterosexual contacts.”¹³¹ Conversely, some researchers preferred to view once-heterosexual prisoners as victims of the more seasoned prisoner, one who was preying upon unsuspecting new arrivals.¹³²

Films and novels featured the over-sexualization of prison lesbians, as seen in “*True Confessions* [magazine’s] sensationalized accounts of ‘love-starved girls in reform schools,’” and “pulp novels [incorporation of] women’s prison seduction.”¹³³ One novel, *Women in Prison*, epitomizes this over-sexualization with scantily clad women pictured on the cover underneath the subtitle, “A shocking story of lives and female desires warped beyond reason by a cruel and sadistic idea of justice.”¹³⁴ Another novel, *Women Without Men*, employs the same suggestive wording, stating “Inside the walls of Kennetank where women become as beasts.”¹³⁵ Some of the first few movies to be made were *Caged*, *Girls in Prison*, and *Women’s Prison*. *Girls in Prison*, like other films, alludes to the sexual undertones of the film in the description, stating “What happens to girls without men? The shocking story of one man against 1000 women!”¹³⁶ The trailer for *Caged* employs much of the rhetoric regarding the perceived contagiousness of “deviance,” stating “Warner Bros. reveals the menace that turns today’s first offenders into tomorrow’s legion of the lost.”¹³⁷ The narrator also states that the prison is “where the

¹³¹ Hayden, *Incarcerated Women*, 117.

¹³² Hayden, *Incarcerated Women*, 117.

¹³³ Freedman, “The Prison Lesbian,” 404.

¹³⁴ Mike Avallone, *Women in Prison*, (New York: Midwood, 1961).

¹³⁵ Reed Marr, *Women Without Men*, (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Publications, 1957).

¹³⁶ *Girls in Prison*, directed by Edward L. Cahn (Beverly Hills, CA: American International Pictures, 1956).

¹³⁷ *Caged*, directed by John Cromwell (Burbank, CA: Warner Bros., 1950).

underworld conducts its training school, where new recruits are taught every vice imaginable.”¹³⁸ *Women’s Prison* similarly appeals to the tempting nature of the films, stating “See the real raw truth about what went on in this women’s prison.”¹³⁹ In the following decades, films such as *Caged Heat*, *Caged Heat 2*, *Chained Heat*, and *Red Heat* proliferated. The word “‘heat,’ a term borrowed from the porno genre” was employed in almost all of them.¹⁴⁰ Many of the films feature a dominant, more aggressive prisoner and a mild-mannered, shy prisoner who is naive to the realities of prison. Others feature unusually cruel wardens who take their anger out on the newcomers. Prison films functioned to both satiate the curiosity of society, but also to reinforce the dangers of sexual “deviance,” “[emerging] as the ultimate narratives of containment, cautionary tales depicting the consequences of not adhering to the ‘virtue of conformity.’”¹⁴¹ The demand for such novels was high, despite cultural and legal norms. In one instance, police officers raided a store that contained “obscene” pop culture materials as part of their raid on “obscenity.”¹⁴² One such novel was *My Name is Rusty: A Story of Lesbian Life Behind Bars*.¹⁴³ Despite the focus on women in such novels and films, many end with a return back to “acceptable” social norms. The woman who was incidentally engaging in sexual relations with other women in prison is suddenly returned to her husband and family, grateful to be out of prison. Or, in some cases, a man, whether an administrator or guard, intervenes on behalf of the

¹³⁸ Cromwell, *Caged*.

¹³⁹ *Women’s Prison*, directed by Lewis Seiler (Culver City, CA: Columbia Pictures, 1955).

¹⁴⁰ Rowe, “From the Inside Out,” 38.

¹⁴¹ Kevin Kehrwald, *Prison Movies: Cinema Behind Bars*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 46.

¹⁴² William Collins, “Smut Raiders Seize 2700 Items,” *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, December 19, 1958, 11.

¹⁴³ Collins, “Smut Raiders,” 11.

“victim” and saves her from the threat of a more aggressive inmate. As Ann Ciasullo writes, “the prison lesbian, by presenting the threat of contagion, perversion, and permanent inversion, makes possible the patriarchal, heterosexual intervention represented by the male characters.””¹⁴⁴

The preoccupation of women’s sexual and gender identities in prison began to fizzle out as the United States became embroiled in culture wars and norms of the Cold War era were shedded for a more youthful, liberating idea of gender and sexuality. While the fantasies of lesbian prisoners remained well into the 1980s and 1990s, this media focus did not represent Cold War anxieties and a preoccupation with sexual deviance. Cold War tensions surrounding sexual fluidity and other “deviant” behavior were represented in prisons. The prison functioned as a site of defeminization, but also as a way to enforce traditional gender roles. Additionally, it operated as a microcosm for Cold War anxieties about sexuality and the perceived contagiousity of behaviors that did not adhere to social norms.

During and after the social movements during the rights revolution, incarcerated women began to take an active role in advocating for their rights and publicizing the atrocities that occurred behind bars. Their activism was a part of broader societal efforts to bring recognition to injustices throughout the United States. While the idea that prisons operated as a microcosm for larger society was present in the preceding chapters, the following chapter represents this ideal in a more positive light with prisons operating as a venue in which to challenge patriarchal norms. Through zines, women brought attention to their experiences using their own words and garnered support for their causes both inside and outside the prison. Zines provided a way for these

¹⁴⁴ Kehrwald, *Prison Movies*, 51.

incarcerated women to take back their agency and voice their concerns in ways that felt most impactful for them.

Chapter Four

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

“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!”¹⁴⁵

The tumultuous years of the 1960s not only fostered a rights revolution for many groups throughout the country, but spurred activism in 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 highly reported riots and publications regarding prison conditions.

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,

¹⁴⁵ *Break de Chains of Legalized U.S. 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.

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 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.¹⁴⁶

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 in prisons. The prisoners' rights movement vied for equal treatment between genders, the ending of inhumane conditions in 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

¹⁴⁶ Dan Berger and Toussaint 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);

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.”¹⁴⁷

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.”¹⁴⁸ 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 in 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 in 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

¹⁴⁷ 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](https://www.jstor.org/stable/44286137).

¹⁴⁸ Dan Berger and Touissant Losier, *Rethinking the American Prison Movement*, (New York: Routledge, 2018), 125.

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 finding "a thousand prisoners" living in the prison, despite its "comfortable capacity of 400 prisoners."¹⁴⁹ 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.¹⁵⁰ 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.¹⁵¹

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,

¹⁴⁹ "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>.

¹⁵⁰ "Brief History of the Atlanta City Prison Farm," 27.

¹⁵¹ "Brief History of the Atlanta City Prison Farm," 19.

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 subjected to brutalities " like "being forced at gunpoint to labor until exhaustion."¹⁵² In one instance, a convict reported his sexual assault 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."¹⁵³

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."¹⁵⁴ 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."¹⁵⁵ The legacy of slavery lived on at Angola where

¹⁵² Roy Reed, "Pressure Mounts for Prison Reform in Mississippi," *New York Times*, September 18, 1973, <https://www.nytimes.com/1972/09/18/archives/pressure-mounts-for-prison-reform-in-mississippi.html>, 39.

¹⁵³ Reed, "Prison Reform in Mississippi," 39.

¹⁵⁴ John Vodicka, "Prison Plantation," *Facing South*, December 1, 1978, <https://www.facingsouth.org/prison-plantation>.

¹⁵⁵ Vodicka, "Prison Plantation."

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.”¹⁵⁶

For women, prison activism focused 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, in prisons was that of Joan Little. At the time of her assault 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

¹⁵⁶ Vodicka, “Prison Plantation.”

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.”¹⁵⁷ 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.”¹⁵⁸

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.¹⁵⁹ 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

¹⁵⁷ 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>.

¹⁵⁸ 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>.

¹⁵⁹ Mary Klein, “Raped Behind Bars,” *Off Our Backs* 10, no. 3 (March 31, 1980), 21, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25793330>.

defamation. The zine in which this was published noted this discriminatory treatment, stressing the sexist treatment that victims of sexual assault 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.¹⁶⁰ 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."¹⁶¹ 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."¹⁶² 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

¹⁶⁰ Klein, *Raped Behind Bars*, 21.

¹⁶¹ Berger and Losier, *American Prison Movement*, 75.

¹⁶² Berger and Losier, *American Prison Movement*, 96.

prison; however, soon after, “150 feminists gathered outside the prison in protest at this retaliation.”¹⁶³

In 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.”¹⁶⁴ 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

¹⁶³ Berger and Losier, *American Prison Movement*, 97.

¹⁶⁴ 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.

resist.”¹⁶⁵

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.¹⁶⁶ 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.”¹⁶⁷ The subsequent issue of “Society of Forgotten Women” also introduces educational programs, such as Operation Upgrade, implemented to foster literacy through individual tutoring sessions.¹⁶⁸ “Belles and Bars” zine published by the Louisiana Correctional Institute for Women also includes information regarding educational programs, with information about the recently

¹⁶⁵ Wright, “Freedom in Her Mind,” 12.

¹⁶⁶ “Society of Forgotten Women,” *LCIW Newsletter* 1, no. 10 (Jan/Feb 1979): 4-5, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.35529159>.

¹⁶⁷ “The Inside World,” *Mississippi State Penitentiary* 26, no. 4 (June 1974): 41, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.34807005>.

¹⁶⁸ “Society of Forgotten Women,” *LCIW Newsletter* 1, no. 9 (Sep/Oct 1978): 11, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/community.35529166>.

begun business classes. Here, students learn secretarial skills and technical skills, similar to what would be taught in vocational school. The women exemplify 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!!!”¹⁶⁹

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.”¹⁷⁰ 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.”¹⁷¹ She requests their cooperation, asking them to “become united with us to overthrow this racism/fascism/kapitalism.”¹⁷² 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.”¹⁷³ 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

¹⁶⁹ 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).

¹⁷⁰ “Society of Forgotten Women,” no. 9, 3.

¹⁷¹ *Break de Chains*, 26.

¹⁷² *Break de Chains*, 26.

¹⁷³ *Break de Chains*, 50.

join us in the Inevitable Revolution.”¹⁷⁴

In 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.”¹⁷⁵ 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.”¹⁷⁶ 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???”¹⁷⁷ 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.’”¹⁷⁸

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.”¹⁷⁹ In the

¹⁷⁴ *Break de Chains*, 50. .

¹⁷⁵ “Belles and Bars,” 4.

¹⁷⁶ “Belles and Bars,” 4..

¹⁷⁷ *Break de Chains*, 25.

¹⁷⁸ *Break de Chains*, 51.

¹⁷⁹ 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.¹⁸⁰ One woman incarcerated in North Carolina demands that she and her fellow inmates be treated like women, “not animals,” or “machines,” or “depraved criminals.”¹⁸¹ 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.”¹⁸²

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.¹⁸³ The “Bar None” prison zine states similar findings, intertwining their prison experiences and human rights abuses with the

¹⁸⁰ “Society of Forgotten Women,” 6.

¹⁸¹ *Break de Chains*, 64.

¹⁸² *Break de Chains*, 64.

¹⁸³ “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.”¹⁸⁴ Some women faced charges of “insighting [inciting] a riot” after the “unarmed women were attacked by male-guards, armed with loads of riot gear.”¹⁸⁵

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.”¹⁸⁶ 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.”¹⁸⁷ 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.”¹⁸⁸ Ellen Amana Porter, incarcerated in North Carolina, “firmly [believes] that all that is gained NOTHING BUT ANGER AND HATE!”¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁴ “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.

¹⁸⁵ “One Year Later,” 16.

¹⁸⁶ “Society of Forgotten Women,” no. 10, 7.

¹⁸⁷ “Society of Forgotten Women,” no. 10, 7.

¹⁸⁸ “Belles and Bars,” no. 5, 5.

¹⁸⁹ *Break de Chains*, 34.

Aside from expressing anger and discontentment with their experiences, some women put forth proposals for changes in 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."¹⁹⁰

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 in America's current system which generally situate men in larger institutions and women in smaller institutions. This system essentially fosters a degree of separation and isolation in women's institutions, but a more collaborative and reform-focused environment in 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."¹⁹¹ 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."¹⁹² 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."¹⁹³ Anne, incarcerated at

¹⁹⁰ *Break de Chains*, 37.

¹⁹¹ "Belles and Bars" no. 5, 5.

¹⁹² "Society of Forgotten Women," no. 9, 7.

¹⁹³ "Society of Forgotten Women," no. 9, 7..

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."¹⁹⁴ 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.¹⁹⁵

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)."¹⁹⁶ 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."¹⁹⁷ 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."¹⁹⁸

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

¹⁹⁴ *Break de Chains*, 60.

¹⁹⁵ *Break de Chains*, 60.

¹⁹⁶ *Break de Chains*, 12.

¹⁹⁷ *Break de Chains*, 12.

¹⁹⁸ *Break de Chains*, 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 in the department of corrections.¹⁹⁹ 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.”²⁰⁰ 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.”²⁰¹

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.²⁰² Despite such setbacks, the court offered prisoners wins in the *Johnson v. Avery* (1969) case in which the Court declared

¹⁹⁹ *Break de Chains*, 6.

²⁰⁰ *Break de Chains*, 6.

²⁰¹ *Break de Chains*, 9.

²⁰² 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."²⁰³ 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.²⁰⁴ 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."²⁰⁵ 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.'"²⁰⁶ 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

²⁰³ 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/>.

²⁰⁴ Chase, "We Are Not Slaves," 76.

²⁰⁵ Chase, "We Are Not Slaves," 77.

²⁰⁶ Chase, "We Are Not Slaves," 78.

representation.”²⁰⁷

In the South, much of the suits focused on 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.”²⁰⁸ 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.’”²⁰⁹ 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 1,500,000.²¹⁰ 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

²⁰⁷ Chase, “We Are Not Slaves,” 78.

²⁰⁸ Jacobs, “Prisoners’s Rights Movement,” 439.

²⁰⁹ Chase, “We Are Not Slaves,” 84.

²¹⁰ 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 in 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.

Conclusion

The exploration of nineteenth and twentieth century prisons through the lens of race and gender has demonstrated that prisons have worked to solidify notions of patriarchal society and further cement socially constructed and accepted ideals of womanhood. Writings exploring the experiences of men in prison overshadow incarcerated women from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. Often dealing with the implications of race and being deemed a prisoner— for Black women this meant being triply marginalized— women also dealt with physical, sexual, and emotional violence. The experience of female convict laborers tells a story of resistance, one that has largely been lost to the historical record. The stories of these women are only told by onlookers, whether it was the public or prison administrators. It was told for them by the same people who inflicted pain upon them.

Despite their inability to bring awareness to their situation or escape Jim Crow norms of race and gender, these women resisted in small, but mighty ways. The prison of the Jim Crow era South was pivotal in reinforcing and differentiating between the meaning of womanhood in Black and white women. An overview of the convict leasing system and the experiences of women depict how the masculinization of Black women and the valorization of white women ultimately worked to uphold white superiority in the region. The treatment and perception of Black women as antithetical to womanhood served to shift the definition of gender to justify the Jim Crow ideals of race and punishment. This differentiation could be seen throughout the South during Reconstruction and the Progressive era, highlighting the ways in which the prison operated as a microcosm for larger society.

Similarly, popular culture confined incarcerated women of the 1940s and 1950s to media

representations of their life, from their experience of gender roles to their experiences of sexuality. Despite conservative cultural attitudes toward sexual fluidity, the more tolerant subcultures of society who viewed sexuality as operating outside the binary were also represented within the prison system. Women resisted ideals that sexuality was fixed and exemplified the changing norms of the era. However, on the other hand, their perception by mainstream society was still representative of larger cultural norms and fears surrounding the changing social climate. They were a product of Cold War anxieties about deviance, sexual fluidity, and gender norms. And like women convict laborers, they were not able to share their stories. They were firmly placed in a box of concerns about the changing social attitudes of the 1950s. Rather than being recognized as having their own unique experiences that were singular, they symbolized the broader cultural fears of the time. This, however, was part of a larger phenomenon in which prisons operated as a venue in which to enforce normalcy in regards to gender and sexuality.

The last chapter denotes the change in the historical record regarding incarcerated women. Zines offered a distinctive platform that did not exist before, allowing women to publish their thoughts surrounding incarceration, capitalism, sexism, racism, and society as a whole. It was in the 1960s that they were finally able to take the power back and tell their story how they wished it to be told. Unfortunately, zines were not published on a wide scale and the general public was likely unaware of their existence. However, incarcerated women were still able to bring about changes in the prison system, whether it was on a local or state level, or simply at their facility. They developed a broader support network in prison and began to educate themselves and those around them of the systemic injustices they faced as incarcerated women.

Their activism within prisons mirrored society's tumultuous climate during the rights revolution.

Incarcerated women, as evidenced in the preceding chapters, faced hardship within the prison system and, despite the work that was done by these women and other activists in the late twentieth century, issues still remain. Prisons have marginalized women since their inception and have operated as more of a vessel for control and repression than rehabilitation. Contemporary statistics detail the many issues that women in prison face— mental and physical abuse, familial separation, isolation, and alienation. The women in these facilities, usually women of color, are then returned to society “with old problems intact and probably new ones, to a community ill-equipped to ease the transition.”²¹¹

This thesis not only traces the experience of incarcerated women through the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, but also examines the language and attitudes surrounding incarcerated women in that time period. It has argued that prisons function as a manufacturer of normalcy, especially in relation to gender roles and invents, erases, and modifies the definitions of womanhood.

²¹¹ Vernetta D. Young and Rebecca Reviere, *Women Behind Bars: Gender and Race in US Prisons* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2006), 179.

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