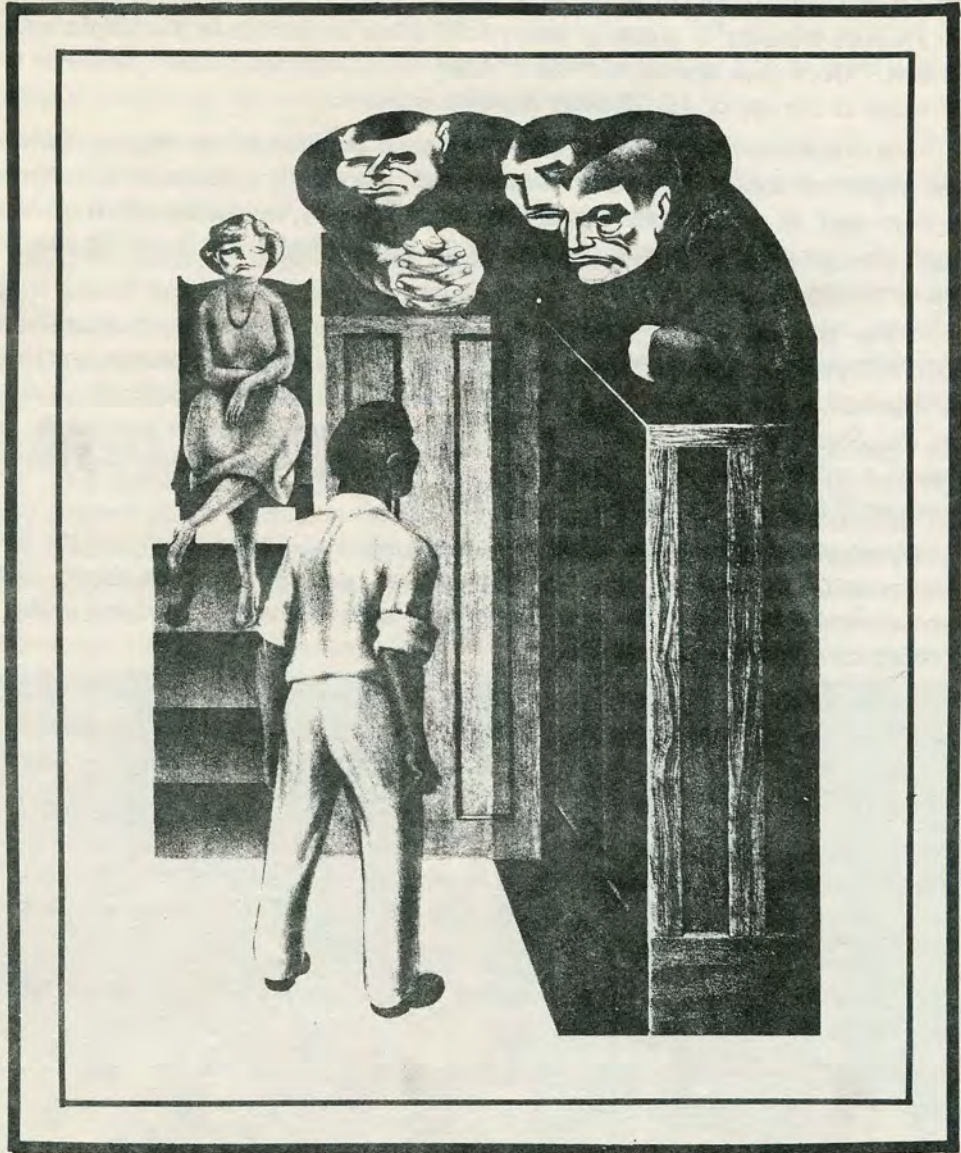


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FREE THOMAS WANSLEY



**A letter to white Southern women
from Anne Braden**

I am writing to you, my white sisters throughout the South, to ask you to join with me and others in a campaign to free Thomas Wansley.

Thomas Wansley is a young man of 26. He is an inmate in the Virginia state prison. More than one-third of his life has been spent behind bars, since he was arrested at the age of 16. Thomas Wansley is black.

Whether we like it or not, he is in prison because of us. He is a victim of the myth of white Southern womanhood. We didn't personally put him in prison—just as we did not create the myth. But by remaining silent as black men died or went to prison because of it, we have helped to fasten its shackles on ourselves.

For Wansley is imprisoned on a charge of rape. Rape—the cry that for the last 100 years in the South has undergirded the myths about women and made it impossible for us to fight for our own freedom. Rape—traditionally a crime in the South if the accused was black and the alleged victim was white, but never a crime if the victim was black and the attacker was white, and scarcely noticed if both parties were white, or both black.

Wansley was arrested in 1961 in Lynchburg, Va., at the height of the sit-in movement. Lynchburg was in turmoil as young black students, often accompanied by whites, sat at the lunch counters—demanding not just a cup of coffee, but dignity and freedom.

In the midst of this, a 57-year-old white woman said she was raped. Wansley was arrested after a massive manhunt in the black community. The woman was not able to identify him, but it didn't matter. He was convicted on two counts, and given two death sentences.

By 1964, a protest movement had been built around the Wansley case, and his convictions were reversed. But in a new trial he was convicted again and this time given life. Meantime the protests died down, the world forgot, and Wansley remained in prison.

Now there is a new movement demanding his freedom. We, the white women of the South, belong in this fight.

December, 1972

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I believe that no white woman reared in the South—or perhaps anywhere in this racist country—can find freedom as a woman until she deals in her own consciousness with the question of race. We grow up little girls—absorbing a hundred stereotypes about ourselves and our role in life, our secondary position, our destiny to be a helpmate to a man or men. But we also grow up white—absorbing the stereotypes of race, the picture of ourselves as somehow privileged because of the color of our skin. The two mythologies become intertwined, and there is no way to free ourselves from one without dealing with the other.

The awareness never comes easily—and perhaps it comes to each of us in a different way. Perhaps for my generation it was a bit easier—when the mythologies were acted out more obviously and more crudely than today.

For me, the awareness began 26 years ago in a courtroom in Birmingham, Ala. I was 22, a young newspaper reporter, covering the courthouse. That day, a young black man was being tried—not for rape, but something called “assault with intent to ravish.” A young white woman testified that he passed her on the opposite side of a country road and looked at her in an “insulting” way. He was sentenced to 20 years.

I was appalled by the case. Torn by what was happening to the black man. But torn, too, as I watched the white woman. She appeared to be very poor, but she had obviously dressed in her best—and for that day she was queen in the courtroom. The judge, the prosecutor, her father who told of her fright when she came in from that walk—all rallied round to defend her honor.

The punishment for “rape”—a device that has kept black and white Southerners divided for generations.



Later that day, I told the prosecutor I thought the conviction and sentence had been terribly unfair. "Now don't you worry your little head about things like that," he said. "As long as I'm prosecutor in this county, we're going to protect our women."

He smiled at me in a confiding way—as if we were on the same side in some great battle—and began telling me about another case, new information, a "scoop" for my paper because we would report it before the competition paper.

I felt a smothering sensation—and left his office as soon as I could. It was not until much later that I was able to articulate my feelings that day. At the time, I wondered how that woman could do this cruel thing to the black man—sending him to prison for 20 years for absolutely nothing.

It was only later that I realized the horror of what she was doing to herself. Tomorrow, after her day as a queen, she would go back to a life of poverty and boredom: waiting on her father, on her brothers, and someday on a husband—paying with a lifetime of drudgery for those magic moments when she could achieve the status of a wronged white woman.

It was even longer before I realized that my conflicts that day also arose from questions about myself—before I came to understand that my position and that of the woman on the witness stand were not very different after all.

I thought I was different. At 22, I had already had an image of myself as a "free" woman—today, the term would be "liberated." I had grown up in Alabama, where the role of women in my world was clearly defined: make yourself as attractive as possible to men; hide the fact that you have a brain since men don't like smart women; learn to make men feel important; be a belle of the ball; marry and have children and make a home.

I had rejected that and chosen a career, in which I was doing well. People at the newspaper said I was one of the best reporters they had ever had; I managed to get the news no one else could, and I knew how to write it.

Yet, sitting that day in the prosecutor's office, I was just one more brainless woman. By my acquiescence, I was part of the conspiracy that said white women must be protected. Even my news-gathering ability was perhaps not real after all, but rather the result of the attitudes of white officials around the courthouse who saw me as one more woman to "protect."

I could not articulate any of this at the time—but I knew something was wrong, and this and many similar instances finally made me flee Birmingham—feeling that if I got away from Alabama and the South, I could escape the forces that seemed to be smothering me.

It was after I took another newspaper job in Louisville, Ky.—seeing it then as a waystop to the North and further development of a career—that I became involved in the organized civil-rights movement. Then I began to analyze. I met people in the movement and talked with them. I began to read things I'd never heard of before.

And so of course I learned that I was not the first Southern white woman who had been torn by these conflicts. I learned about the white women who fought in the Abolitionist movement against slavery—and in the process began to achieve their own freedom.

I learned, too, a little history of the South—how rape had been made a capital crime only after the Civil War, after Reconstruction brought poor whites and blacks in the South together to create a better society. It was then that those who formerly ruled had to institute a new terror to come back to power. And how between 1890 until the 1930's, thousands of black men were lynched, many of them because of the cry of rape.

And how it was a group of white women in the South who first spoke out clearly against this—in the 1930's. They organized the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching and declared to the world that they were tired of being used as an excuse for the killing of black men and they'd protect themselves, thank you. I identified with those women, although I had never met any of them—and sensed that herein lay the road to my own freedom.

By this time, lynching had declined in the South—partly because of the work of those women. But the lynchers had moved into the courthouses, where they still reside today. But by then there were fights around some of the most atrocious cases. The Scottsboro Case in Alabama (about which I only knew vaguely as a child—although it was happening all around me) had awakened many people. In Virginia, whites as well as blacks were fighting for the lives of the Martinsville Seven.



Two historic campaigns: Left, delegation leaves New York City to petition Mississippi governor to save Willie McGee. Right, William Patterson, author of 1951 genocide petition, marches with Martinsville 7 picket line in Washington, DC.

A turning point in my life came when I became involved in the case of Willie McGee. McGee was a black man sentenced to die for the rape of a white woman in Laurel, Miss. His accuser was another of the South's tragic women.

Laurel is a town whose political and economic life was dominated then—as it is now—by the Masonite Corporation. Masonite workers at one time had a union that had the reputation of being the most militant in Mississippi.

McGee was arrested in November, 1945—at the height of the post World War II strike wave that was sweeping the country. His case, which went on until 1951 and brought 1,500 cheering whites to the courthouse lawn on the night he was finally executed, kept Laurel in turmoil for almost six years. It played an important part in maintaining the gulf between black and white workers on which Masonite thrives.

The McGee case became the focal point of an international campaign. The fight did not save McGee's life; he was executed on May 8, 1951. The state of Mississippi was determined to kill him, and at one point the governor said in a public statement that if the state did not kill McGee he would do it himself. But I never felt the campaign really failed. It clarified the issues as nothing else had, except perhaps the Scottsboro case, and the lives of many other black men were saved because of it. After that, for several years at least, public officials were more careful about making random arrests for rape.

One of the historic features of the campaign was a mobilization of white women throughout the country to say what those Southern women in the 30's had said, what I was now feeling so strongly: "We are women, we are human beings, we will no longer be used as things, as tools of white supremacy."

Several delegations of white women from across the country went to Mississippi at various times—to talk to the women there, to take their message to the heart of the monster. I went down from Kentucky where I was then living, with the last delegation—the weekend before the execution. Ours was a last-minute effort; our mission was to see the governor, to state the case for the nation's white women.

We never got to see the governor. Jackson was tense that day—police mobilized on every corner to head off an expected demonstration of blacks from the surrounding countryside. As we were preparing to cross the street to walk to the capitol building, we were arrested. Actually they did not call it arrest; they said we were in "protective custody." So they put us in a jail cell. It struck me as symbolic of what the South's protection of its white women really means.

I rode to the police station in a patrol car with two other members of our delegation on the back seat along with one burly cop—and two more cops on the front seat. One of those in front was making comments all the way: "You girls ought to go back where you came from; you don't know anything about our problems in the South."



Willie McGee leaves Hinds County Jail.

I stood it as long as I could and then I said: "I think I know a good bit about the South. I grew up in Alabama—and before that I lived in Mississippi as a small child. As a matter of fact, here in Jackson. And I'm ashamed of the city of my childhood today."

At that point the mood of the cop in the front seat changed from contempt to fury. He had thought we were all "yankees." Traitors are worse. "And you're here on this—why you...you are not fit to be called a Southern woman. You ought to be killed."

He turned as if to hit me, and hesitated long enough for the cop on the back seat to say, "Wait a minute, Joe," and for me to simply look at him and say, "No, I think I'm not your kind of Southern woman." I guess I must have stared him down, because he turned around and contented himself with growling insults the rest of the way to the station.

What I had said to him, of course, was not exactly what I meant. One can always think later of what it would have been better to say in a tense moment. And this was before I had really analyzed my own feelings as a woman and what was happening to me in those years. Looking at it in retrospect, I think what I was really saying was: "No, I have had enough. From this time on, you and the society you represent will not define me. I will define myself."

But then, in that moment, I only knew that I suddenly felt free—really free for the first time in my life, free that day I spent in the jail cell, the first time I'd been in jail. I think now that I knew instinctively even then that I had reached a turning point in my life—and in a sense a point of no return.

No longer was I the helpless victim of a "protective" society as I had been that day in Birmingham in the prosecutor's office. In a single

moment of action, I had placed myself on the "other side"—the other side from that cop who at first wanted to protect me, and when I didn't want to be protected, wanted to kill me. . . the other side from the prosecutor who took my brain and my humanity away from me by granting me favors as a young reporter because I was an attractive woman. . . the other side from the people in Mississippi who were determined to kill Willie McGee, who had made his accuser a heroine for a time, and used her for all of her life. . . the other side from the people I had grown up with, who had taught me so carefully where a woman's place was. . . the other side from the rulers of the South who treated black people like children and put white women on pedestals—and turned on both in fury when they asserted their humanity. . .

I was on the other side from the death and decay that gripped the society I lived in.

For in an exploitive society, there are always two sides. And at some point, one must choose.

Perhaps because of my own experience, I have believed ever since that the choice comes not in areas of thought and theory—but in some moment of action. An action that puts us on the "other side."

That's what I'm asking of you, my sisters, in regard to Thomas Wansley. An action—action that many of us can take together—that will put us on the "other side" from those who wanted to kill Wansley and now would keep him in prison for life, and would keep us forever imprisoned within the boundaries of what they want us to be.

You may say that my experience is out of the dim and distant past—and things are different now. I don't think so. The presence of Wansley in jail belies the "difference." And he is only one of many.

Perhaps the real difference now as compared with the time of the McGee case over 20 years ago is that then there were forces on the left in this country that were making this kind of struggle a focal point of their work and organizing. Willie McGee was not the only black man sentenced to die for rape in that period—but his case was particularly atrocious and people who understood the issues organized around it, dramatized it—and thus illuminated for many people the depth of the racist myths that imprisoned us all.

Racism has not declined in this country since then; in many ways, it has embedded itself more deeply in our minds and institutions. There is an illusion to the contrary, because of the small gains won by the civil rights movement that crested in the South 10 years after the McGee case.

These gains were real—won by the blood and tears of many people, and the lives of some. But they were only a beginning, only a scratching of the surface. And suddenly a smug and self-satisfied white America turned away, said the battle was

over—as the racists moved to recover the ground they had lost, to crush the black movement wherever they could and to fix firmly in the hands of the powerful white few the ultimate control of our society. Just how successful they have been is indicated by the current national retreat on the issue of school desegregation—a question many of us thought had been decided in 1954.

What the myths of racism do to us as white women may not come to everyone as dramatically as it did to me—in Birmingham, Ala., and in Jackson Miss. But it impinges on the lives of us all.

For example—recently, in Memphis, Tenn., underpaid white women workers in a small factory were persuaded to vote against a union because the company told them a victory for the union would mean they would be associating on a basis of equality with black men in the plant. This was an affront to their “Southern white womanhood,” and to preserve that ancient myth they sacrificed the chance of better pay, food on their tables, and a more decent life for their children.

I am aware that my appeal to you to take up the fight for Thomas Wansley and what it represents comes at a time when the women’s movement in this country is struggling to make our society recognize and deal with the crime of rape. My position is not at odds with this struggle; it is simply another dimension.

For the fact is that rape traditionally has been considered a crime in the South—if the woman was white and the accused black. But it has not been seen as a crime—and is not now—if the woman is black, or if both parties are white. Nor is it considered a crime if the victim appears to be an independent woman—not visibly someone’s wife, someone’s sister, or someone’s daughter. Most real rapes go unpunished—and often unreported—because of the contempt with which police treat the complaining woman. Police and the society generally extend “protection” only to women who are willing to be pawns in their game.

I don’t think all this will change until women—organized and strong and asserting their humanity—demand it.

We haven’t had that kind of strength—and don’t now—because of the deep chasm that divides white women from black in our society, a chasm created by crimes committed in the name of white womanhood.

It may seem paradoxical—but in this racist society we who are white will overcome our oppression as women only when we reject once and for all the privileges conferred on us by our white skin. For the privileges are not real—they are a device through which we are kept under control.

We can make a beginning toward building a really strong women’s movement as we openly reject and fight racist myths that have kept us divided. We can begin by joining with our black sisters in a campaign to free Thomas Wansley—and go on from there to free others, and ourselves.

There is an epilogue to my experience in the Willie McGee case. Several months after his execution, I met his widow, Rosalie McGee, who had worked day and night for six years trying to save him, traveling the length and breadth of the land. After he was electrocuted, she continued in the fight for freedom for other blacks for a number of years.

She has since died, but for a time it was my privilege to work with her in some of these efforts. We did not know each other well, we lived in different parts of the country, we saw each other only a few times—I doubt that I ever particularly stood out in her mind, any more than the many other women white and black with whom she was working.

But I felt a deep kinship with her—and with the other women I met during that campaign for her husband's life. For one of the things that came home to me in that period was how the myth of white womanhood had separated us from our black sisters. In that moment in Jackson when I "changed sides," some of those barriers began to fall—first within myself, then with others. And I began to glimpse what true sisterhood can mean.

In that period, there was a black poet named Beulah Richardson who wrote a long poem that summed it all up. It was called "A Black Woman Speaks of White Womanhood," and it said in part:



Anne Braden & Rosalie McGee

*"It is right that I a woman
black,
should speak of white womanhood.
My fathers
my brothers
my sons
die for it, because of it.
And their blood
Chilled in electric chairs,
stopped by hangman's noose
cooked by lynch mobs' fire,
spilled by white supremacist mad desire to kill for profit,
gives me that right.

I would that I could speak of white womanhood
as it will and should be
when it stands tall in full equality.
But then, womanhood will be womanhood
void of color and of class,
and all necessity for my speaking thus will be past.
Gladly past.*

*White womanhood too is enslaved,
the difference is degree...
They brought me here in chains...
They brought you here willing slaves to man...
If they counted my teeth
they did appraise your thigh
and sold you to the highest bidder
the same as I.*

*They trapped me with the chain and gun.
They trapped you with the lying tongue.*

** * **

He purchased you.

He raped me.

I fought!

But you fought neither for yourselves or me.

*Sat trapped in your superiority
and spoke no reproach.*

*You bore the damning mockery of your marriage
and heaped your hate on me...*

*Yes, they condemned me to death
and they condemned you to decay....*

*I would that the poor among you could have seen
through the scheme
and joined hands with me.*

*Then, we being the majority, could long ago have rescued
our wasted lives....*

*It was no mistake that your naked body on an Esquire calendar
announced the date, May Eighth.*

This is your fate if you do not wake to fight.

*They will use your naked bodies to sell their wares,
though it be hate, coca cola, or rape.*

This is the depravity they would reduce you to.

Death for me

and worse than death for you.

So be careful when you talk with me.

*Remind me not of my slavery, I know it well
but rather tell me of your own.*

If you will fight with me then take my hand...

and as we set about our plan

let our wholehearted fight be:

Peace in a world where there is equality."

**See back cover for how
you can join in the fight
to free Thomas Wansley.**

WANSLEY IS FREE ON BAIL – BUT THE FIGHT ISN'T OVER.

Since this pamphlet was written, a partial victory has been won in the Wansley case. Federal District Judge Robert Merhige in Richmond, Va., reversed Wansley's conviction on grounds that his trial was unfair, and ordered the state to either free him or try him again in 60 days. And he freed Wansley on \$10,000 bail.

But Virginia officials have stated that they plan to appeal Merhige's decision to the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals. Those who originally tried Wansley are determined either to reverse the federal judge and put Wansley back in prison that way—or to bring him to trial again on the same trumped-up charge.

Wansley himself called his freedom on bail a "people's victory." Good legal work by his lawyers was also essential—but Wansley would still be in prison if not for the protest within Virginia and across the country.

If we continue and intensify the protest now, a complete victory can be won. We urge you to do the following:

1. Women should write Gov. Linwood Holton, State Capitol, Richmond, Va., pointing out how the rape charge has been used against Wansley and other black men. Urge him to use his influence to get the state to drop the appeal of the case, accept the federal court decision, and wipe the Wansley case off the books.
2. Bring the women's movement where you live into this campaign. Raise the issue before all the women's groups in your city, and urge them to work for complete freedom for Wansley.
3. Write SCEF for more copies of this brochure, and of a petition demanding Wansley's full freedom. Or you can write your own petition, expressing the women's stake in this issue, and circulate it.
4. Help us reach more women. Send us the names of groups and individuals we can mail material to.
5. A protest campaign such as this costs money—for printing and mailing costs, organizing meetings, etc. SCEF is now helping to organize a statewide meeting in Virginia that will focus on the Wansley case and consolidate the movement to free him. Urge women's groups to send contributions to SCEF, 3210 W. Broadway, Louisville, Ky. 40211—earmarked for "Thomas Wansley Campaign."

This pamphlet is circulated by SCEF, 3210 W. Broadway, Louisville, Ky. 40211.