

***Defying the Tomb.***

Johnson, Kevin “Rashid.”

Forward by Russell “Maroon” Shoats

Afterword by Sundiata Acoli

Introduction & Afterword by Tom Big Warrior  
(Montréal: Kersplebedeb, 2010. 387 pages.)

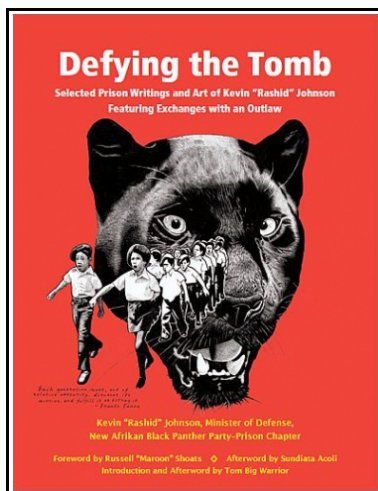
Reviewed by—Jeff Shantz,

*Kwantlen Polytechnic University, July 2013*

There has grown over the last several decades a real disjuncture between working class communities and movements and political prisoners. Even activists have largely lost touch with those comrades imprisoned for organizing only a generation or two before.

That situation is recently changing, perhaps in fundamental ways. As the state clampdown on alternative globalization activists and organizers grows, and as community organizers face jail time under extreme charges such as conspiracy, it is inevitable that more people from contemporary movements will find themselves inside prisons as political prisoners—or will be required to support comrades who have been taken inside.

During the period from the 1980s up to the first decades of the twenty-first century, the lessons, experiences, words, and guidance of political prisoners were kept alive by the efforts of a few dedicated people and groups, such as the Anarchist Black Cross, the anarchist producers of the “Certain Days” political prisoners support calendar, and the publisher of armed struggle literature Kersplebedeb.



At this point in time, with increasingly repressive criminal justice policies and practices there are clearly obstacles to collaboration between prisoners and outsiders in the growing resistance to global capital. Yet, this repression will bring new activists into the prisons and open opportunities for overcoming some of the physical barriers to interaction. More and more the politically mobilized will be compelled to engage with and learn from those members of our movements who have been imprisoned. Thankfully there are works like *Defying the Tomb* that insurgents can turn to for analysis and information.

The author, and the others involved in the collection (Russell "Maroon" Shoats, Sundiata Acoli, and Tom Big Warrior) bring several decades of experience each to bear on the issues. These include experiences of armed struggle and militant resistance. It is important to be reminded of a period, not that long ago, when police were subjected to retaliation for their murders of African American youth and activists.

Throughout the work offers a much needed class analysis of current social problems. It is refreshing to see capitalism identified directly and clearly as the issue throughout, rather than neoliberalism, crisis, or austerity, which are symptoms of capitalist development and regulation. The struggle for political prisoners, and against prisons, is also an anti-capitalist struggle. As Johnson and the others in this work insist, it is necessary that we recognize the unity of the struggle against racist oppression and the class struggle for socialist revolution (and the place of criminal justice systems within these struggles).

*Defying the Tomb* provides a useful discussion of histories of Pan-Africanist struggle and its intersections with anti-capitalism, and communism more proactively. Indeed, the "Foreword" by Russell "Maroon" Shoats offers an excellent introduction and overview to the history of Pan-Africanist and revolutionary black liberation movements. It alone is worth the read for anyone looking for an interesting primer to recent black liberation politics and their intersections with communism.

The first section offers biographical sketches of Rashid and another young prisoner Outlaw. This sets the stage for the conversation in letters between the two men that makes up the middle, largest, section of the collection. Rashid was imprisoned

for 16 years at the time of writing (2006) going in at the age of 18. He had spent the previous 12 years in solitary. His imprisonment resulted from his targeting as a cop killer. The biographical section details his growth and transformation from lumpen youth involved in street crimes (mostly drug trade) to proletarian revolutionary organizer. These are familiar transformations for those of us who grow up poor and working class. They are stories of the shift from individual anger, resentment, and rebellion to collective action and revolutionary struggle. It is the process of finding voice—of finding the words to articulate, analyze, and understand what had previously been inchoate feelings of frustration, a sense that something is wrong but needing to name it.

In his writings on prison Johnson outlines in detail the systematic abuses heaped on prisoners and the attempts by guards to divide prisoners against each other through violence. He also shows the successes of organizing solidarity among prisoners and united defense against guards. Collective organizing against guards is effective in halting abuses—indeed it is the only reliable approach.

Along the way he came to learn that using the courts would not produce continuous results in changing abusive conditions. He taught himself law and became effective in litigation, though never gaining the results desired in reducing or removing abuses. Direct action was needed primarily, but its effects were limited where it involves single rebellious prisoners. He came to recognize that the conditions in prison—indeed the very existence of prisons—could not be changed without fundamental changes in socioeconomic conditions—the broader social structures of capitalism. He went from reformer to abolitionist—a move from a critical to a radical criminological perspective.

His study of revolutionary theory began in 2001 (11 years in) and was highly influenced, as has been the case for many prisoners, by the works of George Jackson. George Jackson plays an important part in the political education and coming to class consciousness of both Rashid and Outlaw.

Outlaw offers poignant counters to the morality that regulates the working class poor and which is echoed in most of mainstream criminology. He suggests:

These were the contradictions in my life, the contradiction between poverty and morality. Morality would have you obey the law, respect authority and so forth. But you may not be able to escape poverty without breaking the law, at least to some degree. We are told to seek legal means to meet our needs, but how are these needs to be met? The ruling powers tell us poor lower-class folks that we have an obligation, a social responsibility to society, to abide by the law, but they don't have any social responsibility to us to help us meet our needs. It's pure bourgeoisie class-based morality, a morality that serves the ruling class, not the masses of the oppressed. (59–60)

Rashid asserts the necessity of organized mass struggle in overcoming oppression and offers lessons from his close reading of theory and history and his own organizing efforts under highly restricted conditions. In his view characteristics of extremism and a willingness to suffer must go hand in hand with uncompromising tactical approaches. He believes these characteristics to be largely absent from the Left in the US.

Personal commitment is not enough. There is a need for shared ideas—for ideology. In the absence of such it is easy for people to lose the initiative to struggle. If action is based in a strong character or instigator, the momentum dissipates when that character is removed or transferred.

On individualism and class Outlaw suggests:

Under the influence of illegitimate-capitalist values, I was pursuing the alleviation of social-economic hardship through individual advancement. This is a wholly inadequate remedy to social problems because it doesn't challenge the fundamental injustice of class-exploitation and class-oppression, which are responsible for creating the socio-economic ills in the first place. Unaware of my class interest, I was perpetuating my own oppression by engaging in competitive capitalist practices that ensure the smooth functioning of the system as the exploiting minority profits in more ways than one off the division and disunity engendered by competition, so prevalent among the exploited. Look around: competition, euphemistically called "individuality," permeates and is systematically promoted to the masses of people while the corporate conglomerates and Fortune 500 are busy "merging and monopolizing." (75)

The contributors are firm in insisting that those who struggle against states and capital must be prepared to defend themselves. To understand the nature of the state is to know that it will attack to kill when and where it feels a threat to its authority and power. In their view, one that is often eschewed these

days, revolutionary mass struggle must be military as well as economic, political, and cultural. It must be mass based. The absence of any of these factors leads to failure as the study of past revolutions suggests. Resisting cultural domination, a favored preoccupation of much of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century Left and alternative globalization movements, is no substitute for resisting economic, political, and military domination.

Even under the most brutal military powers of imperialism, resistance forces can succeed by building a secure base among the people (30). This is achieved through the establishment of economic programs that serve the needs of the population. These programs are what I call infrastructures of resistance. They include schools, health clinics, food distribution centers, and so on. The US and Canada are massive spaces, with areas less accessible to security forces yet with access to vast resources. The working class and oppressed must develop united structures to coordinate their work and to bring together often isolated organizers. Mass based infrastructures are needed within the oppressed sections of the working class.

Rashid rightly points out that most people from “our social sector,” the working class, cannot even shoot a handgun, let alone use real weaponry in any combat capacity that would inevitably be required in a real uprising.

Outlaw notes that while the radical Left cannot shoot straight, Right wing militias and National Rifle Association members “are dangerously proficient” (87).

At the same time Rashid argues that the class character of Right wing militias and survivalists suggests that some might be potential allies. They have an inchoate and confused opposition to monopoly capitalism. It is obscured by conspiracy theories, paranoia, and religious fundamentalism and clearly needs some ideological education.

There must be tangible victories and material gains. People must see results and have reason to believe that organizing and active participation within social struggles *will* improve their lives in real and meaningful ways. The organizers must be able to help people and their communities to develop capacities to provide for material needs “which the enemy state cannot and

will not provide" (91). The community survival programs organized by the Black Panther Party in cities throughout the US provide important examples of this.

Revolutionaries must be connected to communities of the working class and poor. People respond positively to revolutionary ideals when they can see the realistic possibility of success. Where they fight and win their confidence and morale increase. Where they lose repeatedly their commitment wanes. Repeated losses condition people to believe they cannot win. It leads to defeatism and avoidance.

When organizers are not prepared to fight, they are easily put down by authorities. This, then, reinforces the belief that movements cannot win. Organizing without preparing for revolutionary self-defense against authorities is actually preparing people to be defeatist. Failure reinforces conditioned pessimism. As Johnson suggests:

And when we did dare to defy the odds (with total lack of coordinated unity and attention to strategy, tactics, and logistics), we were conditioned to believe (with some justification) that their reflex violence, their revenge, would be so brutal and widespread that the resulting suffering which our resistance provoked wasn't worth the effort. Therefore—failure leading to pessimism—any idea of waging a successful struggle for mass freedom was neutralized." (142–143)

There must be clear functionalist solutions developed. Movements require "social service programs through which to materially reach the broad masses, showing them the need for struggle and giving them something to fight for" (133). Anti-capitalist organizers must get their hands dirty in mass-based projects. They must organize people around meeting their own needs. It is not enough to engage in agitational work, as in periods of low struggle or demobilization perhaps. A critical analysis of capitalism and imperialism is not sufficient.

Perhaps the most debated aspects of the book will be the emphasis on armed struggle. For Johnson, the failure of previous mobilizations in the US has been partly a failure to mobilize "an armed mass base" (133). He argues that politics takes primacy in armed struggle. The main purpose of armed struggle is to protect political work and workers, not only to destroy the

enemy's forces (134). Armed struggle or insurrection in an advanced capitalist context cannot operate without a mass base. Securing that base requires established and durable infrastructures of resistance. Guerrilla actions without a mass based political movement are futile.

Broad mass appeal and support come through meeting needs and securing victories. Health clinics, schools, clothing and food provision, and community facilities and youth recreation are some of the services provided. Many who join movements do so out of the desire to find community or security rather than adherence to the specific principles espoused by the movements. Organized alternatives must, in part, be able to offer a sense of belonging and community. For Johnson: "People can be mobilized to support or at least be neutral toward, most any cause—even something as counterproductive as an open-air neighborhood drug market—if they're given a sense of objective benefit, security, and community" (161).

Once people see that establishment structures are unwilling or unable to meet basic needs—and alternatives become available—they will struggle to break from those structures.

Authorities are aware of this and typically respond with repression in cases where this appears to be happening, even in the early stages. The example of the state response to Occupy movements in various cities is but one recent case in point.

There is a pressing need to develop and organize base of logistical support that can mobilize, support, and sustain what might become revolutionary struggle rather than seeing discontent dissipate in ineffectual, but cathartic, insurrections or riots. Uprisings and rebellions can be extended and given lengthier duration and more positively impactful outcomes. Small groups cannot, despite the best wishes of insurrectionist, provoke mass uprisings or "manufacture revolution," or construct the conditions that will lead to mass rebellion.

Those who suggest they oppose or fear working class involvement in armed struggle forget or avoid the fact that the working class provides most of the combatants in armed struggle (war) in the US and Canada—unfortunately fighting *for* their oppressors. The revolutionary armed struggle simply sees

them fighting *against* their oppressors to gain their own independence and self-determination.

Prisons have been an essential tool in state capitalist capacity to manufacture discontinuity in popular struggles. Imprisonment has broken the link between struggles of the 1960s and 1970s and today. At the same time this discontinuity has allowed for the expansion and consolidation of state capitalist rule (290). This weapon has been deployed especially against Blacks and Natives in the US and Canada respectively. It has made prisoners of political activists and organizers.

There will be dedicated efforts by states and capital to isolate the armed front from the masses.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Daniel Patrick Moynihan advised the Nixon administration to achieve this goal partly by criminalizing the image of the armed front. As today, revolutionary activity became constructed as terrorism. Concerted efforts were also put into dissolving the lower strata grassroots support and replacing it with middle class social conformity and moralism.

The "war on crime" initiated first under Nixon, was directed at stopping the spread of organized armed resistance and the militant tactics of working class and poor youth, particularly Black youth. Under NSC 46 the government explicitly stated that continued growth of Black struggles for economic justice in the 1970s would require violent repression from the government to stabilize the social relations of working class and poor communities. NSC 46 noted that such steps would be "misunderstood" both inside and outside the US and could lead to further trouble for the administration (314).

Middle strata elites, with interests in access to and maintenance of capitalist markets, undermine and eventually replace working class and poor people among the grassroots leadership. Revolutionary activities and armed struggle tactics are demonized and degraded. Existing institutions are presented as means for meeting social needs and energies are channeled toward statist or market based institutions and practices.

Infrastructures of resistance provide a logistical base for building mass support. Many of these infrastructures were destroyed and/or demobilized following the state repression



against the upsurge of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The “war on crime” played a part in this. As Johnson notes:

The ensuing mass incarceration, criminalization, concentration of police and surveillance, and the vast Prison-Industrial Complex targeted especially at poor, urban Blacks, has been a conscious tactical response of empire to repress anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, and revolutionary fervor amongst the oppressed classes. (298–299)

Ironically, perhaps, it was only in prison that they gained access to the literature that would help them properly understand their experiences. This revolutionary theory was itself brought into prison environments as a result of the mass incarcerations of political prisoners in the 1960s and 1970s, including members of the Black Panther Party, American Indian Movement, and Black Liberation Army.

It is a reflection on social conditions that prisons have been sites of revolutionary upsurge in the neoliberal period. Prison populations have expanded exponentially over the last 30 years as incarceration has replaced social housing and other programs that addressed, if inadequately, pressing social issues like poverty. This is a class war and there are many POWs.

On the whole, this is an exciting and enlightening collection of essays and letters. It reveals a uniquely energetic analysis of contemporary issues that are of pressing concern for anyone pursuing social justice and a better world. Some of the issues discussed include revolutionary strategy and tactics, class inequality, racism, prison practices, impediments to solidarity among the oppressed, movement histories, and psychology. The book also provides invaluable insights into the experiences of politically active prisoners *within* the prison system in the US.

Both the cover and the dedication page include a single quote from Franz Fanon: “Each generation must, out of relative obscurity, discover its mission, and fulfill it or betray it.” The current generation is still struggling toward this task. The current collection will certainly help in this process and offers useful guidance along the way forward.

