

Chapter 2

Resistance and Counter-Resistance Growing up Black in America

George Brown

[The following is an excerpt from *Nous, Noirs Américains évadés du ghetto* (Editions du Seuil –Combats, 1978) with permission by the author.]

When I went to prison in 1968, I took with me lots of disgust and bitterness. I now had no hope in what white America tries to tell us is JUSTICE. The racist American society had put me behind bars for something I didn't do. The only "crime" I was guilty of was being born black and poor in a society dominated by racism. Everything that I have been through in my life is directly linked to this "crime".

I went into the prison with my mind made up that I would fight against the injustices that we are suffering daily. I didn't know what to do but I knew that I would no longer allow people to treat me, and others like me, like dirt, without doing something about it.

I decided that since I was in prison and there was nothing I could do about it, I should use the time the best that I could, to study, to question the things going on around me. There had to be answers to this madness of racism and I was determined to find them.

I remember very well the day I went to prison, not just because I was entering prison, but because of the heavy atmosphere of tension that was there that day. Even the guards made comments about it. They were expecting something to happen, some sort of rebellion that could explode at the least spark.

It didn't take long to find out why the tension was so high. The Trenton prison, which was built back in 1798, was overcrowded. It had many of the people who had participated in the 1964 rebellions of Elizabeth and Jersey City and the 1967 rebellions of Plainfield and Newark.

The place was very ugly, with a dull and dingy look. Even a new coat of paint and fluorescent light did nothing to brighten up its depressive look. We froze in the winter and fried in the summer. In a cell assigned for one person we were four. The prisoners were never alone we always had plenty of rats, roaches and a varied assortment of bugs to keep us company.

My 30 days in quarantine were cut short because of the lack of space for the newcomers. I got my medical examination and I was the warden who gave his pep-talk. He reminded me that I was in prison. "We will take over the role of your mother, father, sister, brother, wife and girlfriend. Any problems you have, bring them to us. Your stay here will depend on you. It can go easy or hard depending on how you carry yourself. We can't make you do anything you don't want to do. But we can make you wish that you had wanted to do it. Welcome to prison!"

Once out of quarantine the segregation starts. There are no signs saying “white only” or “colored only,” but it is as strongly enforced as if it were written laws.

Like many past and present segregation practices in the Northern states, such as segregated housing, if you break the unwritten law, you will start having heavy problems. In the prison if you don't sit on the side of the mess hall or the movies that is reserved for the blacks, the guards and sometimes the white prisoners will think that you are trying to integrate and this will most of the time get you a DR (disciplinary report), and mark you as a “trouble maker” who is to be watched closely. It can lead to the white racist inmates jumping on you on the spot. In this case the guards won't do anything until you are badly beaten, then they will probably throw you in the hole for starting a fight.

At the time that I went in, most of the black prisoners wouldn't do anything but watch. But when you got back on the tier you were criticized for trying to stir up trouble, and trying to integrate with the racists –which also carried the meaning among Black Nationalists that you were rejecting your Blackness (négritude).

The prison thrives in racial hatred. Many times the racial conflicts are instigated by the administration in order to avoid becoming themselves the target of the pent up hostility of the prisoners. In the prison the racial hostilities often lead to murders of prisoners. There are several racist organizations inside the prison, such as the KU KLUX KLAN, the Nazi Party, and others that are less known. Part of their doctrine is that “You aren't a man until you've killed a nigger.”

Like in the County jail, the political prisoners suffer the worse, not just at the hands of the administration, but also because they become the special targets of the white hate groups.

Oftentimes the administration will offer rewards to the hate groups if they kill a political organizer. These rewards may take the form of an early parole, time cuts, or payment.

People in that prison were screaming all day long, either from the brutality of the guards, the brutality of the other prisoners, or just simply because there is nothing else to do.

When I got into the main population, I made it my business to find out what was going on around me. I contacted people that I had met in the County jail, people whom I knew from the other institutions and people whom I knew from my home town, Elizabeth.

As soon as you step into the prison, instinctively your defense mechanisms start to work. You also acquire habits that it will take months or even years to break when you are outside again. You sleep light. You are constantly aware of everything that is going on around you. You walk always close to walls, always ready to put your back to the wall if attacked, to keep from being hit from behind. You become constantly aware of everything that is going on behind you. You eat fast because of the limited time allowed to go and come back from the mess hall. You trust very few people and you associate with very few, the fewer the better.

You have to be on guard at all times that someone might go crazy or stab someone in front of you. If you see two people arguing, even though you can see by the way it's going that one of them might get killed, you maintain your distance. The rule among prisoners is that you don't get involved. Many people have tried to break up a fight or an argument and being seriously

hurt. You also are careful of prisoners who have no family outside, most of the time they don't think they have anything to live for and won't think twice about killing or getting killed.

In short, a prisoner becomes paranoid and that paranoia many times saves his life.

Soon after I went to prison, on April 4, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was shot down in broad daylight. Everybody in the prison reacted, as soon as the news was broadcast. But when the impact of the news sunk in, a long cold silence fell on the prison. This was a silence so loud it was deafening. The tension was thicker than I have ever seen it before or after. The guards immediately locked everyone in their cells. Everybody was expecting the prison to explode, but it passed without incident, in this prison. It did explode elsewhere.

Many people are under the impression that prison is closed off from the society in that what is going on, on the outside, doesn't have any effect on the inside. But the prison is far from closed off, not just to what's happening in the U.S., but inside we are even aware of much of what is going on around the world. It all has an effect on the prisoners. In the Trenton prison there were many different newspapers, magazines, pamphlets and books, both legal and illegal and the prison grapevine, which is very effective and accurate.

I read everything that I could find on the Black movement and the American Indian movement, which at that time was only starting to become more known. More and more through my reading I was becoming aware of the scope and the cause of racism and all other chauvinisms.

Many of us in prison started to discuss the problems dealing not just with racism but also the whole range of social problems that develop from this oppressive and unjust system that we live under. We all were developing a social consciousness that leads a person to question everything around us and everything that we had ever taken for granted. “

We were realizing just how many lies we were fed ever since we were born. And each of us, some more than others, were searching for the truths, with which to replace those lies.

This inevitably leads toward political protest. It is very common that my brothers and sisters turned political while in prison. I was no exception.

My studying and discussion helped me to understand that the same forces that govern and control the prisons are the same that govern and control the people outside. The oppression in the prison is only an extension of the oppression that we suffer on the outside. Prisons are largely just a storehouse for those that the ones in power want to discard.

With the intensification of the movement outside, there was also an intensification of the prison movement. The demands now were no longer centered only around the prison conditions, but they started to become more and more political in their implications.

The demands included the right to religious freedom. This demand concerned particularly the Moslems in the prison who were not allowed to hold services, or worship freely like the Christians. Included in this demand is also the right to eat other meats besides pork. These demands have a political significance when looked at from the aspect that the Moslems were the principle organizers of the Black prisoners, instilling in us self-respect, unity and militant combativeness.

The demands were also around better educational programs and job training where the prisoners will be able to learn a trade that will insure them a job once they leave prison. The programs that they had were for trades already obsolete or trades that are only found in prisons. A limit to the time that the prisoners can be kept in lock-up. They would put the political organizers in lock-up and leave them there for very long periods. Then there were the demands for longer visits, better food, less restrictions on writing letters, full meals daily while in lock-up and more space to cut down on the overcrowding.

Even though these demands were in general advanced by the Black prisoners, everybody benefited from the victories and in general the call to action was widely followed.

During my first year in prison we organized a hunger strike around many of the above demands including the demand for an end to the brutality of the guards. The strike was followed by 95% of the prison population. It lasted several days.

After our hunger strike the administration increased its repression. They used all sorts of methods to try to find out who were the leaders who had organized the strike. Their informers were sent into the prison population in full force.

We had won the demands of 3 meals per day in lock-up instead of one every 3 days. But the biggest win was the unity of the prison population, black and white, racists and anti-racists, all sticking together to win our demands.

But our victories were short lived and partial. The meals eventually went back to being the same garbage as before the strike. The limited lock-up time we had soon was subverted soon by putting a prisoner in lock-up for 90 days, releasing him for a few and then putting him back in.

Also after the strike the administration came up with new ways to try to redivide the prisoners along race lines, to try to prevent another action of unity.

I enrolled in school. I wanted to get the equivalency diploma which is given to people who didn't finish high school but who after completing the required subjects could qualify for the equivalent diploma that is recognized like the high school diploma. I thought that this could come in handy when I get out, in aiding me to get into a training school. But the prison school facilities were very inadequate. There weren't enough class rooms, and with the overcrowding there was also the problem that we had school only 2 nights a week for 2 hours. Because we were all on different levels it was out of the question to think that any one of us would receive extra help on a problem.

I had decided to stick through the courses even with the handicaps.

During the summer of 1969, I got a telegram telling me that my brother, Harold had died from an overdose of heroin. He was 27 years old when he died. The captain was the one to break the news to me. After he told me he just stared at me. I asked him why he was looking at me like that, and he said "You didn't show any sign of emotion, and I was just wondering why." I told him that I wasn't surprised. I knew that my brother had started using heroin in 1967. This is the usual end of the heroin addicts. What I didn't tell the captain was that I had written often to Harold trying to explain what was waiting for him at the end of that road. But he, like so many others, was disenchanted with life in the ghetto, and thanks to the police and the big-

time, government-connected gangsters, heroin flows in the ghettos like water in the Nile. Where others chose the bottle, he chose the needle. They both come from the same source and have the same destiny.

I was given permission to go to Harold's funeral. There I found out that he was in New York when he ODeD. The people who were taking drugs with him got scared when he ODeD, and they dumped his body in front of the Harlem Hospital and fled.

Not long after Harold died, I went up before the parole board. One of the first questions that they asked me was if I had any bitterness toward the man who accused me of robbing him. I told them, yes, but I wouldn't let it cause me to do something that would send me back to jail if I was released. "So, you still say that you are innocent?" I answered, "Yes, the transcript of my trial shows that I was found guilty not because I had committed a crime but because I have a past record."

They didn't like this. The Black on the board especially didn't like it. I'll never forget the look that that "Uncle Tom" gave me. He looked at me as if I were dirt to be walked on. He was ashamed that he and I shared the same skin color.

The board refused my parole.

Around the same time, the Black Panther Party was gaining momentum on the East coast. Inside the prison they were beginning to start groups and many Blacks were talking about the Party and wondering how they could join. I was one of them.

I had not related very heavily to the Cultural Nationalist groups who had as their goals either returning to Africa, or separating from the U.S. I felt that they had forgotten what a hard struggle had been waged in order to make dents in the homegrown apartheid. I saw them as people who generally had completely given up not only on the white Americans' ability to change (which they will admit) but also on the black Americans' ability to make them change.

Most of the Cultural National groups had developed from the Black Power and "Black is Beautiful" concepts. Because of this there were many aspects of the cultural nationalism that I could go along with. I agreed with the Cultural Nationalist movement giving to Black people a self-respect and dignity that we didn't have before when our heads were still being controlled by the racists' propaganda, telling us that we are nothing and ugly because we're not white. It was also through the CN movement that I learned about many of the Blacks who helped to build America and whom the whites have erased from the history books.

Another thing that the CN movement taught me was that we Afro-Americans have a lot in common with our brothers and sisters in Africa. We had a common oppressor. The CN movement destroyed the myths that Hollywood had built through Tarzan movies about Africans, and they built up a strong sense of solidarity with them seeing their struggle as our own and their advances as ours and ours as theirs.

But where I couldn't go along with the CN movement was their doctrine of hating all whites. In prison I was learning about white people who fought against slavery and racism. I know that John Brown was certainly one white man who gave his life for the freedom of black people. The Underground Railroad was run by whites. Schwerner and Goodman --two white men--were killed along with Chaney --a black man-- and all three were fighting for freedom

of Americans from racism. There were many white people who had been lynched because they took a stand for our rights. So I couldn't put all white people in one bag and say that they were all the same. My enemies, the racists, don't do that. They certainly make a difference between the people they call "nigger lover" and their own kind.

This is why prison was my university, just like it was for many of my brothers and sisters. It was there that I found myself and saw that my duty to mankind is to do everything in my power to change the wrongs against my people and to fight for justice in America.

One day, they told me that I was being transferred to Leesburg Farm. I didn't really want to go because I had made some friends in prison who had helped me a lot. They had, through long hard struggle, helped me to find myself and to understand the why's of many things that I had questioned before. I owe them a lot.

It didn't take me long to see that the guards at Leesburg were in general more racist than many in the prison. They were from poor backgrounds and had only one thing that gave them any self worth, and that was the fact that they had somebody under them --the black prisoners.

At the Leesbrug Farm there are no bars on the windows, the doors are never locked and there is no fence around the compound. The road was only about 200 yards from the barracks that I lived in. If anyone wanted to escape all that he had to do is just walk away.

We were free to go from one barracks to the other until bedtime. In the talk that the superintendent gave us when we arrived he mentioned that if we wanted to escape we could, that there was nothing to keep us from it. "But," he added, "they will find you sooner or later."

I started to check things out on the farm to find out who are the informers --whom I could talk to, and whom I couldn't trust. I wanted to see if there were any groups or any organizing going on. But I realized that only very few prisoners were interested in what was going on the outside, in the movement and in the world. The main interest of most prisoners was making "hooch" (jail wine), playing cards for cigarettes or money and talking about what they had before coming to prison and what they would do once they were back out.

Because of this, my contact was limited to only a few people. I had problems because I wouldn't be an "Uncle Tom" and a "Yes-Man" around the guards, so when I didn't work I stayed mainly on my bed reading a lot. Or I was sitting on the grass with my few friends and we were discussing.

It was the year 1969 that the FBI declared war on the Black Panthers. The repression against them became nationally coordinated and publicly espoused by J.Edgar Hoover and Nixon.

Panther offices were broken into without warrants. Panthers were attacked on the streets by police. Many Panthers were shot down. The organization itself was disrupted by FBI agents and informers.

It was, also, in 1969 that I first decided that I would escape from prison. There was too much going on the outside for me to be wasting time on that prison farm. I thought that once I was out, I could join the movement and become active in the Panther Party. They needed all the help they could get.

During this time some of the members of the New Jersey chapter of the Panthers came to Leesburg. They were telling us about the things that were going on. They explained that even if the Panthers were catching the heaviest part of the repression, there was a government plot to crush all of the left movements. While smoke screening their general plans with the big noises made about the Panthers' call to black people to defend themselves against police brutality even if it meant arming ourselves and our homes, they were attacking any and practically every group, be it pacifists, anti-war or cultural nationalists. None of this was believed by the general public because it was coming from the mouths of black radicals. It would take the Watergate investigations and the mouths of white folks to state that things had degenerated to the point of police state tactics before it would be believed. In the meantime much damage was done to the movement.

Everything that I heard made me want to leave that much more. The problem was that I couldn't just leave like I was going on a stroll. That would get me caught. I had to prepare myself so that I could get away far enough. I needed some money and possibly some clothes. I also had to know the area.

So I asked to change my job and to work in the laundry. The laundry was located in a Mental Hospital. We were taken to work by bus and it took us one hour to get there. This way I could check out the roads.

Also while I was working in the room where we separate and shake out the dirty clothes I could find money many times in the pockets. We were supposed to turn the money over to the guards to have it put into our accounts but most people only gave the guards some change and a few small bills in order to keep the suspicion off them. One time I found 30 dollars, which I kept. Some days I found only two or three dollars; some days no money at all.

In general, the prisoners used the money to buy liquor or drugs from other prisoners or gamble with it. Sometimes they gave it to a visitor to take it outside for them.

After I had made my decision to escape I met George Wright. I saw him everyday, but we never had talked much. But now we started to discuss our viewpoints about the things that were going on around us. During this time we were feeling each other out to what extent we could trust each other.

Not long after meeting George, I got my first disciplinary report for having a knife. It was only 3 cm long when it was open. I had found it while cutting grass. I was given one week restriction to my bed area. This was done not so much because of the knife but because the guards were calling me an agitator, because I was trying to get the prisoners to sign a petition for better food and mosquito nets. The mosquitoes were so bad at Leesburg that some people would rather give up the semi-freedom on the farm to go back to prison. I was also watched on my job because I was trying to get better work conditions. I knew why I was really given the weeks restriction, but it didn't bother me.

At that time more and more prisoners were escaping. Five had left in the past three months. I knew that I had to leave before they would use new measures like putting cameras along the road. They were already putting up guard towers.

On the 7th of August 1970, Jonathan Jackson, the younger brother of George Jackson, of the Soledad Brothers, was killed by police when he tried in a desperate attempt to draw public attention to the fate of his brother and many other black prisoners by liberating three prisoners and taking a judge, a prosecutor and a jurist hostage. Killed with Jonathan were two of the prisoners and the judge.

When I heard about this, I, like most of the black people in the United States, could understand the reason behind this action. At that time the general sentiment in the black community, even though they wouldn't follow the example of Jonathan, was certainly one of understanding for his motives and many applauded his actions. Jonathan was desperate but so was the whole black community. I was in complete sympathy with his action. I felt then that this was the only way to confront the racist and murderous repression that Nixon was bringing down on us.

Shortly afterwards, I heard the news about Angela Davis, saying that they were looking for her because she was the "organizer" of the attack. Things were starting to get heavy.

The next week George Wright came over to my building and asked me if I had any money. I explained to him that I had but it was all at the laundry where I kept it hidden until I needed it. He said that he was selling everything that he had and didn't need. I asked him what's up? He told me to put on my shoes and come outside. And he explained that he and two other guys were escaping that night. I asked how they were leaving, and he said by car. I knew that they couldn't have a car hidden. That meant they had to steal one. But I wanted to make sure that the plan would work because if we would get caught we wouldn't get another chance. He explained that it was a sure thing, that it had been checked and double-checked.

I couldn't ask for a better chance than this. I asked if I could come with them, to ask the two other guys about it. I would see if I couldn't get some money through my contacts. We decided to meet in one hour in the recreation room. I explained to my main contact what was up, and he wanted to see if he could find some money for me.

Everything was set; we would leave after 9:00 o'clock headcount, which would give us an hour before the next count. We could also count on another half hour to forty-five minutes that they give you to come in late for the head count, in case you were asleep, or out in the fields stealing watermelons, or drinking liquor. But after this time was up, they would ring the escape alarm.

I knew all of the roads in the area because I had been driving them for the past year while going to work. I also knew the procedures that took when someone escaped. I knew where they would look first.

They would call all the guards in to help look for us. Since most of the guards lived close by it did not take them long to come but we should still have 30 to 45 minutes before they would get their search organized. We would long be gone.

I went back and took off my prison shoes and put on my personal shoes, a white shirt and a personal sweater. I put my sport shorts on under my prison pants. Personal pants were not allowed on the farm because of the possibility of escape, but since it was summer it wouldn't look suspicious if we wore shorts, especially in Atlantic City summer resort town). We were dressed like vacationers.

I was on the farm for over a year and I never wore my white shirt because I never had any visits, which is when most prisoners wore them. But when I put on my personal clothes, everybody wanted to know where I was going. I told them to Atlantic City. They all laughed. Even the guard who was making the head-count laughed when I gave him the same answer.

It was to light outside when the 9 o'clock head-count was made. So we decided to wait until after the 10 o'clock count. After the count we all met at building N°2, which was near the field that we had to cross. There were guys walking around outside at the time we met up, but for them to see someone crossing the field at that time of night wouldn't arouse any suspicion because we could be going to steal watermelons or get some wine or liquor in the cache.

We had to go all the way up to the house because that is where the car was. We were so close to the house that we could see the superintendent and his family in the kitchen eating and watching television. One of us opened the car door. The light came on inside, so two of us jumped in quick. The two others pushed the car backwards down the driveway to about eight meters from the road. Now we had to work fast. We lifted the hood. One guy cut and crossed the starter wires. The car started and he attached the wires. I checked the road and told them to come out quick because no cars were coming. We were off, ten minutes after we left building N°2.

Just after we passed the entrance to the farm, we saw a prison car coming down the road. They were patrolling the road, but since they didn't expect prisoners to leave the farm by car, they didn't even look at us when they passed by.

I told the guy who was driving how to get to Atlantic City. By the time we got there they would just be doing the next head count on the farm.

In Atlantic City we decided to split up. George Wright and I decided to stay together for the time being. The other two went west and we north. George and I contacted a guy whom we knew from the prison who gave us a pair of pants each. Now we had it made. We left the car in a parking lot and went to the bus station to go to New York. But the next bus only left in eight hours. So we mingled with the crowd until time to leave. This would lessen the chance of the police harassing us and accidentally finding out that we had no identification at all.

We arrived in Harlem about 9:00 the next morning. We contacted friends and got a place to stay. We would look for jobs and save up some money. I also made plans to contact the Panthers. The same afternoon on the news we heard that "four inmates had escaped from the Lessburg Prison Farm."