

Bring it to the Yard

An Open Reply to White Progressives/Radicals

Anonymous

May 2005

Dearest white progressive/radical,

I have to confess I had no idea how true the forecasts made in “An Open Letter to White Progressives/Radicals” would be. I had a hunch I was correct on many predictions, but how accurate I was proven was a surprise.

I wanted to share why “An Open Letter” was written, and what the outcomes can be. I’ll try to refrain from the supposedly unconstructive commentary this time, though I make no promises.

As I made clear in “An Open Letter,” I have no faith white activists have the wherewithal to be the change they envision or to upend white supremacy. I have witnessed too many whites mutilate the idea of radicalism in defense of whiteness to believe otherwise. I wrote the original piece as a critique of white behavior in movements, and to offer people of color what the elders call a teaching moment. People of color should take every opportunity to learn how whites strategically position matters of race when confronted, and to learn those lessons hopefully before a situation happens so we can hold steady and not get ground up in the process.

I do not mind throwing out a critique of white behavior in movements, because whites can’t take my legitimacy or voice among people of color, who know virtually every word I wrote in “An Open Letter” is true. I have nothing to lose in your society or your movements.

The language of “An Open Letter” was chosen more carefully than many of you may realize. Deliberately provocative comments were stated to reflect what people of color, who may be angry over a situation, may say. People of color in local political scenes who raise criticisms of racism experience the same white hatred of which I was the target. though they are mostly unknown or dismissed.

Picking fierce language, in my experience, always demonstrates the contradictions in radical movements. A few whites, in this case, will grasp the spirit of the concerns. The rest show their true colors as reactionaries. I wanted “An Open Letter” to educate people of color about tactics whites use to defend racism, white supremacy and their society when white emotions are at their most honest. As the old maxim goes, you find what people are made of in a crisis.

Reactions to “An Open Letter” demonstrate the entrenchment of notions such as reverse racism (a right-wing term if ever there was one), the nonexistence of race to whites, my-daddy-didn’t-own-slaves type arguments and white working class deification, though the fascist nature of the white working class throughout history is avoided. These concepts are not just common

among garden-party liberals, but epidemic among white radicals and progressives. Acknowledging whites' need for rudimentary political education is less a concern for me, but for people of color who wish to work in multiracial coalitions with whites and whites who see the racist nature of progressive movements, these examples should be addressed in your work.

Not everyone who disagrees is a reactionary. Although such never happened this time around, I have had discussions with those who were able to articulate a political disagreement. Most respondents to "An Open Letter" weren't nearly as smart. The reactionaries, as I predicted in the original letter, used the language, examples and anecdotes as license to mimic stuff most of us would never dream coming out of a conservative Republican's mouth, let alone a radical or progressive. Then the behavior was justified by saying the language of "An Open Letter" was coarse or without nuance or unconstructive. They did not understand the deliberate use of such language as a test of sorts.

A well-meaning (white) comrade of mine likens this kind of behavior, which we've both seen before, to headlines in every major city. A person of color, most often Black, may be emotionally despondent. The cops are called, and the tension heightens. Despondent person of color, having had possibly many negative experiences with those who represent control and power in this society, becomes even more emotional. Not particularly caring what the person of color is despondent over, cops demand said person of color calm down. Now fear has mixed with the already troubled cocktail of emotions, and the person of color becomes even more frantic. Cops think the person of color will harm them and put a bullet in (usually) his head. When asked, the cops say they felt threatened and thus justified. Cop supporters just assume the cops are right that the darkie had it coming to him. End of story.

Dramatic? Yes, but there's a summary effect that happens to people of color in political movements. When a person of color raises a concern, even if it sounds unconstructive or emotional, it's generally done because that person cares about a problem and believe in a political movement, or else they'd be in Toastmasters. White people, who some claim also care, show that care by minimizing the concern through deflection, mocking and other forms of intimidation. A person of color who had the courage to say something becomes frustrated with the lack of concern and willingness to defend a way of life rather than act against it, and that consternation is used as another weapon against him/her. Pretty soon, the original speaker is marginalized and disempowered — effectively politically killed off and disappeared.

I remain amazed, but not surprised, how many people interpreted "An Open Letter" to be about Kevin Tucker. For the record, the piece was written for and inspired by the reasons above, not Tucker or Seal Press, which to me is far more important a problem anyway. Seal Press, which was named first in my sarcastic close, is engaged in a major conflagration involving Amanda Marcotte's recent book emblazoned with images of a white Amazon beating down Black savages; the silencing of women of color; and the non-apology apology the 'progressive' press issued. The "Go Light" ignorance pales in magnitude to the Seal Press controversy, yet most radicals are absent in the debate.

As I hope I made clear, a white person running off at the mouth about choosing to be white or associated white supremacist propaganda doesn't make that white unique. Such people certainly don't merit any more than a comment. I am being totally honest when I say people of color have experienced whites like this for all of our lives. We know how bigoted behavior will be defended, and how whiteness is protected. Centering a debate around a single white person, rather than the concerns of people of color who raise specific issues, is an example of white privilege.

Related to the protection of whiteness, when whites center a debate around a single white, typically the defenders of said white begin constructing straw men to attack, but distort the original point. Thus, people claim everything from “An Open Letter” being really about some other issue or Western civilization or guilting whites so people of color have power in a ghosts-of-reverse-racism scenario. It’s not really worth honoring such poor rhetorical skills with a reply, save to say I know what I write, how to write and anything you make of it is your inference, not what was actually written. Such tactics are critical for people of color to understand. Hold your ground and don’t get caught up in distractions.

As for outcomes, the reactions to “An Open Letter” are positive for people of color for a few reasons. In addition to the exposure of authoritarian, rightist elements, we see the need prioritize racial justice education and self-defense as a focus internally. Whites, including white radicals, tend to associate all the people of color as the same without understanding our cultural and ideological differences; for instance, I deleted a lot of forwarded email from whites angry about “An Open Letter” taking sides on scene debates I know nothing about. They assumed, being a person of color, I must have heard about it through the Underground Railroad or something and am now putting them on blast over it.

People of color also need to be confident in ourselves enough to understand we do not need whites for validation of our ideas. Whites, even progressive ones, have historically misrepresented the work of people of color. Whites only respect dead people of color and vilify them while living, from Martin Luther King to radicals of color who dispute appropriation. Respect of and support for one another as people of color in a political space is important, and centering whites in a struggle plays their game. As Ashanti Alston notes, radicals of color and whites may need each other, but people of color will make change without them if we need to do so.

Was I nicer this time around?

Oh yeah. Fuck Chuck Munson. Racist asshole.

Adoringly,

Another Anonymous Person of Color, still supporting illvox.org

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A guest editorial, "An Open Letter to White Progressives/Radicals," published on illvox.org generated a lot of email on matters the anonymous author raised. These replies mirrored much of the online discussion of the piece. In a new addition to illvox.org's Tuesday polemics series, the author of "An Open Letter" has forwarded a new editorial as a public response.

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