

# LETTER TO MICHAEL REINOEHL



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# **LETTER TO MICHAEL REINOEHL**

IDRIS ROBINSON



DEAR  
MICHAEL  
REINOEHL,

I must begin by apologizing for not writing to you sooner. That is, I need to say sorry for not getting this letter to you before it was all over—or better, before they took it upon themselves to end it, and had subsequently finished you off in the process. However, if there is any consolation that we can hold onto in all of this, then it is, as you and I both know very well, that it is never *really* over. And as the old slogan goes, “Nothing stops; Everything continues...”

Believe me, I will totally understand if there is simply no forgiveness left in that big heart of yours, since we all let you down when you needed us most. The sad fact of the matter is that everyone on our side claims to be waiting for the next John Brown, but when he finally appears before us, we instead line up to unanimously reject him. Later on, I think, most will come to acknowledge the tragedy in allowing history to repeat itself, yet very few will have the honesty to admit that you and your children were sacrificed so that we could continue to live our farcical lives of fear and shame.

What I mean is that there will be those who will continue to bear false witness, even though it is impossible to deny that it was none other than Ol' Brown who manifested himself through you. It is obvious to anyone, who was courageous enough not to turn away, that the piercing stare that the two of you share in common is, in fact, one and the same. Indeed, it showed itself to us, as you sat in that wooded grove, where the unmistakable fire in your eyes made the same silent pledge, which was also proclaimed in the black and white image of the great 19th century abolitionist, with his palm raised. It is the look of a person, man or woman, who has declared an eternal war against slavery.

It all happened so fast...And almost immediately, in the very next instant, so many of those who once stood beside you found a convenient way to forsake those bonds by expressing worries, instead of using their words to strengthen the collective commitments of solidarity. Above all, what indicated the implicit hypocrisy in the whole matter was how quickly they arrived at certain conclusions before they had even had a chance to learn the details of the situation.

The fact that it somehow did not manage to cross their minds that what happened was more than likely a legitimate case of self-defense is rather telling in and of itself. Since the uprising began, the list of those martyred by white supremacists, with or without a badge, continues grow almost daily: Calvin Horton, Sean Monterossa, Sarah Grossman, Italia Kelly, Marquis Tousant, Malik Graves, Victor Cazares, Robert Forbes, Oluwatoyin Salau, Victoria Simms, Erik Salgado...And in that same week, when you set your course with a bold decision to act, we lost two other momentous figures of your stature in Kenosha: Anthony Huber and Joseph Rosenbaum. Since it is the martyr's blood and not abstract humanitarian life that must be deemed the most precious, I have to accept all of the fault for inevitably leaving out names that demand to be repeated, again and again.

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Thus, as we witness, with each day, each week, and each month, another human being destroyed by firearms or automobiles, the question then poses itself more forcefully: why did their initial assumptions stray from the predictable instance of self-defense, which you would later confirm in that final interview?

On the other side of things, there is no black person—unless they are a complete and total Uncle Tom—who would've even had a second thought about giving you the benefit of the doubt here. This is because the course of our lives has shown us that anyone who plays with guns as recklessly as the fascists do will, eventually and unsurprisingly, get themselves shot. To put it bluntly, if we were talking about an inner-city gang affiliate, instead of a member of the far-right, then there would certainly be no discussion about any of this at all.

What the double-standard with regards to your situation reveals is how violence in America will always necessarily have a profoundly racial dimension. And it is precisely this—the terrifying core of racialized violence—that they are trying to repress when they lie to both themselves and others that their issue with what you did is a question of strategy or tactics. I mean, give me a break: in a country that is literally saturated in violence, from blind mass shooters to murderous police, no one can honestly claim that the few shots that you let off could in some way be construed as an escalation. There is simply no way to avoid the spiral of violence that began at the very moment when the first wooden ships reached the shores of the Atlantic.

In truth, when considering that a veritable industry has been constructed to promote victimhood—where everyone except the most wretched is capable of cashing-in—what they are afraid of is not so much ending up on the smoky side of the barrel of a gun. Instead, what they are really afraid of is having another person's blood on their hands. Put better, it is what is implied by spilling another's blood that constitutes their deepest fears.



It would mean that they would finally have to believe in something—that is, believe in something beyond themselves. Such a choice would necessarily involve a conscious transgression: crossing over a dangerous boundary, at the edge, at the limits, where whiteness ends; and once it has been breached, they could never find their way back.

What I am trying my best to get at, albeit poorly, is what Walter Benjamin had once struggled to explain about the ethical stakes of the commandment, “Thou shalt not kill”:

“Those who base a condemnation of all violent killing of one person by another on the commandment are therefore mistaken. It exists not as a criterion of judgment, but as a guideline for the actions of persons and communities who have to wrestle with it in solitude and, in exceptional cases, to take upon themselves the responsibility of ignoring it... But those thinkers who take the opposite view refer to a... doctrine of the sanctity of life [and] profess that higher than the happiness and justice of existence stands existence alone. As certainly as this last proposition is false, indeed ignoble, it shows the necessity of seeking the reason for the commandment no longer in what the deed does to the victim, but in what it does to God and the doer. The proposition that existence stands higher than a just existence is false and ignominious, if existence is to mean nothing other than mere life...”

As holy as they come, John Brown fought, with the utmost religious sincerity, exactly this internal battle within himself. By contravening the prohibition against murder, at Pottawatomie, at Harpers Ferry, he drew a line that elevated truth and justice above life itself. It demonstrated that all life will remain senseless and bar-

ren, so long as there are those reduced to abject servitude. And yes Michael, you did the same, when in protecting both yourself and your friend, you brought to reality the chant, otherwise carelessly echoed, that “No Lives Matter Until Black Lives Matter.”

Such a conversion of words into deeds inherently involves a fundamental transformation of the self. This is what Benjamin meant when he said that it is more about what is done to the doer than to the victim. Once again, in our context, this has an irrevocably racial significance. To some extent, it boils down to the plain fact that I know so many white people who have never been in a fist fight; but, conversely, when you grow up black, your grandma won’t let you back in the house unless you stand up for yourself and throw hands. It is for this reason that I can so readily dismiss purported strategic concerns as irrelevant, because we are taught to fight even if we are sure to lose to a stronger opponent. In the larger struggle against America, it is clear that, in the same way, we have both nothing to lose and nothing to gain, except for that something “higher” that could only be abandoned by giving in. It’s like James Baldwin once said, those who are forced to snatch their humanity out of the fire of cruelty, whether they survive or not, still come to know something that no school or church could ever teach. For others to accept this wager is to perpetrate the ultimate betrayal of their own whiteness. It is to become an abolitionist.

Conducting his raid, John Brown assumed precisely this peculiar blend of hope and despair in order to affirmatively take up his position on death-ground. Accordingly, his willingness to act was wholly reflected in his character. In this regard, there was always something about an account offered by the historian Margaret Washington that has stayed with me:

“It’s important to understand what an anomaly John Brown was during his time as far as his atti-

tude toward people of African descent was concerned, because John Brown considered himself a complete egalitarian. It was very important for him to practice egalitarianism on all levels...And even the [other] abolitionists, as antislavery as they were, the majority of them did not see African Americans as equals...Well, John Brown was not like that. For him, practicing egalitarianism was a first step toward ending slavery. And African Americans who came in contact with him knew this immediately. He made it very clear that he saw no difference, and he did not make this clear by saying it, he made it clear by what he did."

For lack of a better formulation, it could be said that *common sense* is very white, whereas *good sense* is totally anti-white.

What this entails is that much of academic debate about race, which has now become everyday parlance, is actually beside the point. It is neither biological nor social: whiteness is to be measured by the degree to which a person clings to the last vestiges of this dying and doomed country. It is to maintain a faith in the same constitutional protections that your summary execution again proved empty. It is to nurse feelings for that one racist family member who still manages to elicit affection and love. It is to believe that a job is actually deserved at a firm where the darker employees can only cleanup. In short, it is the extent to which a person embodies life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It is worthwhile to note that, according to this standard of evaluation, it follows that many of the people who are called "black" must instead be judged as white.

In order to fend off its own dissolution, white supremacist society tells us that there is nothing more insane than the desire to be born with black skin. This is how they present Rachel Dolezal to us. John Brown was forced to wear this label for more than a century and

it will unfortunately be attached to you, Michael, for some time to come. However, this is nothing but a projection of a far more widespread cluster of pathologies pervading white America: a situation in which opiates and self-inflicted wounds have become the only means to temper the pain of rapidly disintegrating personal relationships.

Likewise, the dire emotional state of the individual citizen is being mirrored in the way the country, as a whole, is crumbling before our eyes. To be more precise, I'd say that the American government is doing its best to overthrow itself. Yet, so accustomed to disappointment, I should have expected some of the loudest voices within the movement to express skepticism, a defeatist attitude, and acquire a defensive posture through their reluctance. It brings to mind the old "Chapter Report on the S.D.S Regional Council" distributed by Up Against the Wall Motherfucker:

A 'WHITE RADICAL  
IS THREE PARTS BULLSHIT  
AND ONE PART HESITATION,  
IT IS NOT REVOLUTIONARY  
AND SHOULD NOT BE  
STOCKPILED  
AT THIS MOMENT...

Despite certain grandiose delusions of white mastery and control, it is becoming increasingly evident that civil war is inescapable. It is not up to anyone. Rather, it is a play of forces that does not need to make any excuses for itself—once the tiger has been let out the cage, it doesn't go back in without trying to turn its former

captors into prey. In other words, it doesn't look like black people are going to sit down anytime soon, unless Mister Charlie figures out a way to strap us back down into his chair. Therefore, the strategic question is, then, not so much how to stop it, but how to win a civil war.

And so, the misgivings about what you did tend to tread on thin air. What's more, they all turn a blind eye to the concrete lessons taught to us by history. That is, the criticism and apprehensions, which I'm sure you have also heard, tend to ignore the extensive tradition of militant self-defense, which has consistently been the red thread capable of uniting the most advanced and revolutionary sectors of the black freedom struggle. Only by neglecting this legacy can one mistakenly suppose that racist terror will somehow disappear on its own or be checked by the authorities.

Alas, I have written too much. With that said, if all this too overwhelming, don't feel compelled to hurry in writing back—even when I don't hear from you, I know that you're still around. To close, I should mention that, in these difficult times, with their disorientating ups and downs, I find myself telling my friends, more often and in earnest, that I love them.

Love and solidarity,

Idris Robinson







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