

Vegans for Vick: Dogfighting, Intersectional Politics, and the Limits of Mainstream Discourse

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Once one of the most popular players in the National Football League (NFL), Michael Vick's success came to an abrupt end in 2007 when he was convicted of a federal felony for his involvement in an illegal dogfighting ring. After serving 19 months in prison, Vick returned to the NFL as a starting quarterback and has since become a leading campaigner for antidogfighting efforts. This article analyzes the social controversy surrounding Vick through intersectional antispeciesist and antiracist perspectives. First, the work uncovers this intersectional perspective from within the broader vegan activist community. It demonstrates that such an approach has been largely absent from popular media discussions of the case. The work argues that much of this silence can be attributed to the absence of intersectional politics at the heart of several key organizations that have helped to shape the ethical debate around the Vick saga.

Introduction

This article explores some of the key issues that emerge when the case of Michael Vick—NFL star and convicted proprietor of an interstate dogfighting ring—is approached from intersectional antispeciesist and antiracist perspectives. In this work, I make no attempt to excuse the cruel actions that were undertaken by Vick during his days as part of the Bad Newz Kennels dogfighting operation. I do, however, suggest that the philosophical foundations of ethical veganism,¹ when enacted in conjunction with an antiracist praxis, point toward a set of interpretations that differs from those that dominated public discourse on the case. Further, I seek explanations as to why this intersectional counterpublic ideology barely surfaced in the mass-mediated discussions that helped to shape the Vick controversy for the broader public.

¹As Francione (2010) explained,

Although veganism may represent a matter of diet or lifestyle for some, ethical veganism is a profound moral and political commitment. . . . Ethical veganism is the personal rejection of the commodity status of nonhuman animals, of the notion that animals have only external value, and of the notion that animals have less moral value than do humans. (p. 62)

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Not surprisingly, the Michael Vick dogfighting case sparked outrage on the part of major animal rights organizations, as groups such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) characterized Vick as a sociopathic monster unfit for civil society (Shannon, 2009). At the same time, the controversy spurred significant public discourse about the racist implications of his public and legal prosecution. Key figures from organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), for instance, argued that Vick's treatment was illustrative of the systemic racism present in U.S. culture and its institutions (Kim, 2009). Less visible in the mediated public sphere, however, were the ideas of those who took an intersectional antispeciesist/antiracist approach. By intersectional, I refer to those perspectives that recognize that multiple axes of identity shape experiences of injustice (Deckha, 2008). Those who take an intersectional antispeciesist/antiracist approach link the historical realities of human *and* animal oppression as a way to better understand social phenomena and to build long-term strategies for change—solutions that aim to simultaneously reduce human and nonhuman animal suffering alike. In this work, I contend that the absence of this intersectional perspective during the Vick controversy resulted in large part from a lack of organizational leadership on these issues. Ultimately, it represented a missed opportunity for advocates of an intersectional politics to influence the public debate that ensued.

When Michael Vick signed with the Philadelphia Eagles after his release from prison, I was forced to confront an uneasy tension. I wondered—as a lifelong Eagles fan as well as a committed activist on animal rights *and* social justice issues—what was the appropriate stance for me to take? After a critical interrogation of the issues, I came to the conclusion that the case could be a powerful entry point into several much-needed public dialogues—about human–animal relations, about structural racism, and about the potential for coalition building among activists in the animal rights and civil rights communities. This work is one product of that exploration.

In this article, I first draw from a number of animal rights theorists and social justice practitioners to articulate the foundations of a joint ethical vegan/antiracist stance. I assert that, while far from a majority opinion, this intersectional perspective has been consistently present *within* the counterpublic that is the animal rights community.² From there, I explore the reasons why an intersectional ethical argument in support of Michael Vick has not gained greater traction, with a focus on three key organizations that emerged as influential media voices throughout the case. By highlighting the practices of the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), I illustrate the shortcomings of mainstream organizational discourse on intersectional animal rights and social justice issues. Finally, I conclude with thoughts on how those interested in the intersections between media, animal rights, and structural racism might intervene as a way to further progressive change in these arenas. It is my hope that future controversies similar to Vick's might be parlayed into more constructive dialogue as well as into collective action that could bind together activists from both the animal rights and civil rights communities.

2 The term *ethical vegan* is used somewhat interchangeably with the terms *animal rights* and *antispeciesist* in this work and elsewhere.

The interpretive analysis of this article draws from a review of dozens of journalistic accounts of the Vick controversy; from an analysis of the websites of three advocacy organizations that played a key role in shaping public understandings of the Vick case—that is, HSUS, PETA, and the NAACP; and an analysis of posts and comments from the official blog of PETA, known as the PETA Files. Several online search engines were used to amass a complement of articles that could provide insight into the ongoing arguments surrounding the Vick case. Search terms included variations and combinations of the phrases “Michael Vick,” “dogfighting,” “animal rights,” and “racism.” Key search engines used in this process included LexisNexis Academic, Google, and Philly.com as well as the internal search engines of the organizational websites described above. These accounts were analyzed for prominent themes through an iterative constant comparative method (Charmaz, 2000).

Social Controversy and the Public Sphere

Inspired by Habermas’ (1985) discussion of the public sphere, a number of scholars have investigated the role of social controversy for advancing and/or constraining deliberative discourse. Locating social controversies across various potential sites—including participation in governance processes, in the distribution of resources, and in the administration of social justice—Olson and Goodnight (1994) defined the concept as “an extended rhetorical engagement that critiques, resituates, and develops communication practices bridging the public and personal spheres,” adding, “Social controversy occupies the pluralistic boundaries of a democracy and flourishes at those sites of struggle where arguers criticize and invent alternatives to established social conventions and sanctioned norms of communication” (p. 249).

Phillips (1999) outlined the two dominant treatments of social controversy that characterized most of the literature on the topic to that point. Many traditional scholars saw controversy as fundamentally blocking the consensus that underlies social action in the public sphere. Others took a more optimistic tack and suggested that the publicity of oppositional arguments that comes through social controversy actually opens a space for reflection, such that it draws more communicative practices into the traditional arena of public deliberation.

Phillips leaned more toward the latter perspective, but differed in that he sought to disconnect theories of social controversy from a conception of a single grand public sphere. He was influenced, in part, by theorists like Fraser (1990), who articulated the concept of *subaltern counterpublics*, what she defined as “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (p. 67). With this in mind, Phillips suggested that the process of controversy leads neither to the “grand conclusion of a public sphere nor to the chaos of postmodern aporia; rather, controversies provide momentary opportunities to resist, change, and reform the local practices of those involved” (ibid., p. 495).

It is based on a similar understanding of social controversy that this analysis unfolds. First and foremost, this work is concerned with the ideological positioning of a specific subaltern counterpublic—that of the ethical vegan/animal rights community—and the set of responses that emerged from within this

counterpublic in response to the Michael Vick controversy. It is also interested in the extent to which any of these arguments effectively resisted, changed, and reformed the practices of those involved in the case, including the public at large. As will be outlined in full below, while present within this counterpublic discursive domain, an intersectional antispeciesist/antiracist perspective was noticeably absent from mainstream public discourse during the Vick controversy.

Michael Vick: Newport News, Bad Newz, and NFL Newsmaker

Michael Vick was born in June 1980 in Newport News, Virginia, a port city at the southeastern end of the Virginia peninsula. He was the second child of four, born to Brenda Vick and Michael Boddie, who were 16 and 17, respectively, at the time Michael was conceived. Life was challenging growing up in the Ridley Circle housing project in the primarily African American East End section of Newport News. The economically depressed part of town in which the family lived was nicknamed "Bad Newz" on account of its poverty and drug and gang activity. Vick's competitiveness and athletic ability were his way out, and his talents were clear from an early age.

As a child, he played basketball and baseball at a local boys' club and was steered by a coach toward football when he was about 9 or 10 years old (Maske, 2007). He started to flash signs of his superior ability as a three-year starting quarterback with the Warwick High School Raiders in the mid-1990s (Stewart & Kennedy, n.d.). He was considered a top national recruit and eventually accepted a scholarship from the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech), where he would spend the first year redshirting before taking the reins as the starting quarterback. As the redshirt freshman quarterback of Virginia Tech, Vick put on a remarkable performance, leading his team to an undefeated regular season and finishing third in the Heisman Trophy voting. A year later, with the top pick in the 2001 NFL draft, the Atlanta Falcons selected Vick to be their quarterback and the foundation of their franchise moving forward.

After seeing limited action in his rookie year, in his second season, Vick started 15 of 16 games in 2002 and was named to his first Pro Bowl team. A broken leg the following season kept him off the field for much of the year, but Vick returned with another Pro Bowl effort in 2004 and led the Falcons deep into the playoffs. In late 2004, the Falcons inked Vick to a 10-year, \$130 million contract extension—the richest ever in league history ("Falcons Quarterback," 2005). Vick was hardly a perfect football player, often taking criticism for not working hard enough and for inconsistent passing accuracy.³ Still, with his rare combination of speed, arm strength, and on-field awareness, the 24-year-old Vick was generally regarded as the most electrifying man in the game, with potential to be one of the greatest quarterbacks of all time.

When he was not showcasing his football talents, however, Vick's personal associations and some poor decision making contributed to his persona as a controversial public figure. In 2004, police charged

³ Such criticisms have often been leveled against so-called running quarterbacks, many of whom are African American. Indeed, there is an ongoing discussion about the role of race (and racism) in the evaluation of both white and black quarterbacks. See, for example, Billings (2004).

two men in Newport News with drug trafficking after marijuana was found in their car. Both men had criminal records and were old friends of Vick's, and the car was registered in Vick's name. In 2005, Vick settled a lawsuit with a former girlfriend who claimed he knowingly gave her a sexually transmitted disease. Vick was also fined by the NFL in 2006 after he gave the middle finger to his own Atlanta Falcons fans following a losing performance. Around the same time, Vick was subject to police questioning when a water bottle with a secret compartment, alleged to contain a marijuana-like substance, was confiscated by airport officials (Glazer, 2007). As journalist Alan Judd (2007) described: "The incidents surrounding Vick have followed a consistent arc: Public embarrassment; followed by private talks with team officials, often described as 'stern'; and concluding with Vick's pledge to do better" (para. 51). That successful formula, however, would be impossible to follow once allegations of Vick's involvement in an illegal dogfighting ring began to surface.

On July 17, 2007, Vick, along with Quanis Phillips, Tony Taylor, and Purnell Peace—three old friends from the Newport News area—were indicted by a federal grand jury and charged with "conspiracy to travel in interstate commerce in aid of unlawful activities and to sponsor a dog in an animal fighting venture." A fifth defendant, Oscar Allen, was charged in October. An investigation uncovered that, from late 2002 to late April 2007, the defendants purchased and developed a Virginia property as a staging area for housing and training pit bull dogs and conducting dogfights (Haaser, 2008). Their group—Bad Newz Kennels—engaged in interstate commerce through the dogfighting operation, as gambling purses of tens of thousands of dollars were placed on fights in several states (Piquero et al., 2011). Vick initially denied any involvement in the day-to-day operations of the dogfighting ring, but a failed polygraph test was used as leverage to obtain a confession. Ultimately, Vick was identified as the primary financier of Bad Newz Kennels, and he also admitted to being a personal witness to the killing of a number of dogs in training that were deemed unsuitable for dogfighting.

A *Sports Illustrated* profile from 2008 gave some insight into the conditions that investigators discovered when the grounds of Bad Newz Kennels were searched:

The water in the bowls was speckled with algae. Females were strapped into a "rape stand" so the dogs could breed without injuring each other. Some of the sheds held syringes and other medical supplies, and training equipment such as treadmills and spring bars (from which dogs hung, teeth clamped on rubber rings, to strengthen their jaws). The biggest shed had a fighting pit, once covered by a bloodstained carpet that was found in the woods. According to court documents, from time to time Vick and his cohorts "rolled" the dogs: put them in the pit for short battles to see which ones had the right stuff. Those that fought got affection, food, vitamins and training sessions. The ones that showed no taste for blood were killed—by gunshot, electrocution, drowning, hanging or, in at least one case, being repeatedly slammed against the ground. (Gorant, 2008, para. 8)

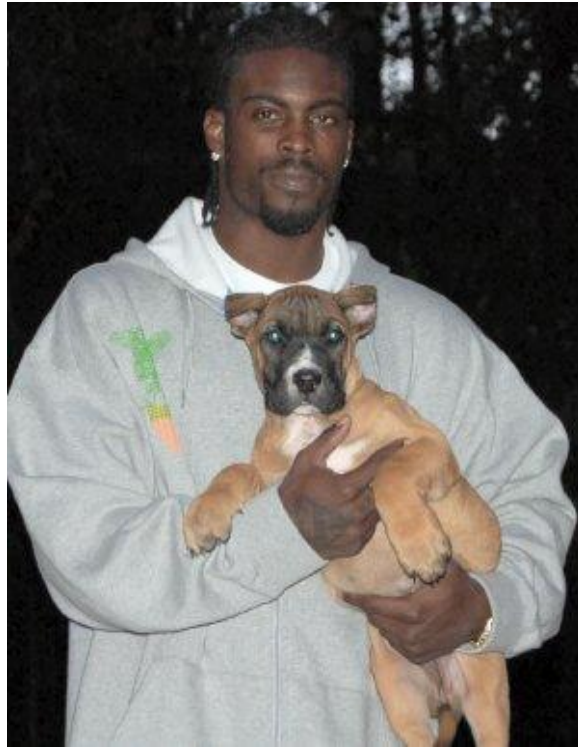


Figure 1. Michael Vick poses with a pit bull, presumably a dog used in the Bad Newz Kennels dogfighting operation.

Photo: Deadspin.com

In August 2007, Vick pleaded guilty to the criminal dogfighting charges and was sentenced to 23 months in federal prison, to be followed by 3 years of supervised release. At this time, he was suspended indefinitely from the NFL. Vick also settled civil charges through his plea deal, in which he agreed to pay for the costs associated with the long-term care and/or humane euthanasia of 53 pit bulls rescued from the site (Haaser, 2008). A wide array of other financial sanctions were handed down from the NFL, from his endorsement partners, and through other business ventures. In all, Vick's financial loss was estimated to be in the hundreds of millions of dollars (Piquero et al., 2011). After serving 18 months at a federal penitentiary in Leavenworth, Kansas, Vick was released on July 20, 2009, to a three-year probationary period.

Shortly after his release, Vick was offered a conditional reinstatement by the commissioner of the NFL, and in August 2009, he signed a deal with the Philadelphia Eagles. After playing a limited role as a backup for a season, an injury to Eagles quarterback Kevin Kolb meant that Vick was thrust back into the role of starting quarterback in 2010. Vick excelled in his reclaimed spot, was named to his fourth career Pro Bowl team, and was given the NFL's Comeback Player of the Year award. Before the start of the 2011 season, Vick signed a six-year, \$100 million deal with the Eagles, with \$35.5 million guaranteed. Vick still

owed some \$18 million to creditors at the time of the signing and had been living on a court-restricted bankruptcy budget. However, the new contract and several new endorsement deals meant that Vick could finally dig himself out of his financial hole, with plenty to spare (Tamari, 2011).

Race, Animal Rights, and the Michael Vick Backlash

Vick's road back to NFL stardom was hardly universally lauded. From the time the initial reports of his involvement in the dogfighting operation surfaced, Vick became one of the most intensely vilified public figures in the United States. From the start, his court hearings were beset by protestors, many affiliated with animal rights groups like PETA. Back in 2007, a Gallup poll found that 58% of Americans surveyed believed Vick should never be allowed to play again in the NFL, with nearly 90% believing he should serve some jail time (Jones, 2007).

To further intensify the case, Vick's public prosecution was undoubtedly racially charged from the start. An analysis of the same Gallup poll from 2007 confirmed what to many was conventional wisdom about the influence of race on perceptions of Vick. Whites who were surveyed expressed significantly harsher attitudes than did African Americans with respect to both Vick's criminal punishment and the prospects of his NFL reinstatement (Piquero et al., 2011). Some prominent black leaders aimed to explicitly point out the racial elements of the case, including the outspoken Rev. R. L. White, president of the Atlanta chapter of the NAACP. White urged the NFL and Vick's commercial sponsors to continue to support Vick through the ordeal: "In some instances, I believe Michael Vick has received more negative press than if he would've killed a human being" (CNN, 2007), White was quoted as saying.

The prosecution of Vick took place in the media well before his case made its way through the judicial system. He received a fairly brutal and unforgiving treatment in the press, as journalists individualized his behavior as personal acts of moral monstrosity. Many (mostly white) commentators consistently insisted that race had no place in the discussion of the case, as they suggested that Vick's cruelty toward animals would be condemned in the same ways regardless of his racial background. Despite these protestations, journalistic tendencies to dehumanize Vick and to emphasize his actions as barbaric acts of cruelty did serve to reinforce long-standing negative portrayals of black athletes. The common depiction of Vick as a *beast*—the true animal among the dogs in his ring—undeniably played off of a history of the dehumanization of black men in U.S. culture (Kim, 2009; Laucella, 2010).

Not all black leaders felt that Vick should be excused for his actions on account of these racial implications, and there were differences of opinion even within the ranks of the NAACP. Then interim president of the national office of the NAACP, Dennis Courtland Hayes, urged against a common media assertion that dogfighting was an acceptable part of African American life and rejected the idea that Vick was a victim. Hayes, did, however, situate the reaction of some segments of the African American community in a broader context. He argued: "We have to understand that what we're hearing expressed by some African-Americans is their anger and their hurt, distrust, in a criminal justice system that they feel treats them like animals" (Johnson, 2007, para. 17).

Vick's reinstatement to the NFL after his release was met with continued controversy. PETA argued on its blog that, even though the legal system said he would be allowed to walk free, "that doesn't mean it is acceptable to put him in the position in which children will look up to him as a role model and wear any new jersey that bears his number" (Flavell, 2009, para. 2). Much of the mainstream animal rights narrative continued to target Vick as not just as a criminal but out-of-control monster. In January 2009, for instance, PETA sent a letter to the league asking that Vick be subjected to a psychological test and an MRI brain scan to look for evidence of clinical psychopathy or antisocial personality disorder. PETA argued that "these tests can help determine if Vick can ever truly understand that dog fighting is a sick, cruel business. Or, they could suggest that he's doomed to repeat mean, violent behavior in the future—whether with dogs or other human beings" (Shannon, 2009, para. 3).



Figure 2. Animal rights activists, organized by PETA, protest Michael Vick.

Photo: David Handschuh/NY Daily News

Taking a strikingly different tack, the Philadelphia chapter of the NAACP organized a march to show its support for Vick as he prepared to play his first game back in the NFL. Standing alongside the Black Clergy of Philadelphia and other local civil rights groups, J. Whyat Mondesire, president of the Philadelphia NAACP chapter, explained the organization's position in direct opposition to groups like PETA. He stated: "We believe Michael Vick has served his time, paid his debt to society and deserves a second chance and the animal rights groups want to hold him hostage for the rest of his life" (Paolantonio, 2009, para. 5).



Figure 3. Defenders of Vick show their support in public.

Photo: Win McNamee/Getty Images

This sentiment was echoed in part by the Humane Society of the United States, the nation's leading animal welfare organization (an approach distinct from animal rights, as will be detailed below). Through a partnership with HSUS, Vick became active upon his release in various antidogfighting efforts. Subject to its own criticism from Vick's many opponents—devoted dog lovers included—HSUS (2012) described its reasons for partnering with Vick:

He served his time in prison, he admitted his wrongdoing, and his regret, and he determined to make amends. His work in reaching out to important audiences now buttresses that of the leading antidogfighting group in the nation in its broad efforts to attack the problem. (para. 4)

Vick was in the public eye as he testified before Congress, side-by-side with the HSUS president, to call for stricter antidogfighting laws. That said, most of Vick's advocacy involved speaking to relatively small groups of students at inner-city schools across the country about the dangers of getting involved in activities such as dogfighting. Vick was quoted as saying,

I know that there are people who will never forgive me, and I understand that. What I did was inhumane. I can't change people's minds, I can't change that—if I could, I would. All I can do is what I am doing, to try to help more animals than I hurt, to try to be part of the solution instead of part of the problem. (Bowen & Domowitch, 2010, para. 11)

Vegans? For Vick?

A few years removed from his prison release, Vick had achieved a good deal of success repairing his football career and, to some extent, his personal image. Still, Vick was right to believe that there would remain a significant segment of the public whose opposition would never cease. In 2012, three years after his release from prison, a poll featured by *Forbes* magazine placed Vick as the single most disliked athlete in all of sports, with a 60% dislike rating. The story read: "Hardcore NFL fans love him, but Vick still struggles with the casual fans that still know him mainly for his dog fighting legal troubles" (Van Riper, 2012, para. 2).

The rationale offered by *Forbes* is a common narrative. Football fans are apt to forgive a convicted criminal like Vick, the argument goes, so long as his performance on the field makes him worthy of praise. Meanwhile, those uninterested in the NFL, along with animal lovers and far-left animal rights activists, think that Vick has gotten off too easy, if anything, and certainly does not deserve to be back to making millions of dollars. Indeed, the maimed dogs from Bad Newz Kennels were hardly afforded that type of opportunity. The thrust of this narrative was supported, for instance, in August 2011, when 60 or so protesters showed up on a steamy summer day in New Jersey to make their presence felt at a Michael Vick autograph signing. Holding signs emblazoned with the PETA logo and photos of abused dogs, the protesters called Vick a monster and compared him to Hitler and Jeffrey Dahmer. On the other side of the street, more than 300 fans were excited to get a chance to meet the starting quarterback of their favorite team (Fleming, 2011).

Still, there is evidence to suggest that this commonly accepted narrative is not altogether reflective of the spectrum of opinions that the Michael Vick controversy engendered, especially given the great divergence in philosophy between those who identify with the causes of animal rights and everyday animal lovers, the latter of whom are unlikely to embody the ideals of ethical veganism. Indeed, I take particular issue with the characterization of animal rights advocates as exclusively portraying Vick as a monster and for insisting that he does not deserve any level of forgiveness due to his undoubtedly heinous acts. While this may be the opinion that is made most visible in media depictions of animal rights activists, my work suggests that there is another important perspective within the animal rights community—a minority perspective, no doubt, but one that has been ignored at the expense of a more grounded understanding of the case.

The ethical vegan case in support of Michael Vick is really quite simple. It begins with the foundations of an ethic of animal liberation, as articulated by scholars such as Peter Singer, among others. Singer (1975/2002) was one of the first to discuss the concept of speciesism, defined as a prejudice or attitude of bias in favor of the interest of members of one's own species and against those of members of

other species. As he argued, "speciesists allow the interests of their own species to override the greater interests of members of other species" (p. 9). Singer asserted that the interest of a species is not based on her possession of reason or of language but rather her capacity for suffering and enjoyment, which is a prerequisite for having any interests at all. No matter what the nature of the being, he wrote, if it "suffers there can be no moral justification for refusing to take that suffering into consideration" (p. 8). Importantly for the case of Michael Vick, an animal liberation ethic does not favor "cute" or "people-friendly" animals above others. Rather, it sees contemporary U.S. society's general commitment to the prevention of cruelty against nonhuman companion animals like dogs and cats, while other nonhuman animals like chickens, cows, and monkeys are slaughtered and abused in food production and medical research (among other domains), as a socially constructed phenomenon without a strong basis in moral philosophy. In this sense, an ethical vegan stance rejects the dualism created by humans *within* the nonhuman animal community as strongly as it rejects the dualism *between* humans and nonhuman animals on the whole.

This article is not the first effort by an animal rights activist to call attention to the hypocrisy of Michael Vick's vilification. Indeed, several academics, ethicists, philosophers, and others have taken similar public stances. They have argued that, while Vick's actions are undoubtedly cruel and deserving of punishment, they must also be understood within a broader social context in which untold cruelty toward nonhuman animals is consistently ignored, even celebrated. Peter Singer himself weighed in on Vick's case in an interview with the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in which he suggested that

the people who are very quick to jump on Michael Vick maybe could spend some time thinking about how they participate in the cruelty to animals just by walking into the supermarket, spend some time thinking about what happened to that animal before it was turned into meat. (Rubin, 2009, para. 9)

Similarly, Francione (2007) argued that the case was demonstrative of America's "moral schizophrenia" around animal issues: "How removed from the screaming crowd around the dog pit is the laughing group around the summer steak barbecue?"

On a connected path, several other writers have attempted to use the Vick case to link our understandings of animal rights with issues of structural inequality and historical racial oppression. These arguments build upon a rich history of intersectional analysis and activism that has brought together anti-racist and anti-speciesist perspectives. Prominently in that history, Marjorie Spiegel's (1988) *The Dreaded Comparison* drew parallels between the institutions of slavery and animal domination. In that work, the author wrote, "When both blacks and animals are viewed as being 'oppressible', the cruelties perpetrated upon them take similar forms" (p. 27). It is not surprising, then, that many of the historical leaders who have looked to advance animal liberation have also been involved in struggles to deconstruct institutions of human oppression. As Singer (1975/2002) suggested, Indeed, the overlap between leaders of movements against the oppression of blacks and women, and leaders of movements against cruelty to animals, is extensive; so extensive as to provide an unexpected form of confirmation of the parallel between racism, sexism, and speciesism. (p. 221)

Working from this foundation, social justice activist Dany Sigwalt (2009) articulated the feeling that, in holding both antiracist and antispeciesist ideologies, she often found herself at odds with almost everyone in terms of the Michael Vick debate. These intersectional antioppression ideologies forced her to, “realize that dog fighting circles are frequently located in low income communities and communities of color where the practice has provided a resource for financial survival” (para. 4). Similarly, Rudy (2007) called attention to what she saw as unjust treatment for animal-related crimes that were more likely to implicate African Americans:

We need to face the fact that dog fighting is not the only “sport” that abuses animals. Cruelty also occurs in rodeos, horse and dog racing (all of which mistreat animals and often kill them when no longer useful). . . . But I see one important difference between these more socially acceptable mistreatments and the anger focused on Vick: Vick is black, and most of the folks in charge of the other activities are white. (para. 4)

Indeed, one need not look further than the Philadelphia Eagles roster to see this racialized double standard in action. Kevin Kolb, the West Texas–born white quarterback whose injury paved the way for Vick to take over the Eagles’ starting job, grew up honing his skills not just as a football player but also as an “avid outdoorsman”—that meant hunting, fishing, and rodeo. In a 2007 profile of the recently drafted quarterback, Kolb outlined his hunting tactics:

The dogs corral ‘em pretty good. When you know it’s your turn, when you get a slot, you go in and you grab (the hog) by the back legs first. Depending on how big it is, you flip it over, jump on it, and stab it in the heart. (Bowen, 2007, para. 8)

Kolb, of course, broke no laws in his hunting excursions, but legality alone hardly explains why there was little to no public outcry based on his treatment of animals, either from the mainstream animal rights movement or from everyday animal lovers. Instead, it is affirmation that a nuanced understanding of Vick’s case necessarily requires an intersectional perspective, one that is cognizant of the multiple dualisms at play with respect to human–nonhuman animal relations, socioeconomic status, and race. It is also, in many ways, an indictment of an animal rights movement (and a civil rights movement, for that matter) that has heretofore failed to articulate such a perspective to the public at large.

Importantly, my analysis also suggests that this perspective is not limited to professional ethicists and social justice activists, but also *is* present within the rank-and-file of the animal rights community itself. As an example, in December 2010, Vick made more off-the-field headlines when he gave an interview with a website called *The Grio*. In that discussion, he remarked that he would love to be able to get a dog for himself and his children, after the court-mandated moratorium that prohibited him from doing so expired. This story was excerpted with commentary on the official blog of PETA. Following the tenor of PETA’s long-standing rhetoric in the Vick case, the blog post took a strong stance against his desires: “The guy whose name has become synonymous with hanging, electrocuting, drowning, and shooting dogs and forcing them to rip each other to pieces in dogfighting rings is now bemoaning the fact that he can’t have a canine companion” (Pollard-Post, 2010, p. 1).

An additional 164 comments were written in response to this posting.⁴ Most participants took a stance similar to the PETA staffer and argued that Vick was unfit and undeserving to have any companion animal in his presence. Yet a small but stalwart group of defenders made their voices heard on the PETA Files message board. Indeed, out of the 164 posts, about 20 were in direct support of Vick. These commenters implored others to show some compassion and to offer Vick a second chance in life. One explicitly suggested that Vick would not be treated with such animosity if he were a white man, others drew attention to the negative influence of Vick's social environment, and a number argued that Vick could serve as an influential role model to help dissuade young people from getting involved in dogfighting. In the view of these participants, Vick's cruelty toward animals was no more heinous than the cruelty that animals in the food system, for instance, face every day and on a vastly larger scale. Participants like Jon saw constructive forgiveness as the logical move:

Michael Vick is doing and saying all the right things. He has truly changed and is doing everything that he can to be part of the solution, including speaking out against dog fighting on a weekly basis. . . . The fact of the matter is that people can change. This is evident of course, by the example of the millions of vegetarians who have converted from a non-vegetarian diet. By your logic, PETA, all vegetarians should spend the rest of their life being punished for once eating meat. (Pollard-Post, 2010, p. 15)

Taken as a whole, this analysis challenges the commonly held understanding of animal rights activists and their response to Michael Vick. In no way does it demonstrate that a majority of this counterpublic community held an intersectional antioppression ideology that compelled them toward support for Michael Vick's reclamation project. However, it is clear that a small but strident portion of the community has made efforts to use the case of Vick as a way to call attention to the constructed nature of society's concern for specific companion animals. These advocates have also pointed out that the case of Michael Vick should be understood within a social context in which dogfighting was largely normalized through his worldview. The racial implications of Vick's treatment have also been called into question, as several activists and scholars have suggested that Vick's identity as an African American male has played a role in his vilification throughout the media and in the public eye. Finally, a number of these "Vegans for Vick" have looked forward to the potential good that Vick could do to spread an anti-animal cruelty message, particularly to youth in predominantly urban and ethnic minority communities. The question remains, then, as to why this intersectional message has been largely absent from the broader public discourse surrounding the Michael Vick case. Why has it been isolated in a few academic op-eds and as a minor thread of online commentary?

Intersectional Politics and the Limits of Mainstream Organizations

A critical reflection on the ideology of two of the leading anti-animal cruelty organizations in the United States as well as of the nation's oldest and largest civil rights organization provides some insight into this topic. Ultimately, it demonstrates that, when analyzing the influence of counterpublic

⁴ Earlier versions of this article included an in-depth thematic analysis of these user comments.

perspectives on the discourses of social controversies, it is important to keep in mind the influence of organizations that are able to gain access to mainstream media and therefore can shape the discursive environment in the mediated public sphere.

Focusing first on the animal organizations, both the Humane Society of the United States and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals have played vocal but mostly opposing roles throughout the Michael Vick case. HSUS has made Vick the centerpiece of its antidogfighting efforts, and they have partnered on the production of public service announcement videos, testified together in front of Congress, and appeared at dozens of schools across the nation as a way to connect with at-risk youth. Yet HSUS is a self-described animal protection organization, not an organization that advocates for animal rights or liberation. Its topics of interest range from stopping puppy mills to ending animal fighting to finding retirement homes for chimpanzees once used in laboratory testing. Its guide to “Humane Eating” suggests

embracing the Three Rs—reducing the consumption of meat and other animal-based foods; refining the diet by avoiding products from the worst production systems (e.g., switching to cage-free eggs); and replacing meat and other animal-based foods in the diet with plant-based foods. (Humane Society, n.d., para. 3)

This is not to say that HSUS does not do important work in the domain of animal protection or that its moderate approach is not a useful one in connecting to a U.S. population that has become accustomed to being ignorant toward widespread animal suffering. Yet it is clear that HSUS does not ask society to fundamentally question its relationship to animals. Terms such as *speciesism* are nowhere to be found in HSUS literature—even the words *vegetarian* and *vegan* are noticeably absent from the website’s guide to “Humane Eating.” It is therefore difficult to expect that an organization like the HSUS would parlay the Michael Vick case into a broader conversation about society’s relationship to animals, one that goes beyond a focus simply on the wrongs of dogfighting. In short, its approach in no way compels everyday animal lovers to take stock of the moral schizophrenia exhibited by much of the U.S. public in its relationship to nonhuman animals.

Contrast this to PETA, which describes itself as the largest animal *rights* organization in the world. It is an organization that consciously takes antispeciesism as its foundation and cites authors like Peter Singer as influential in guiding its operations. The PETA website asserts that

Animal rights is not just a philosophy—it is a social movement that challenges society’s traditional view that all nonhuman animals exist solely for human use. . . . If you wouldn’t eat a dog, why eat a pig? Dogs and pigs have the same capacity to feel pain, but it is prejudice based on species that allows us to think of one animal as a companion and the other as dinner. (PETA, n.d.)

With this in mind, the campaigns of PETA take a much harder line than does the work of HSUS. The organization explicitly calls for people to switch to a vegan diet, to abstain from wearing any clothes in

which animals were used in the production process, and calls for an end to animal use in research laboratories and in the entertainment industry.

Much of what has put PETA on the map has been its use of various controversial tactics, including the use of nude celebrities in their "I'd rather go naked than wear fur" campaign, gallery exhibits that juxtapose pictures of factory farming alongside photos of enslaved Africans and Holocaust victims, and the types of protest actions that were seen during the Michael Vick saga. PETA argues that such colorful and controversial tactics are the best way for the organization to attain media coverage and spread the message of kindness to animals around the world. Yet PETA has come under significant criticism over the years for what is seen as a lack of sensitivity in terms of both sexism and racism.

For instance, in describing PETA's exhibit comparing the slavery of Africans with factory farming, "The Animal Liberation Project," Breeze Harper (2010) argued that "PETA's campaign strategies often fail to give a historical context for why they use certain images that are connected to a painful history of racially motivated violence against particular nonwhite, racialized humans" (p. xiv). PETA's efforts were also opposed by Marjorie Spiegel, author of *The Dreaded Comparison: Human and Animal Slavery*, who (unsuccessfully) sued PETA for copyright infringement. In response to criticism over an exhibition that compared the Holocaust to the treatment of nonhuman animals, a PETA staffer argued that the organization's ultimate goal was "apolitical" and that it seeks the "elevation of our concept of animals as beings who merely live to beings who share with humans the 'form or manner of living peculiar to a single individual or a group'" (Guillermo, 2005). This avoidance of identity politics exemplifies the lack of intersectional, antioppression interests of PETA, which in many ways illustrates a broader trend of white domination in the animal rights movement in which other struggles for social justice are not taken into account (Nocella, 2012). The Michael Vick case lays bare the reality that, for many in the mainstream (white) vegan community, issues of social justice are entirely off their radar.

What makes the Vick case particularly compelling is that attention to *only* its racial and social justice implications is also incomplete. That is why it is necessary, as well, to interrogate the role of an organization like the NAACP, as it, too, maintains a distinct dualism between animal rights and racial justice. It is clearly beyond the interests of the organization to take on concerns related to animal rights as part of its mission, and that is understandable to a certain extent, given the scope of civil rights goals toward which its resources are focused. However, the Michael Vick case is not the only instance in which spokespersons from the NAACP have directly *opposed* animal rights activists broadly and PETA in particular, and this opposition has come at the expense of finding common ground in a struggle against oppression at large. Members of the NAACP have opposed PETA's exhibits that contrast human and animal slavery; in 2005, Scot Esdaile, then president of the Connecticut and Greater New Haven chapters of the NAACP, demanded a display be taken down, adding, "We were used like animals to build this country for free; the comparison of black rights with animal rights is not a good one" (Brune, 2005, para. 11). When NAACP leaders have attempted to stand up for animal issues—as did president and chief executive Kweisi Mfume when he signed on to a 2003 PETA campaign urging KFC (and its parent company, Yum! Brands) to employ more humane slaughtering methods—a harsh rebuke can be expected from the broader organization. In the instance of the KFC issue, under pressure from NAACP members for diverting their

focus, a spokesperson for the organization quickly declared that, after speaking with the company, Mfume's single letter would mark the end of his involvement in the campaign (Cohn, 2003).

Time and again, the NAACP has shown that it lacks an interest in drawing connections between human and nonhuman animal suffering. Rather than serving as a force to educate the mainstream animal rights movement about the value of an intersectional approach to deconstructing oppressive structures, it has instead helped to perpetuate a dualistic distinction. Writing on the Vick case, Claire Jean Kim (2009) asserted that this myopic focus consistently "subsumes, deflects and ultimately denies the other moral question being raised, the animal question" (p. 22). Indeed, NAACP president Hayes argued that African Americans' anger with respect to the treatment of Vick emerged from a "criminal justice system that they feel treats them like animals," a tacit approbation of the systemic exploitation of nonhuman life that goes a long way in describing why an intersectional politics has not sprung forth from mainstream organizing for civil rights and racial justice.

Taken together, these examples demonstrate the key influence that the connection between major advocacy organizations and mainstream media outlets plays in shaping public discourse during social controversies. In the case of Michael Vick, the voices of traditionally subaltern counterpublics—including activists from civil rights, animal welfare, and animal rights—were featured in major media stories. Yet these discussions did not encompass the full breadth of opinions from within these subaltern communities. Instead, those that espoused an intersectional antispeciesist/antiracist perspective were not sufficiently represented in organizational nor in mediated domains. As scholars like Castells (2009) have articulated, social movement power in our contemporary network society is *communication power*, as discourses are "generated, diffused, fought over, internalized, and ultimately embodied" (p. 53) through communicative action from within local-global networks of individual, mediated, and organizational actors. Absent this access to communication power, the intersectional perspective was unable to significantly "resist, change, and reform" (Phillips, 1999) the practices of those involved in the Vick controversy.

Conclusion

How, then, might we advance a different narrative—one that puts at the forefront an intersectional concern over the systematic oppression of people *and* nonhuman animals? How might we bring greater attention to the mainstream animal rights community's inattention to overlapping issues of systemic racism at the same time as we encourage those interested in social and racial justice to consider the animal question? And what might we do to push those animal lovers who vilify Vick as a sociopathic monster to recognize the arbitrary and constructed nature of a speciesist society's differential treatment of different kinds of nonhuman animals? Voices of both scholars and everyday activists have attempted to draw these connections, but, clearly, none of the major organizations that have emerged as important parts of the Vick debate—from the NAACP to PETA to HSUS—have sufficiently attempted to bridge these important gaps.

A fundamental starting point, it seems, is the foundation from which most movements begin—that is, these disparate voices must find a way to coalesce into some sort of coherent and holistic form. There are minor rumblings at the grassroots level to this effect, but to make a broader impact, a more

concerted, national, and media-oriented structure might be required. HSUS, PETA, and the NAACP are all characterized by national structures with local chapters, and individually each helps shape the course of its respective movement—animal welfare, animal rights, and civil rights. At this time, however, none of these organizations, and none of the movements in which they are situated, gives voice to those who are committed to deconstructing oppression at the intersection of animal rights *and* racial justice. This lack of institutional voice was brought into relief during the Michael Vick controversy and was exemplified most clearly in the near media blackout of advocates who could speak to these issues from an intersectional perspective.

But what of the next social controversy that begs for an analysis of the intersections between animal rights and racial justice? A push toward organizing like-minded individuals represents the only way to ensure that intersectional politics will have a voice in the discussion and, ultimately, the opportunity to reduce the suffering of nonhuman animals while also deconstructing racism in its modern institutional forms. Again working from Castells (2009), the importance of *communication power* in such instances cannot be underestimated. To intervene in future social controversies, the intersectional perspective must be seen and heard in the relevant organizational and media platforms that help to shape discursive reality.

Given the prominence of organizations such as the NAACP and PETA, along with their access to influential media systems, the best strategy might be to attempt to work from within these institutions and bring new intersectional insights into their everyday practices. Advocates could push for an intersectional ethic by urging leaders to open up interorganizational dialogues and could participate as rank-and-file members by bringing up such issues in meetings, through online platforms, and in organizational literature. It would take time for significant returns to be realized, but the potential for future impact would make the efforts worth the long-term struggle. If such institutions proved to be consistently unwilling to shift from their well-established ideologies, it might be time for the “Vegans for Vick” to strike out on their own; perhaps the external pressure would force the established organizations to reconsider their own relationships to intersectional politics moving forward.

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