

Dangerous Crossings

*Race, Species, and Nature in a
Multicultural Age*

CLAIRE JEAN KIM

University of California, Irvine



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animal and environmental activists can critique Makah whaling mindfully, that is, in a way that engages and takes seriously the Makah's ontology and tribal justice claims. I also argue that the Makah, for their part, can move toward opening themselves to animal and environmental protectionist claims, building upon the example of some other Native American tribes and Canadian First Nations. The next chapter explores a second comparative case, the Michael Vick dogfighting scandal.

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Michael Vick, Dogfighting, and the Parable of Black Recalcitrance

Vick beat dogs to death. He watched dogs drown in his swimming pool, he shot them, he electrocuted them, he buried them alive, he savagely abused them, he took great enjoyment in it, and he found it funny to watch family pets being torn apart.

— Nathan Winograd

[What happened to Vick was] an electronic lynching.
— Kwame Abernathy

On April 25, 2007, the Sheriff's Department in Surry County, Virginia executed a search warrant at 1915 Moonlight Road, a fifteen-acre property owned by NFL superstar and Atlanta Falcons quarterback Michael Vick. The search warrant was triggered by the arrest of Vick's cousin on marijuana possession charges, but investigators had heard rumors of Vick's involvement in dogfighting for years, so they asked Animal Control Officer Kathy Strouse to accompany them. At Vick's property, they found more than fifty dogs (many of them scarred or wounded), kennels, a fighting pit, and the standard paraphernalia of dogfighting, including breeding stand, treadmill, breakstick, and injectable steroids. Over the following months, investigators ascertained that Vick, who lived in Atlanta, had selected, purchased, built, and maintained the entire property for six years for the express purpose of housing his dogfighting operation, known as Bad Newz Kennels. Vick financed the operation, maintained several of his friends on the property to manage the breeding, training, and fighting of dogs, and visited every Tuesday (his day off from the Falcons) to supervise. Vick hosted fights involving dogs from many other states and took his dogs to fights in other states as well.

Thus began Michael Vick's precipitous fall from grace. Years earlier, Vick had vaulted from humble beginnings in a Virginia public housing project to NFL superstardom. Recognized as a prodigious talent, he was the first African American to be selected first in the NFL draft (in 2001 by the Atlanta Falcons) and became the highest paid player in NFL history. In 2004, he signed a

\$130 million, ten-year contract with the Falcons, and he had endorsement contracts with Nike, Coca Cola, Reebok, EA Sports, Kraft Foods, and many other major corporations.¹ When prosecutors charged Vick and three of his friends with several federal felony counts relating to the operation of an interstate dogfighting and gambling ring, Vick denied the charges and for months claimed that he had had no involvement in or knowledge of his friends' criminal activities at 1915 Moonlight Road. But the evidence against him slowly mounted. As it came to light, Vick was suspended from the NFL, lost his lucrative endorsement contracts, and filed for bankruptcy. When all three codefendants turned state's evidence, Vick pled guilty and was sentenced to twenty-three months in prison.

The Vick saga, like the Chinatown and Makah conflicts, is another contemporary U.S. site where race, species, and nature have been passionately produced, contested, and reproduced. In this case, however, what was at issue was not a historically embedded minority group practice valorized as a cultural tradition but rather a practice that has been long criminalized as felonious activity and is undertaken surreptitiously by individuals across racial, class, and geographic lines.² The matter was already clearly settled, at least in public discourse, as to whether dogfighting should be allowed (not one person who spoke out during the controversy argued that it should be), which shifted the controversy to two questions: how much Michael Vick should pay for his misdeeds and whether or not race was a "factor" in his prosecution and public excoriation.

Animal advocates advanced an optic of cruelty to highlight Vick's culpability, while Vick's defenders advanced an optic of racism, arguing that critics were targeting Vick because of his color and invoking larger societal debates about the U.S. state's turn toward mass incarceration policies as a way of dealing with racial and social inequalities. When Vick's defenders took this opportunity to weigh in about the racially oppressive aspects of the criminal justice system, Vick's critics complained that they were "injecting" race into the situation, "playing the race card," or even engaging in reverse racism. The Vick saga, in other words, intersected forcefully with the ongoing passion play over whether or not the United States is now a postracial society.

I argue in this chapter that rather than seeing race as "a factor" in the story – as a discrete variable that can be disaggregated from other relevant "factors" – we should instead understand race as constituting the very cultural frame through which the story came to be read. What was at play was not only "racism" in the sense of anti-Black animus but "race" in the sense of a taxonomy of bodies and a set of enduring, structured meanings about these bodies.

¹ Laucella (2010), 39 estimates that Vick lost a total of \$142 million in salary, bonuses, and endorsements.

² When the Vick story broke, dogfighting was a federal felony and a felony in forty-eight states. Now, in part because of the Vick case, it is a felony in all fifty states.

The Vick saga was crafted as a *parable of Black recalcitrance about doing the right thing and succeeding*, and inasmuch as this parable drew upon the constraining, deforming tropes with which we think and do race – specifically, tropes about Black masculinity, criminality, brutality, and animality – we could not help but read the story this way. The parable presented Michael Vick as choosing between good and evil, sports and the gang life, the NFL and the ghetto, human and beast, and reaping the consequences of that choice. Vick made the right choice at first but then *slipped back*, losing the American Dream because of his own recalcitrance. This parable echoes across the centuries with Southern plantation owners' antebellum arguments that freed slaves would revert to (bestial) type as soon as the civilizing, disciplining influence of slavery was lifted. The Negro brute would never be more than a Negro brute. As an interpretive frame, the parable can be thought of, following Cole and King (1998), as a mode of displacement whereby the dramatic narrative of individual choice and responsibility elides the pervasive patterns of institutionalized violence against Blacks and institutionalized violence against dogs that subtend this story. The broader public, complicit in and privileged by these patterns, finds itself absolved as it turns its gaze upon the recalcitrant Vick.

The Vick controversy was explosive in part because its central players were, in the American cultural imaginary, the most animal of humans (the Black man) and the most human of animals (the dog). The human-animal boundary is continually crisscrossed here, race and species intersect often and urgently, and the distinctively tangled relationship between Black masculinity and animality runs like a bright thread throughout the narrative. Animal advocates talked about Vick's dogs in human terms – as having been executed, as experiencing redemption (Glick 2013) – even as other critics called for Vick to be caged, neutered, or placed in a fighting pit. Bruce Braun (2003) argues that Black men are not legible as wilderness adventurers because they are imagined as still inside of nature and thus unable to transcend it. Perhaps the same logic extends to the illegibility of Black men as dogmen (men who fight dogs). If the message to Chinese merchants and Makah whalers was that they needed to get with the American program, culturally speaking, the message to Vick was that he needed to discipline the bestial aspect of himself or it would be done for him, violently. The threat of Blackness is uniquely biological, uniquely incorrigible.

In this chapter, I examine the optic of cruelty advanced by animal advocates and offer a brief glimpse into the history and contours of dogfighting in the United States. I then turn to the optic of racism advanced by Vick's defenders and the overall framing of the story as a parable of Black recalcitrance. I also briefly discuss how the pit bull has been raced as Black over the past few decades and how this has dramatically altered the life chances of dogs of this breed. Finally, I show that Vick's critics and defenders adopted a posture of disavowal toward each other and reflect on how the two sides might move toward an ethics of avowal that considers both the institutionalized violence against Blacks and the institutionalized violence against dogs in contemporary society.

DOGFIGHTING AND THE OPTIC OF CRUELTY

Cruelty, like all valuations of ethical and political acceptability, has a history. Fighting dogs against other animals dates back in Europe to the fifth century BC and became widespread by the Middle Ages in England, where the baiting of bulls, bears, badgers, and rats was enjoyed by all classes in urban and rural areas alike (Kalof and Taylor 2007). It was only upon the withdrawal of upper-class patronage that these sports began to be seen a moral problem and that a political opportunity arose to curtail them. A simple reduction of early nineteenth-century British and American animal activism to class domination is too facile, however. If it is true that animal advocacy in Britain and the United States emerged in tandem with a project of race, class, and civilizational uplift at home and abroad (Davis 2013; Deckha 2013), it is also true that it was joined from the start to the ongoing abolitionist struggle in both locales, and that animal advocates strongly opposed the oppression of racialized others, women, children, prisoners, and workers, as well as nonhuman animals (Beers 2006).

Dogfighting was exported from Britain to the United States as early as the 1750s and increased in popularity over the next century so that, by the 1860s, professional pits in places like New York City and Boston were drawing large, raucous crowds, often composed of police officers and firemen.³ From 1800 to 1860, the *Police Gazette* published dogfighting rules in the same tabloid that listed the latest crime and police news.⁴ The rise of organized animal advocacy in Britain and the United States in the early 1800s eventually led to the prohibition of baiting sports, including dogfighting. Ironically, Britain's anti-baiting legislation of 1835 sparked an increase in dogfighting because it was easier to conduct surreptitiously than bull baiting or bear baiting. Massachusetts was the first state to ban dogfighting in 1835 (Strouse 2009), and most states followed suit over the next several decades. In 1867, at the behest of Henry Bergh, founder of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (modeled on Britain's Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals), New York revised its anticruelty law to render all forms of animal fighting illegal for the first time. Precisely because so many police were avid dogmen, Bergh pressed successfully for ASPCA Humane Law Enforcement Agents to have the power to make arrests themselves in New York.⁵ The United Kennel Club withdrew its official endorsement of dogfighting in the 1930s, and by 1976, the practice was illegal (that is, driven underground) in all fifty states.

I argue in Chapter 3 that the United States has seen in recent times, simultaneously and contradictorily, an intensification in the instrumental usage of animals, driven by consumer demand and enabled by technological innovation and neoliberal sensibilities about nature, *as well as* a widening and

³ "Top Ten Dogfighting Questions"; Evans and Forsyth (1997).

⁴ "A Brief History of Dogfighting."

⁵ "Dogfighting FAQ."

deepening discussion over whether animals have the intrinsic right to be protected from such usage. For animals, it is the best of times and the worst of times. Dogfighting is embedded in this ambiguous picture. Public sentiment and the law have turned decisively against it; what was once the sport of English aristocrats is now a felony in all fifty states.⁶ In 2007, with strong bipartisan support, Congress passed the Animal Fighting Prohibition Enforcement Act, which increases penalties for violations of the federal anti-animal fighting law.⁷ The Vick case in fact furthered the criminalization of dogfighting by stiffening penalties and helping to make the practice a felony in Wyoming and Idaho, where it had been a misdemeanor.

At the same time, there are indications that dogfighting is on the rise in the United States and spreading out geographically. It is growing in popularity in its traditional stronghold – among white working-class men in Southern rural areas – and it has also been growing in poor urban Black neighborhoods since the 1990s (Burke n.d.; Mann 2007). Mark Kumpf, investigator with the National Illegal Animal Fighting Task Force, remarks: "It's definitely on the upswing. Communication on the Internet has made dogfighting accessible without the inherent risks of arrest that used to go along with it" (Simpson 2004). Numerous Web sites offer dogfighting equipment and pit bull puppies for sale, and trade journals such as *Your Friend and Mine*, *Game Dog Times*, *The American Warrior*, *The Pit Bull Chronicle*, and *Sporting Dog Journal* chronicle actual dogfights (under the guise of fictionality), binding together an underground community of fervent dogmen (Gibson 2005). An estimated 40,000 adults and 100,000 kids and teenagers in the United States fight dogs (Peters 2008), although the actual number is almost certainly higher. Consider that in 2003 alone, the city of Chicago responded to 1,093 animal fighting complaints.⁸ In the early 1990s, pit bulls made up only 2 to 3 percent of the dogs coming into shelters; by 2007, they made up 30 to 60 percent, with a good number showing scars from fighting. With bets ranging from pocket change to tens of thousands of dollars, dogfighting is now a half-billion-dollar industry in the United States (Gibson 2005).

The life of the fighting dog is nasty, brutish, and short – and almost always ends in a violent death. Indeed, the cruelty of the practice, animal advocates say, lies as much in the way the dog is made to live as in the way he or she is made to die. To begin with, dogs are genetically manipulated to alter normal canine behavior (such as growling before attacking and ceasing to fight when injured or when the other dog submits), to be more dog aggressive, to have a more powerful bite, to be willing to fight through pain and to the death (Strouse 2009). Female dogs who resist breeding are placed in breeding stands

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ The Animal Fighting Prohibition Enforcement Act of 2007 was signed into law on May 3, 2007. The law upgrades current penalties by creating felony-level jail time (up to 3 years) for violations of the federal animal fighting law.

⁸ Gibson (2005), 5.

or "rape racks" that immobilize them so that the male dog can penetrate them at will. Spending his entire life outside, chained to a buried car axle, with only a barrel or small kennel for protection from the elements, the fighting dog is kept just close enough to other dogs to keep him riled up but never close enough to have contact and become socialized. Dogmen routinely taunt, starve, and drug dogs to heighten their aggression, and they use cats, small dogs, and rabbits (some of whom are stolen family pets) as "bait" to create an appetite for killing and for blood. They put each dog through a grueling exercise regimen involving running with heavy chains around his neck and running on a treadmill and/or a jenny (where live bait is dangled in front of the dog to make him run; he is rewarded with the bait at the end of the session). Even after being bred and raised this way, some dogs still fail the viciousness test, showing little or no inclination to fight. These dogs are promptly killed. The fighting dog is a commodity, a product of intensive human forethought, artifice, and labor.

In a fight, dogs are placed in a dirt pit ranging from eight to sixteen square feet and surrounded by a three-foot-high fence and set upon each other for a fight to the death. Fights often last for hours and end with the death of one dog or when one dog cannot or will not continue. Semencic writes that a dogman capitalizes on his dog's desire to please him, changing position around the edge of the pit "in order to be in sight of his dog at all times."⁹ The dog's love for his master, his desire to please, is the force that drives him to his own destruction. Dogs who do not die fighting will often die hours or days later from broken bones, puncture wounds, blood loss, shock, dehydration, or infection. Veteran criminal investigators describe finding pits full of blood, corpses of dogs, dogs with dozens of open wounds and half of their jaws missing, dogs with most of their bodies covered in scar tissue.

Consider this description of a fight:¹⁰

His face is a mass of deep cuts, as are his shoulders and neck. Both of his front legs have been broken, but Billy Bear isn't ready to quit. At the referee's signal, his master releases him, and unable to support himself on his front legs, he slides on his chest across the blood and urine stained carpet, propelled by his good hind legs, toward the opponent who rushes to meet him. Driven by instinct, intensive training and love for the owner who has brought him to this moment, Billy Bear drives himself painfully into the other dog's charge. ... Less than 20 minutes later, rendered useless by the other dog, Billy Bear lies spent beside his master, his stomach constricted with pain. He turns his head back toward the ring, his eyes glazed searching for a last look at the other dog as [sic] receives a bullet in his brain.

And this one:

Snow and Black lunge at each other. Snow rears up and overpowers Black, but Black manages to come back with a quick locking of the jaws on Snow's neck. The crowd is cheering wildly and yelling out bets. ... It looks like Black is hung up so Norman motions for the handlers to separate the dogs. ... [Next] Snow races toward Black and is not going to let

⁹ Semencic (1992), 67-8.

¹⁰ Gibson (2005), 7-8 quoting C. M. Brown, "Pit," *Atlanta Magazine*, 1982, 66.

Black get the best of her. Snow goes straight for the throat and grabs hold with her razor sharp teeth. Almost immediately, blood flows from Black's throat. Despite a severe injury to the throat, Black manages to continue fighting back ... this fighting continues for an hour. ... [Black] is severely wounded. Black manages to crawl across the pit to meet her opponent. Snow attacks Black and she is too weak to fight back. L.G. realizes that this is it for Black and calls the fight. Snow is declared the winner. Rick collects his money. L.G. then lifts Black from the pit and carries her out back. Her back legs are broken and blood is gushing from her throat. A shot rings out barely heard over the noise in the barn. (Evans and Forsyth 1997, 64-5)

Why must the losing dog be killed? Rhonda Evans, DeAnn Gauthier, and Craig Forsyth write, "In the sport of dogfighting, the actual combatants serve as *symbols* of their respective owners, and therefore any character attributed to the dogs is also attributed to the men they represent."¹¹ Dogmen attest to this: "I only expect a dog to be as good as the man behind him, not any more, not any less"; "I expect the same thing out of my dog as I expect out of myself. A dog is only as good as his master."¹² "Gameness" or the willingness to fight to the death, is the most prized quality, while the most despised dog is the so-called cur, one who turns away from the attacking opponent. Alan Dundes's description of cockfighting as a "thinly disguised symbolic homoerotic masturbatory phallic duel, with the winner emasculating the loser through castration or feminization" is an apt description of dogfighting, too.¹³ Killing curs quickly and brutally helps to alleviate the owner's humiliation and restore his injured masculinity. Dogs who fight hard but lose may be killed or simply left to die. A dogfight, then, distributes honor, status, and manhood, not just prize money.

Dogmen deny charges of cruelty and insist that their dogs choose to fight, that they love doing it, that it's their nature (Forsyth and Evans 1998).¹⁴ While they do not present an alternative ontology as Makah whalers do, they, too, interpret the human-animal interaction in a way that emphasizes reciprocity and elides any suggestion of coercion, domination, or violence. Likening themselves to coaches and their dogs to prizefighters, dogmen claim that they are in fact helping their dogs by enabling them to reach their full potential or fulfill their nature. It might be more accurate, though, to call dogmen artificers of dog natures rather than actualizers of dog natures. "Nature" has been carefully *made* in this case through centuries of selective breeding, myriad training techniques, and, ultimately, the elimination of dogs who do not want to fight. (Are these dogs betrayers of dog nature?) In dogfighting, as in rodeos and bullfighting, humans deliberately contour an animal genetically and biologically and manipulate the animal's physical and mental state of being – and then present the animal's behavior as a reflection of its pure "nature." It is only by

¹¹ Evans et al. (1998), 832.

¹² *Ibid.*, 831.

¹³ Cited in Kalof and Taylor (2007), 321; Dundes (1994), 251.

¹⁴ This discussion of dogmen's claims is based on the scholarship cited, which looks at white Southern rural male subjects. Michael Vick has said very little publicly about his views on dogfighting, but the comments he has made are consistent with the perspective of these men.

concealing the hand of human artifice that the spectacle succeeds as a ritualized demonstration of the masculine conquest over (or within) nature.

What does it mean to say a dog chooses to fight? He certainly exercises agency in turning to face and attack the opponent, and in responding to the urgings of his owner/handler throughout the fight. But when human artifice is this heavily involved in the production of the fighting dog, ascertaining the dog's "choices" is not a straightforward matter. Dog phenomenal world(s) are closely imbricated with human phenomenal world(s) because of thousands of years of domestication, cooperation, and training (Haraway 2007). We have an intimate, daily knowledge of them that gives us confidence in declaring what they want or need, but it is their very intimacy with us – their acute responsiveness to our manipulations – that should shake this confidence. If dogs were not bred for aggression, were socialized with other dogs, were not subjected to training regimens and narcotics intended to heighten aggression, and were not urged on by their owners and handlers, would they choose to fight? If it is their nature to fight, why is all of this human labor necessary? If a human fought for his or her life under these circumstances, rather than submit to an attacking opponent, would we consider the word "choice" appropriate?

The analogy between the prizefighter and the fighting dog breaks down precisely because humans can meaningfully choose to fight – and part of what makes that choice meaningful is that they have other plausible options and can choose *not to fight*. They are authors of their own destinies in ways that dogs are not. The lethal brutality toward so-called curs is not consistent, in any case, with a framework emphasizing the dog's free will. It is consistent, rather, with a framework where the fighting dog is the symbol of his owner's aggression and strength. The proper fate for a disobedient symbol is elimination.

"Love" is the dogman's other answer to the charge of cruelty. Michael Vick said in a recent press conference that he has a "different kind of loving dogs" (Winograd 2011). Dogmen have powerful affective investments in their dogs and dogfighting, in many cases deriving their sense of self from this practice. They put in time and effort, enjoy a secretive social world stitched together by blood and illegality, and savor their dogs' victories as validation of their expertise, knowledge, and manhood. But the instrumentalization and commodification of the fighting dog, almost always ending in his or her violent destruction, is not a process that sits easily with a standard notion of love as an other-regarding disposition.

Michael Vick was not caught in the act of fighting dogs or killing dogs. The evidence against him, both testimonial and forensic, was slowly pieced together to suggest what he had done. In this sense, there was a spectral element to the story, with the dead dogs coming back to be heard through their bones and blood.¹⁵ Animal control officer Kathy Strouse recalls that night at 1915

¹⁵ On spectral dogs, see Carla Freccero (2010, 2011).

Moonlight Road when she climbed a ladder and came upon the room where Vick and his associates had fought dogs:

I climbed towards the opening that gave way to the second level, where I came face to face with a large drip of what appeared to be dried blood. Continuing upward, I finally stood and surveyed the room ... the entire room was painted black. Despite the black paint, we could see spatters and smears of more blood on the walls. In the center of the floor was a clean rectangular pattern. It appeared that this was where the carpet had been laid to provide traction for the fighting dogs and to absorb the blood. Around the edges of this clean pattern were more blood spatters, stains and smears. Next to a folding chair on the right of the access opening, was a plastic bucket and lid. On top of this was a tooth. It looked like a canine tooth from a dog. There was a boom box on the floor and a blood streaked sweatshirt jacket hung from the air conditioner. None of us spoke.¹⁶

The dogs who bled and died there haunt the room, their physical traces evoking images of agony and death in those still living. Vick's friends testified to the methods they all used to kill dogs who did not seem interested in fighting:

- Hanging by a nylon cord thrown over a two by four nailed between two trees
- Drowning by holding the dogs' heads submerged in a five-gallon bucket of water
- Shooting in the head
- Electrocuting by attaching jumper cables to the dogs' ears and throwing them in the swimming pool
- Slamming against the ground repeatedly

Again, the dogs buried at 1915 Moonlight Road spoke from the grave. The forensic report indicated facial fractures, broken necks from hanging, broken legs and vertebrae, and severe bone bruising. Most of the dogs had skull fractures, possibly from a hammer. Jim Gorant (2010) writes of one dog who was still alive after being hung:

There was one last body that stood out from the rest. It had signs of bruising on all four ankles and all along one side. Its skull was fractured in two places and it had four broken vertebrae. ... [A]s that dog lay on the ground fighting for air, Quanis Phillips grabbed its front legs and Michael Vick grabbed its hind legs. They swung the dog over their head like a jump rope and slammed it to the ground. The first impact didn't kill it. So Phillips and Vick slammed it again. The two men kept at it, alternating back and forth, pounding the creature against the ground, until at last, the little red dog was dead.¹⁷

Is haunting a form of justice, where the ungrievable dogs return to indict their killer? Vick's own body bore the signs of this haunting. After months of denying that he had personally killed dogs, he failed an FBI polygraph on the issue (October 12, 2007) and blurted out, "Yeah fine, I killed the dogs. I hung them. I slammed them. I killed all of them. I lost fucking millions, all over some fucking dogs" before his attorney Billy Martin ushered him out of the building.¹⁸

¹⁶ Strouse (2009), 25.

¹⁷ Gorant (2010), 93.

¹⁸ Strouse (2009), 135.

Animal advocates, too, have been haunted by Vick's dogs. Donna Reynolds of BAD RAP (Bay Area Doglovers Responsible About Pitbulls), who helped to rehabilitate some of Vick's dogs, says she cannot get out of her head the details of dogs who were connected by cable to car battery terminals and then thrown in Vick's swimming pool:

I can't shake my minds-eye image of a little black dog splashing frantically in the bloody water ... screaming in pain and terror ... brown eyes saucer wide and tiny black white-toed feet clawing at anything, desperate to get a hold. This death did not come quickly. The rescuer in me keeps trying to think of a way to go back in time and somehow stop this torture and pull the little dog to safety. I think I'll be looking for ways to pull that dog out for the rest of my life.¹⁹

It is their ardent desire to make these dead dogs grievable, even if *retroactively*, that drives some animal advocates to refuse the notion that Vick has repented and is now redeemed. As long as Vick struggles, as long as the metaphorical jury on him is still out, there is a fragile portal open through which the spectral dogs can be heard.

This goes some way to explaining why Wayne Pacelle, president of the Humane Society of the United States, came under serious friendly fire when he signed Vick on as an anti-dogfighting spokesperson after his release from prison. Pacelle had in mind appropriating Vick's Blackness, fame, and urban authenticity for the anti-dogfighting cause, just as Vick set out to trade on the good reputation of the HSUS as part of his public rehabilitation campaign. It was a move that infuriated PETA and other animal advocates who wanted to maintain a chorus of condemnation against Vick indefinitely (Winograd 2011; Cooper 2012). Although it bolstered Vick's public relations project, Pacelle's intervention also had the important effect of shifting the issue from a purely characterological one (just how pathological is Michael Vick) to one that was still characterological but with social/political overtones (how do we persuade young Black and Latino men in blighted urban areas that dogfighting is a dead end?).

Some leading animal advocates pointedly shifted attention from Vick's specific deeds to the cruel animal practices of the broader society. Peter Singer, author of *Animal Liberation*, sometimes called the "bible" of the modern animal rights movement, observed: "[T]he 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."²⁰ Similarly, in an article entitled "We Are All Michael Vick" (2009), legal scholar Gary Francione said the reaction to Vick revealed "our 'moral schizophrenia' about animals" in that the treatment of animals in modern industrial farming is just as cruel and no more justifiable than the treatment of fighting dogs.

¹⁹ Keith (2009).

²⁰ "Are Animal Advocates Giving Michael Vick a Pass?"

Francione continues: "How removed from the screaming crowd around the dog pit is the laughing group around the summer steak barbeque?" Most of us presume that dogs are more important than cows and pigs and chickens; we presume, too, that we are innocent of cruelty while we shake our heads at Vick. Singer and Francione aim to disrupt our complacency and direct our attention to the institutionalized exploitation and violence toward animals that happens on a massive scale every day in this country *and is normalized*. However, it is not clear whether this rhetorical strategy makes us see animal suffering more broadly and more clearly or whether it makes us simply throw up our hands at its pervasiveness. Does the wrong of cruelty, once generalized, disappear from view? If everybody is cruel, is anybody cruel?

THE OPTIC OF RACISM AND THE PARABLE OF BLACK RECALCITRANCE

Blogger Kym Platt (2007), who is Black, wrote: "[M]any in the black community believe that because of his [Vick's] stature and fame and his blackness, he is being made an example of and is suffering from overly harsh public censures." In the blogosphere, on radio and television, and in print, Vick's defenders alluded to the criminal justice system as a historic instrument of racial oppression and terror and argued that whites took special delight in bringing down famous Black men such as Mike Tyson, O. J. Simpson, Kobe Bryant, Barry Bonds – and now Michael Vick.²¹ For some Black civil rights and community leaders, this called for closing ranks around Vick as one of their own. Reverend Joseph Lowery, a veteran of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and other civil rights movement actions, said from the pulpit: "Michael Vick is my son. I've never met him. But he is my son." Southern Christian Leadership Conference president Charles Steele, too, stated: "We need to support him no matter what the evidence reveals." Kwame Abernathy's characterization of events as an "electronic lynching" was echoed by the head of the Atlanta chapter of the NAACP, Reverend R. L. White,²² although the NAACP national office took no position on the matter and interim president Dennis Hayes commented: "[Vick] was in control of his actions at all times and should be held accountable for what he did" (Johnson 2007).

Polls suggested that Blacks were more likely than whites to think the media had covered Vick unfairly, to believe that Vick's punishment was too harsh, and to support his reinstatement to the NFL after his release from prison, although Blacks were far from unanimous on these issues. A Pew survey on August 28, 2007 showed that 51 percent of Blacks felt the press treatment of Vick had

²¹ According to *Animal People* (June 2007, September 2007), Black NFL running back Todd McNair was twice convicted in the 1990s of animal neglect charges related to dogfighting and given fines and probation; NFL player LeShon Johnson and NBA player Qyntel Woods were also given fines and probation after being convicted of or pleading guilty to such charges.

²² Thompson n.d.

been unfair, while 38 percent believed it had been fair. For whites, the figures were 12 percent and 60 percent, respectively.²³ Thirty-one percent of nonwhites and 9 percent of whites thought Vick's punishment was too harsh; 70.1 percent of nonwhites and 53 percent of whites agreed with Vick's reinstatement to the NFL.²⁴ A racial gap is evident in these numbers, but so, too, is the diversity of Black opinion.

When NFL players were polled by ESPN, 57.1 percent said they believed race "mattered" in the public's perception of Vick, and one specifically mentioned the imperative of putting a Black quarterback in his place.²⁵ Did Vick's anomalous position as a Black NFL quarterback make him an irresistible target? Scrupulously catalogued and scrupulously denied, "stacking" or positional segregation is a well-known secret in American professional sports (Schneider and Eitzen 1984; Coakley 1998; Buffington 2005).²⁶ Based on the notion that Black players are only bodies not minds, stacking involves placing white players in positions thought to require leadership, intelligence, and decision making (such as quarterback in football, point guard in basketball, and pitcher and catcher in baseball) while confining Black players to positions thought to require strength, speed, and agility (Primm, DuBois, and Regoli 2007). Both media commentators and football scouts continuously reproduce the racial tropes underlying this practice by describing Black athletes in physical terms and white athletes in mental ones (Woodward 2004; Mercurio and Filak 2010).²⁷ Standard descriptions of white quarterbacks ("An intelligent 4-year starter. Very productive." / "Heady quarterback who sees the field and reads defenses well." / "Natural leader with good size.") can be productively juxtaposed with standard descriptions of Black quarterbacks ("A *freakish* athlete who is more dangerous as a runner than a thrower." / "A Big, strong kid who can run.")²⁸ Despite the fact that nearly 70 percent of NFL players today are Black, the Black quarterback remained, until very recently, a relative rarity.²⁹

²³ "Michael Vick Case Draws Large Audience."

²⁴ Piquero et al. (2011), 544. Unfortunately, the nonwhite category is not broken down here.

²⁵ Clemmons et al. (2011).

²⁶ My thanks to John Cline for raising this issue with me.

²⁷ The same goes for honorary white players. In Kim (2012), I note that Chinese American NBA player Jeremy Lin was heavily praised for his intelligence, diligence, organization, and preparation (all model minority traits) as a player.

²⁸ Bigler and Jeffries (2008), 134, 138.

²⁹ For decades, Black quarterbacks coming out of high school or college were persuaded to change positions in order to get hired by an NFL team. Some, like Warren Moon, opted to play in the Canadian Football League, which did not pursue stacking with the same zeal as its southern counterpart. From 1983 to 1998, Blacks were only 9 percent of quarterbacks in the NFL although they were more than 66 percent of overall players. In the early 1980s, there were only two consistently starting Black quarterbacks, Warren Moon and Doug Williams. In April 1999, three Black quarterbacks were chosen in the first round of the NFL draft, while up to that point only four Black quarterbacks had been first round picks in the entire history of the draft. By 1999, 21 percent of all quarterbacks were Black. See Lapchick (2001). The 2013 NFL season featured a record nine Black starting quarterbacks.

Vick's dramatic success on the field made him an intruder on hallowed (white) ground. Brock Cohen writes: "NFL quarterback is one of the last islands in the nation's collective cultural imagination that remains the exclusive province of white males. Which means the image of a black quarterback calling the shots on a last-minute, game-winning TD drive is ... alarming to a significant segment of the American populace."³⁰ Add to this the fact that Vick's style – in particular his penchant for running the ball – seemed so Black:

When Michael Vick plays, I see ... street basketball. Vick's style reminds me of Allen Iverson – the speed, the court sense, the sharp cuts, the dekes, the swag. ... Vick seems to have a deeply African-American approach to the game. I'm not saying that a black QB who stands in the pocket ain't playing black. I'm saying Vick's style is so badass, so artistic, so fluid, so flamboyant, so relentless – so representative of black athletic style.³¹

This commentator is celebrating what he sees as Vick's Black style, but many others in the media and NFL saw this style as something to be policed and contained. The anxiety about Black quarterbacks defying the rules and changing the game can be seen in descriptions of them as a "new breed," "running quarterbacks," or even "runningbacks at the quarterback position" (Buffington 2005).

A couple of dust-ups over the past decade indicate that Black incursions into this particular territory of whiteness continue to meet stiff resistance. On September 28, 2003, Rush Limbaugh remarked on Philadelphia Eagles quarterback Donovan McNabb on ESPN's *NFL Countdown*: "Sorry to say this. I don't think he's been that good from the get-go. ... What we have here is a little social concern in the NFL. The media has been very desirous that a Black quarterback can do well. ... There's a little hope invested in McNabb, and he got credit for the performance of his team that he didn't deserve."³² Reiterating an insistent conservative political theme, Limbaugh not only denies the persistence of racism in the NFL but suggests that the real problem is one of preferential treatment for Blacks.

Years later, Hall of Fame Black quarterback Warren Moon asserted that Black quarterback prospects continue to be evaluated unfairly, pointing to a *Pro Football* weekly scouting report by Nolan Nowrocki on West Virginia's star quarterback Geno Smith. Nowrocki, who had famously trashed Black quarterbacks Cam Newton and Robert Griffin III in previous years, had this to say about Geno Smith: "Not committed or focused – marginal work ethic. Interviewed poorly at the Combine and did not show an understanding of concepts on the white board. ... Will be overdrafted and struggle to produce against NFL defensive complexities."³³ The Black athlete as body not mind. Moon's

³⁰ Cohen (2011).

³¹ Toure (2011).

³² Hartmann (2007), 46.

³³ Florio (2013). Geno Smith fared less well in the draft than expected. He was picked in the second round, thirty-ninth overall by the New York Jets. He is now their starting quarterback.

comments about Nowrocki provoked online responses that were scathing and revealing: "I maintain that Warren Moon is a racist" / "Warren Moon ... The Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson of the NFL" / "Every player, coach and owner could be black and this idiot would still be crying."³⁴

That Vick was already seen at some level as representing transgressive, incorrigible Blackness in a white space made him a perfect subject of a racial parable. In 2010, Black Entertainment Television aired *The Michael Vick Project*, a ten-part series that described Vick's rise, fall, and attempted comeback. Partly a chronicle of penitence, mostly a hagiography, the series was a centerpiece, along with *Finally Free: An Autobiography by Michael Vick* (2012), in Vick's strategic effort, aided by "at least seven public relations advisors" (Leitch 2011), to rehabilitate his public image. BET's series is organized around a basic duality reflected in its cover graphic, a headshot of Vick with one set of words to his left (Crime/Tragedy/Shame/Fear/Failure/Consequences) and another to his right (Punishment/Triumph/Honor/Courage/Redemption/Truth). At the bottom of the image, a summarizing statement: "A Life in Progress." This is not just a film project about or by Vick, *Vick is the project*.

I suggested earlier that there was no way for us to read the Vick story other than as a parable of Black recalcitrance. That is to say, ubiquitous and tenacious tropes about Black masculinity as violent, criminal, hypersexual, and animal overdetermined the narrow terms in which Vick's story could become culturally legible to us. Vick came from the ghetto, he was sued by a woman for allegedly giving her genital herpes and sought treatment for herpes under the pseudonym "Ron Mexico," he was stopped in the airport for concealing marijuana in a water bottle, he gave booing fans the finger – all of the elements were in place. And the key element: that he overcame his origins and biology and achieved the American Dream, *only to slip back and lose it all*. It is this slipping back that makes it a story of recalcitrance, of his character's resistance to improvement. In the early 1800s, proponents of slavery argued that the institution improved and civilized the Negro, but only provisionally, and that his brute-like nature would reassert itself the moment his chains were removed (Fredrickson 1971). Lewis Gordon writes about the current life of this expectation:

They are waiting. For they know I have to be on the alert. I have to be on call – no respite, no letting my guard down. Somewhere out there, until the day I die, there is the weight of predestined failure. To be black is to *be*, as Du Bois observed, a "problem." I have seen many black men struggle, struggle hard, and then just when they are about to achieve their goal, they go to pieces. They slip into a horrid absurdity. "What's up with that?" a friend once asked. Yeah, what's up with that? But he knew. He knew what it was to be the exemplification of sin. To be, that is, guilty in advance. It waits. Guilty of what? Time will tell.³⁵

³⁴ Smith (2013). Warren Moon was pressured to change positions, was passed over in the 1978 NFL draft, and spent six years in the Canadian Football League before becoming a successful NFL quarterback and the first Black quarterback in the NFL Hall of Fame.

³⁵ Gordon (1997), 22.

Michael Vick had it all but then predictably reverted to type. Rendered as commodified spectacle, the parable promotes the marketing of both dangerous Black masculinity in the global marketplace and national mythologies about merit, individual freedom, and opportunity (Kellner 2001; Leonard and King 2011). Structural barriers to the American Dream are refigured as characterological or biological ones, and the drama of racial oppression is refigured as a drama of individual weakness.

Culture figured in the parable obliquely and ambiguously. Because dogfighting is practiced by only a small segment of the Black community (and by Southern rural whites as well), culture entered the conversation not as grounds for marking and valorizing a group tradition but rather as an explanation for Vick's decisions – as an exculpatory device meant to problematize the matter of choice and thus responsibility. So, on September 4, 2007, actress Whoopi Goldberg said on ABC's *The View*: "He's [Vick's] from the South, from the Deep South. ... This is part of his cultural upbringing. For a lot of people, dogs are sport. Instead of just saying [Vick] is a beast and he's a monster, this is a kid who comes from a culture where this is not questioned." Months later, actor Jamie Foxx observed: "It's a cultural thing, I think. Most brothers didn't know that, you know. I used to see dogs fighting in the neighborhood all the time. I didn't know that was Fed time. So, Mike probably just didn't read his handbook on what not to do as a black star."³⁶ Vick himself made a similar point in a *GQ* interview: "You got the family dog and the white picket fence, and you just think that's all there is. Some of us had to grow up in poverty-stricken urban neighborhoods, and we just had to adapt to our environment" (Leitch 2011). Ironically, it was left to HSUS president Wayne Pacelle, who is white, to say that dogfighting is not an accepted element of Black culture (Gorman 2007).

The parable of Vick's recalcitrance works off of a particular mode of imagining Black men in professional sports. In the NFL and NBA, the Black male athlete, unlike the white male athlete, is figured *ambivalently* as admirable and frightening, heroic and abject, "commodified and criminalized" (Leonard and King 2011), a site of both desire and terror (Griffin 2012). John Hoberman writes of "the white psyche's anxious oscillation between idealized and demonized images of blacks, who are always denied normal human status."³⁷ Even Michael Jordan's supposed transcendence of race was, as Ferber (2007) argues, less a genuine transcendence than a displacement of the image of the violent Black criminal onto other players such as Charles Barkley, or later, Latrell Sprewell and Ron Artest.³⁸ This ambivalent figuration produces a suspenseful tension where the Black athlete is seen as always unpredictable – always about to be out of control, always about to revert to type, always a prisoner of his biology – and where his misdeeds are greeted with both condemnation and a

³⁶ http://www.starpulse.com/news/index.php/2007/08/24/jamie_foxx_defends_michael_vick.

³⁷ Hoberman (1997), xxxi.

³⁸ See also Hughes (2004) and Collins (2005).

pointed lack of surprise. This tension is, of course, precisely what the commodification of the Black male athlete under neoliberal capitalism requires. It is the dangerous edge of Blackness that lures the white consumer, even as he insists that Blackness be made safe for consumption. Thomas Oates notes that while the NBA and NFL have for some time allowed white men “to both discipline and imaginatively inhabit the bodies of powerful Black men,” new media have deepened the commodification process by allowing the “vicarious management” of Black bodies through fantasy football and video games like *Madden NFL*.³⁹

The NBA’s shifting strategies for managing this tension around Blackness have been remarkably transparent (Guerrero 2011). In 1984, with players widely known for drug use and partying, teams losing money, and corporate sponsors withdrawing, NBA commissioner David Stern said the league was “perceived as a bunch of high-salaried, drug-sniffing black guys” and set about counteracting this image.⁴⁰ But in the 1990s, in an effort to globalize the NBA’s market appeal, the league self-consciously attached itself to hip-hop in order to gain “urban, hip authenticity.”⁴¹ Hip-hop stars were hired to create theme songs, some became part owners of NBA teams, and extra baggy shorts became the norm for players. Perhaps inevitably, when the infamous “Palace Brawl” occurred in 2004 between the Detroit Pistons and Indiana Pacers, involving players going after white spectators who had taunted them and thrown things at them, the media laid the blame squarely on the excesses of the NBA’s hip-hop culture (Leonard 2006). A league ban on hip-hop attire and other changes ensued.

David Leonard writes: “Black bodies, even those living the ‘American Dream,’ functioning as million-dollar commodities, are contained and imagined as dangerous, menacing, abject, and criminal.”⁴² I would add: *as animal*. Animal tropes pervade discussions of Black male athletes, to the point where they have become normalized, working synergistically with tropes about Black male violence, brutality, and dangerousness. Black football players, all body not mind, are called “amazing specimen[s]” by draft experts (Bigler and Jeffries 2008). Thomas Oates writes about the assertion of the white “erotic gaze” at the pre-NFL draft event known as the Senior Bowl, held in Mobile, Alabama each January to showcase the best college senior players. Scouts, managers, coaches, and the media assemble in a hotel ballroom to watch as young players, most of them Black, are stripped to their shorts, lined up, weighed, and measured in various ways. Players say it makes them feel like a “prize bull” in a “meat market.” One team manager commented: “It’s a livestock show, and it’s dehumanizing, but it’s necessary ... If we’re going to buy ‘em, we ought to see what we’re buying.”⁴³ The allusion to slavery, inadvertent or not, is hard to miss. This routine, unremarkable NFL tradition functions as a ceremony of

³⁹ Oates (2009), 44.

⁴⁰ Guerrero (2011), 101.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁴² Leonard (2010), 259.

⁴³ Oates (2007), 77.

white racial power where young Black players, as object of the “erotic gaze,” are raced, feminized, sexualized, and animalized all at once.

The media’s treatment of Black male athletes, too, reminds us of the way that race and species continuously invigorate each other. The 2003 Nike television ad “The Battle” memorably juxtaposes gritty urban scenes of one on one basketball with a pit bull facing off against a Rottweiler in a fight. After the “Palace Brawl” of 2004, “the black bodies of the players climbing into the stands were represented as ‘violent beasts.’”⁴⁴ Alluding to the fact that a white fan began the brawl by throwing a drink at Pacers players, Charles Barkley commented acerbically, “We’re not animals in the zoo ... you can’t throw things at us.”⁴⁵ In April 2008, LeBron James was featured with supermodel Gisele Bündchen on the cover of *Vogue* magazine, and his hulking presentation, coupled with his evocative grasp on Bündchen, immediately raised questions about whether *Vogue* meant to depict him as King Kong. ESPN, in anticipation of the 2013 NBA Finals, showcased Spurs shooting guard Kawhi Leonard in a “science” segment where they measured his abnormally large “wingspan” and abnormally large “paws.”⁴⁶

Many of the cartoonists who satirized Michael Vick traded avidly in animal and racial tropes. The most salient idea was one of reversal between Vick and his dogs, between Black man and animal. One cartoon, for example, pictures Vick next to a fighting dog and the caption reads: “Pop Quiz: Find the True Animal.” Dogs are frequently granted the agency of revenge, while Vick must suffer helplessly. (That Vick deserved to experience the same suffering he inflicted on his dogs was a recurrent theme in the blogosphere.) In one cartoon, a dog sitting curbside gives Vick the finger as Vick is driven away in a van labeled “Animal Control.” In another, evocative of lynching, Vick is chased up a tree by a pack of braying dogs. Perhaps the most startling one shows Vick sitting in an electric chair placed in a tub of water, while a dog holding electrical wires approaches (see Figure 8.1). This powerful image not only suggests that Vick deserves a taste of his own medicine, it legitimates the U.S. criminal justice system as a tool of racial terror. The Black man must be contained or else killed, as journalist Tucker Carlson suggested when he opined on Fox News that Vick should be executed for what he had done to dogs.⁴⁷

In these cartoons, state power champions the just cause of the dogs (the animal control van, the official tolerance of lynching, the infliction of capital punishment) and the recalcitrant Vick, victim of his own bad choices, is dealt with in a mode that can only be described as murderously carceral. The state’s complicity in institutionalized violence against Blacks and dogs – in, among other things, the blight inflicted upon poor Black neighborhoods like Vick’s by neoliberal capitalism, the injustice of mass incarceration and capital punishment

⁴⁴ Griffin and Calafell (2011), cited in Griffin (2012), 168.

⁴⁵ Griffin (2012), 169.

⁴⁶ June 5, 2013.

⁴⁷ “Tucker Carlson: Michael Vick ‘Should Have Been Executed.’”

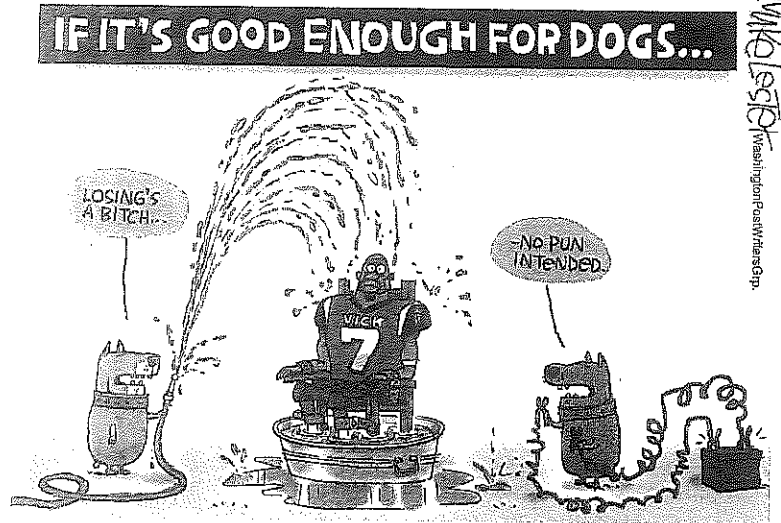


FIGURE 8.1. "If It's Good Enough for Dogs ...". Cartoon courtesy of Mike Lester.

policies, and the "euthanasia" of millions of dogs a year in U.S. shelters – is, in the meantime, quietly and effectively concealed.

The parable of Black recalcitrance temporalizes the image of the ambivalently figured Black athlete, dramatizing his state of being as a movement or journey – "a life in progress." Ladies and gentlemen, what will the Black male athlete choose? Will he successfully transcend biology or will he revert to type? How many mistakes will he make and how many chances will he be given? Vick's attempted comeback since his release from prison fits squarely in this narrative. Maharaj (1997) notes that Black athletes are depicted as having to choose between the "nightmare/street" and the "dream/NBA"; Cole and King (1998) see the choice depicted as one between "gangs" and "sports." I suggest that another dyad overlaid upon these is that of "beast" and "human," so that the choice before Vick was one between ghetto, nightmare, criminality, evil, and bestiality, on the one hand, and riches, dream, sport, goodness, civilization, and humanity on the other. Vick chose well initially but then slipped back. He frequently blamed his involvement in dogfighting on his unsavory acquaintances: "A lot of my poor decisions and subsequent mistakes can be attributed mostly to two things: my weak resolve in telling people no, and the people I chose to be associated with. I had an entourage of pretty questionable characters."⁴⁸ Might it be that Vick, as a Black man, can only ever have a "life in progress" – one that perennially stops short of a fully human life?

⁴⁸ Vick (2012), 86.

The parable of recalcitrance has paused with a post-prison Michael Vick who is chastened, submissive, domesticated. There is now no sign of the attitude and swagger of old. Vick is no longer resisting the good and is eloquent about what his past resistance cost him. In *Finally Free* (a title that suggests he is both out of prison and rid of his inner demons), Vick sums up his story: He worked hard until he had it all. Then he lost his way, hit rock bottom, found God, and realized the error of his ways. Now he is climbing his way back to the top. The tripartite organization of the book – The Rise, The Fall, The Redemption – is a classical structure reminiscent of ancient Greek dramas and Christian morality tales. Indeed, the book is part American Dream, part *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, with a measure of Greek mythology thrown in (Vick compares himself to Icarus, whose hubris caused him to fly too high and too close to the sun). Vick's spectacle of penitence – his quiet apologies, subdued demeanor, and assumption of a new role as an anti-dogfighting spokesperson for the Humane Society of the United States – achieved its purpose. Vick was reinstated by the NFL, signed by the Philadelphia Eagles in 2009, and re-signed by Nike. He was nominated by his teammates for the Ed Block Award for courage and sportsmanship, and he also received the Associated Press NFL Comeback Player of the Year Award. In 2011, Vick signed an \$80 million, five-year deal with the Eagles. The continuing cyberspace chatter about "what is really in Michael Vick's heart," however, suggests that for many observers, the conclusion to the parable is still uncertain.

HOW PIT BULLS BECAME BLACK

To Americans at the start of the new millennium, the dog is the most human of animals – not in terms of appearance or cognitive ability or percentage of shared DNA, but in terms of intimacy, familiarity, and identification. More so than with any other animal (including turtles, frogs, and whales), we feel for dogs and explore the frontiers of interspecies communication and love with them (Hearne 2007; Haraway 2007; Kohn 2007; Weaver 2013). We readily speak on their behalf and recruit them to causes, as when people dressed their dogs in t-shirts that read "My Dog Hates Michael Vick."

Of course, this intimacy is structured in dominance. Our concern for dogs is contingent and, from the dog's point of view, sadly unreliable. We use dogs as instruments for our own ends – companionship, security, vanity, to track missing children, to herd sheep, to rescue us in the Alps, to help us when we are disabled, to sniff out drugs in the airport, to cheer up sick children in the hospital. We are taken with dogs, but we dispose of them at will. We embrace them as family members, but we turn them into the local shelter to be killed when they pee on the rug one too many times. We countenance their maltreatment in research, breeding, entertainment, and sport. We seek out "pure breeds" from breeders and pet stores as millions of other dogs are slaughtered in shelters every year across the country. How we are with dogs is a reminder that benevolent dominance is still dominance (Tuan 2004).

Pit bulls in particular experience malevolent forms of human domination.⁴⁹ The breed's image and fortunes have declined precipitously in the past thirty years. In the 1800s, pit bulls were frontier farm dogs cherished as family companions because of their mild temperament and loyalty. In the early 1900s, they were the "all-American family pet": Helen Keller and Teddy Roosevelt owned pit bulls, and Petey in *The Little Rascals* was a pit bull, as was the dog in the beloved Buster Brown shoe commercials. Stubby the pit bull served in World War I, received both a Purple Heart and a Gold Medal of Valor, and was honored at a White House ceremony (Medlin 2007, Twining, Arluke and Patronek 2001). The decisive shift occurred when young Black men in blighted urban areas took up dogfighting in the 1980s and began using pit bulls "as extensions of social status, as symbols of masculine power, as tools to intimidate others, and as weapons for the protection of property and illicit drug activities."⁵⁰ A "pit bull panic" (Cohen and Richardson 2002) ensued, with the media widely sensationalizing pit bull attacks and demonizing the breed. By 1987, *U.S. News & World Report* dubbed the pit bull "the most dangerous dog in America."⁵¹ Now the hypervisible image of the pit bull is one of a hired (and all too willing) assassin. Separately, the young Black man and the pit bull make people cross to the other side of the street; together, they are a picture of unmitigated threat.

The pit bull is now raced Black in the American imagination. As we saw in Chapter 5 with invasive species, animals are often raced in the national imaginary to register the sense of threat they pose. That is to say, race, which borrows from species, gives back to it; race is part of the lexicon by which species is made just as species is part of the lexicon by which race is made. Like Blacks, pit bulls have been constructed as a group of beings whose behavior is biologically determined as violent, ruthless, and dangerous. Like Blacks, pit bulls are often victims of a "shoot first and ask questions later" policy by police. Like Blacks, they are objects of public loathing and fear whose very presence provokes a strongly disciplinary (if not murderous) response. Subject to human cruelty but also putatively inclined to do great harm, the pit bull is both victim and aggressor, at best an ambiguously figured object of public sympathy in dogfighting cases.

Multiple practices further the process of dog racialization. Law enforcement has deepened the association of Black urban criminality and pit bulls with its

⁴⁹ Harlan Weaver writes about the loose definition of the pit bull breed: "Keeping in mind that contemporary dog breeds are regulated and determined by kennel clubs, not biologists, one can see that this confusion is partly due to the shifting history of breed politics: the American Kennel Club (AKC), in an effort to distance its registries from dogs with reputations as fighters, began to recognize the American Staffordshire Terrier (AmStaf) in the 1930s, while the United Kennel Club (UKC) continued to register the American Pit Bull Terrier (APBT) throughout the 20th century. Add to this the fact that the American Dog Breeder's Association (ADBA) also has a registry for APBTs, and the confusion as to what exactly pit bull stands for is easy to see" (2013, 691). See also Ortiz (2009).

⁵⁰ Kalof and Taylor (2007), 328.

⁵¹ April 20, 1987.

recent development of state-level joint task forces aimed at tackling together a number of associated gang activities such as dogfighting, gambling, drug dealing, and illegal weapons sales (Malanga 2007; Siebert 2010).⁵²

Although race is not openly mentioned in these efforts, the indelible impression here is pit bull = gang = Black. Hip-hop, too, cements this association. Resting on the commodification of Black urban authenticity, it treats dogfighting as an unquestioned aspect of this phenomenon. One of DMX's CDs, *Grand Champ*, features a pit bull on the cover; the liner notes explain that a grand champ is a three-time winner. Jay-Z's video *99 Problems* shows him handling a fighting dog in the pit, and 50 Cent and Snoop Dog have also referenced dogfighting in their music videos. Nor is it just in the music: DMX was convicted of animal cruelty charges in relation to dogfighting in 2009 (Medlin 2007).

Pit bulls are dying for being Black. Hundreds of U.S. cities and counties have responded to "pit bull panic" by passing breed-specific legislation (BSL) that bans or otherwise regulates the ownership of pit bulls. In places with strict bans, the state confiscates pit bulls from their owners and promptly kills them. Opponents of BSL call it BDL, or breed-discriminatory legislation, evoking the analogy to racial discrimination to awaken sympathy for the pit bull (but also unavoidably reproducing the association with Blackness).⁵³ Harlan Weaver writes: "BSL names and labels as innate (and often, unpredictable) the qualities of danger and viciousness in the bodies of specific kinds of dogs. ... [This is] pit bull profiling. Simply put, BSL produces pit bulls and pit bull-type dogs as criminalized beings." Weaver notes that pit bull advocates develop "pit bull underground railroad[s]" to evade BSL and that they speak of fighting "canine racism."⁵⁴ Attorney Ledy Van Kavage, who works for Best Friends Animal Society, deploys this analogy when she denounces BSL as "canine profiling" (Campbell 2009).

⁵² A study of dogfighters in Chicago over a three-year period showed that 86 percent had two previous arrests, 70 percent had previously committed felonies, and 59 percent were in street gangs (Ortiz 2009, 57). Law enforcement is now going after dogfighting more seriously than before because they perceive it to be linked to myriad other illegal activities involving drugs, gambling, and weapons. As a result, they are developing policies intended to address all of these illicit practices together. See Randour and Hardiman (2007).

⁵³ The overall case against BSL or BDL is strong (Medlin 2007). Studies show that pit bull bans lead to an increase in other breed bites (See "Position Statement on Breed-Specific Legislation," American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals). Dog advocates instead favor breed-neutral dangerous dog laws that target owner behavior (spay/neuter, chaining, neglect) not dog breeds; these have been shown to reduce bites overall, whereas no studies show the effectiveness of BSL. A task force formed in Prince Georges County, Maryland in 2003 to examine the impact of the pit bull ban there concluded that the county spent more than \$250,000 per year to round up and destroy banned dogs and that public safety had not been improved by the ban. In the hundreds of municipalities that have BSL, lawsuits have been filed arguing that the laws violate substantive due process and equal protection, and that they are unacceptably vague (Campbell 2009). Marmer (1984) argues that BSL is unconstitutional because it infringes on due process (because of the difficulty in identifying "pit bulls") and equal protection (because the laws are underinclusive).

⁵⁴ Weaver (2013), 693-4.

Pit bulls now make up an estimated 30–60 percent of the dogs at U.S. shelters and are the most frequently euthanized type of dog in the nation (Muhammad 2012). They are killed by dogmen when they resist fighting, they are killed by other dogs in fights, they are killed by shelter workers because they are discarded in large numbers and then passed over for adoption or not put up for adoption in the first place. About 75 percent of municipal shelters euthanize pit bulls *immediately* upon intake, without them ever having any chance at adoption.⁵⁵ An estimated 3 million pit bulls are killed in shelters annually in the United States.⁵⁶ In the Los Angeles area alone, 200 are put to sleep per day. A study by *Animal People* reports a 93 percent euthanasia rate for abandoned pit bulls and estimates that only 1 in 600 will find a forever home.⁵⁷

All of this is based on racialized hysteria, not fact. Sensationalistic media accounts notwithstanding, there are no reliable findings on the relative dangerousness of pit bulls to other breeds (i.e., bite rates) because of inadequate data on how many pit bulls exist within the United States (Sacks et al. 2000). For this reason, the Center for Disease Control strongly recommends against BSL on the grounds that the data used by lawmakers is fraught with error.⁵⁸ The American Kennel Club, HSUS, ASPCA, American Veterinary Medical Association, and National Animal Control Association, too, among other organizations, oppose such legislation. Pit bulls have been bred to be aggressive toward other dogs but friendly to people so that they could be handled easily in the pit (Cohen and Richardson 2002). Indeed, the American pit bull terrier, Staffordshire bull terrier, and American Staffordshire terrier (all breeds that get placed under the imprecise rubric of “pit bull”)⁵⁹ all earn an above-average and passing score on the American Temperament Test – near or above the Golden Retriever’s score (Medlin 2007).

When the Vick story broke, animal advocates asked the public to move from seeing pit bulls as a raced threat that must be exterminated to subjects who deserve sympathy and care. The re-figuration of the pit bull as victim of human cruelty was precariously achieved and regularly contradicted, as when the HSUS pursued its policy of recommending that all dogs seized in fighting raids be killed. Because of the intervention of other animal welfare groups, the court appointed animal law professor Rebecca Huss as a special master to oversee temperament evaluations on Vick’s dogs. In the end, only one of the more than fifty dogs was killed because of temperament problems. The rest were adopted into families or went to live in sanctuaries, such as Best Friends in Kanab, Utah, which took in twenty-two of the “Victory dogs” and created a blog about their rehabilitation.⁶⁰ Some became therapy dogs tasked with

⁵⁵ “Pit Bulls and Euthanasia Rates.”

⁵⁶ *Off the Chain: A Shocking Exposé on America’s Foresaken Breed.*

⁵⁷ “Pit Bulls and Euthanasia Rates.”

⁵⁸ “Position Statement on Breed-Specific Legislation.”

⁵⁹ See note 49.

⁶⁰ <http://bestfriends.org/The-Sanctuary/Explore-the-Sanctuary/Dogtown/Victory-Dogs/>.

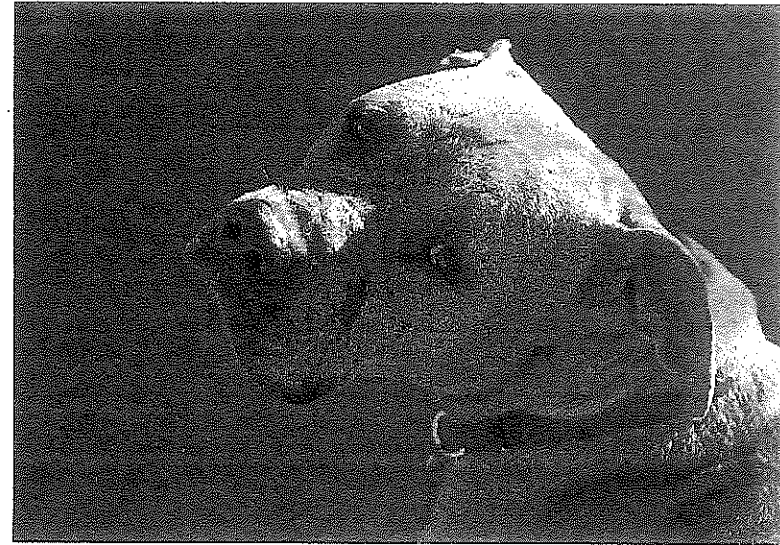


FIGURE 8.2. Lucas.

Source: Photo courtesy of Best Friends Animal Sanctuary, Kanab, Utah.

comforting ailing human patients. Lucas (Figure 8.2), who died recently, was one of the Victory dogs. The animal advocates involved in these rescue and rehabilitation efforts saw the Vick case as a once in a lifetime opportunity to speak out for this maligned breed, to counteract the myths of biological determinism and demonstrate that pit bulls, if handled with love and care, are loyal, smart, affectionate, gentle, wonderful dogs. Above all, it was a chance to get the public to see these dogs as individual beings with life stories that mattered to them.

FROM DISAVOWAL TO AVOWAL (AND CRITIQUE)

During the Vick controversy, animal advocates and race advocates adopted a posture of disavowal toward each other’s claims. Most animal advocates did not use explicitly anti-Black rhetoric about Vick, but their criticisms of him as cruel, brutal, and pathological resonated with persistent tropes of incorrigible Black male criminality and violence. In addition, they claimed that the Vick case had “nothing to do with race.” One caller on NPR’s *Talk of the Nation* said: “I don’t care if Michael Vick was black, white, green, purple. To me, this is not a story about color.”⁶¹ PETA’s blog on the Vick case stated emphatically,

⁶¹ “Race Played Factor in Vick Coverage, Critics Say.”

"This is not a race issue. We don't care if he's [Vick's] orange. This is not a race issue. White people who fight dogs need to fry. This is not a race issue."⁶²

In the PETA post, the white animal advocates, who see race as a smoke bomb meant to distract from the issue of cruelty, evince race fatigue. But in their frustration they engage in the very thing they charge race advocates with – zero-sum, either/or thinking. Consider this white blogger discussing Black support for Vick:

Aren't such racial stances racist in themselves? I don't see how you can support someone just because of the color of their skin while calling for racial equality, in spite of how damning and disturbing the evidence is to the crime. It's almost as if those groups are suggesting that Michael Vick should be let off because he's black. Despite whatever one's cultural views are, dog fighting is cruel and inhumane, bringing life into being only to torture and kill. And regardless of one's views, it's a crime. Race has no place in this issue.⁶³

What this advocate seeks to do is bracket out race and assert a universalist narrative about cruelty that is free of racial implications. But there is no standpoint of racial innocence from which to make these or any other claims. There is no race-free space. Vick's critics said they didn't care if he was green, purple, or orange, but they are missing the point: no one in this country has ever been enslaved, auctioned off, or lynched for being green, purple, or orange. By asserting the colorblindness of their project, animal advocates deny their own racial situatedness and the ways that race mattered in this story, in addition to furthering a conservative discourse that proclaims racism to be over and done with and labels any effort to call attention to it reverse discrimination. Sherene Razack writes: "As long as we see ourselves as not implicated in relations of power, as innocent, we cannot begin to walk the path of social justice and to thread our way through the complexities of power relations."⁶⁴

At the same time, many of Vick's defenders trivialized concerns about the dogs' suffering. They briefly acknowledged Vick's misdeeds but argued that his public excoriation was excessive: dogs are, after all, only animals. They pushed back at the raising of the animal question, which they saw as a deliberate deflection of the race question. Discussing the Vick case on *Real Time With Bill Maher* in August 2007, NPR host Michel Martin, whose husband Billy Martin was Vick's attorney, asked why people were up in arms about Vick but silent about the recent shooting deaths of Black people in Newark, New Jersey. And consider this exchange between host Allison Keyes and scholar Michael Eric Dyson, both of whom are Black, in a segment entitled "The Michael Vick Case: Is 'Supporting Our Own' Ok?":

DYSON: Lassie stayed on the air for 15 years, Nat King Cole couldn't stay on his show for six months. Dogs and animals have been treated – relatively speaking – with greater respect and regard ... than African American people. When you look at Hurricane

⁶² PETA Files, "Vick at the Office, Part 2."

⁶³ "Michael Vick: Race, Reality and Society."

⁶⁴ Razack (1998), 22.

Katrina, they have a famous picture of a bus full of dogs and animals being treated to first-class citizenship rights in America while black people were drowning. ... [T]his is not to disrespect the needs of other sentient animals who would coexist with us on the human space called earth.

KEYES: So what disturbs me is that an African American man who came from that legacy [of slavery] could do the same thing to dogs that white people did to us during the civil rights movement.

DYSON: True. There's no question about that. But you know what? We're not dogs. We're not animals. We are African American human beings. ... [W]hat he [Vick] did was reprehensible ... but to put dogs and animals parallel to black people is the extension of the legacy of slavery, not its contradiction.

Keyes points out the ironic link between the brutality of racism and Vick's brutality toward dogs, but Dyson brushes aside her comments and re-centers race as the only subject at hand. In the same NPR segment, Mark Gray, host of the radio show *The Sports Groove* (WOL-am in Washington, DC) commented:

[I]n the African American community, I think there would be more of an anti-Vick sentiment if we were dealing with the killing of people as opposed to animals. ... [I]f the guy had raped someone, if the guy had killed somebody, a human being, they [Black people] would be more anti-Michael Vick. But the thing that it's animals is one of those things that have a lot of people on edge and a lot of people uncomfortable with the treatment of Vick.⁶⁵

Antiracism does not logically require reinscribing the subordination of animals, but here Vick's defenders vigorously affirm both that Blacks are human and therefore more important than animals, and that animals do not merit much moral consideration.⁶⁶ From there they move to the conclusion that animal advocates' profound concern for Vick's dogs is perverse and morally out of joint – perhaps even a pretext for engaging in the persecution of a famous Black man. The focus on race subsumes, deflects, and ultimately denies the other set of moral claims being raised. When Kwame Abernathy called what happened to Vick an "electronic lynching," he echoed the words of Clarence Thomas, whose strategic decision to denounce the Senate Judiciary Committee hearings of 1991 as a "high-tech lynching" secured him a seat on the U.S. Supreme Court. Is the lynching metaphor being used once again to deflect our attention from another form of injustice – not male domination this time but human domination?

Michael Eric Dyson suggests that Blacks have the most at stake in shoring up the impassable line between humans and animals and erasing the human-animal borderlands into which Black people are continuously placed. But if white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, human supremacy, and mastery over

⁶⁵ "Supporting Our Own: Blacks Split on Michael Vick."

⁶⁶ Sandra Kobin (2007) wrote of the Vick case: "The message is clear. Beat a woman? Play on. Beat a dog? You're gone." Rather than talking about how notions of masculinity lead to the abuse of both women and dogs, Kobin implies that things are topsy-turvy because dogs are being valued more than women, who clearly have more worth than dogs. See Siebert (2010) on the connection between animal cruelty and violence against women and children.

nature are all cut from the same ideological cloth and all reinforce one another, Black people have a very significant stake in redefining a borderlands wherein humans and animals are reimagined and human-animal continuities (cognitive, social, emotional, moral) are avowed in ways that diminish neither humans nor animals. Race has been so closely sutured with species in Western thought for centuries – shoring up one and attacking the other puts one at cross-purposes with one's self.

Once again, moving from a posture of disavowal to avowal does not mean forswearing critique. But it does mean doing critique differently. An ethics of avowal is about maintaining openness to the suffering of others and actively acknowledging a connection to their experiences. So, animal advocates might choose to condemn dogfighting and call for Vick's censure, but instead of claiming racial innocence, they would advance their critique in a manner that not only acknowledged but actively challenged the context of anti-Black racism. They would begin by understanding their own racial situatedness – that white people clamoring for a Black man's (violent) punishment *can never, ever be a race-neutral narrative*. They would educate themselves deeply about the very issues displaced by the parable of Black recalcitrance: the economic, political, and ideological forces that produce blighted and segregated urban Black neighborhoods, substandard and segregated education for Black children, pervasive job discrimination, and high levels of Black unemployment; the myriad institutional causes of Black people's "differentiated vulnerability to premature death," from inferior health care, to residential and occupational exposure to environmental toxins, to vigilante violence, to the routinized violence of law enforcement practices; and the criminalization of social problems and conscious deflection of public energies and funds away from social programs and education and toward mass incarceration policies and the "War on Drugs." They would connect these forms of institutionalized violence against Black people to the many forms of institutionalized violence against dogs (and non-human animals generally), grasping that these phenomena are connected all the way down.

Race advocates who embraced an ethics of avowal would still hasten to point out the racialized aspects of the Vick controversy, but they would resist the reflexive moves of asserting human superiority and reducing animal advocacy to anti-Black racism. Rather than dismissing animal suffering, they would seek to understand the exploitation and instrumentalization of dogs and explore the connection between these phenomena and the exploitation and instrumentalization of Black people. They would take a hard look at the harms inflicted in dogfighting; at the exploitation of dogs in the name of research, entertainment, service, the military, and national security; at the unmerciful "mercy" killing of millions of discarded dogs every year in U.S. shelters; and at the connection between dogfighting and other forms of exploitative animal usage, including modern industrial farming. They would explore how the conjoined logics of race and species work together to decide who lives, who dies, who is used as an experimental subject without consent, who is imprisoned, who is asked to

bear the cost of war, who is set upon each other for the entertainment of others, who is rendered a commodity, whose labor is exploited, who is fully grievable, and who is not.

This chapter examines the Michael Vick dogfighting story, exploring the optics of cruelty and racism in turn. The parable-ization of Michael Vick's life is analyzed as a mode of simultaneously reproducing negative tropes about Black masculinity and displacing collective attention from naturalized patterns of institutionalized violence against Blacks and dogs in the contemporary United States. I briefly discuss how animal advocates and race advocates disavow each other's claims in the course of conflict and suggest what it might look like if they instead embraced an ethics of avowal toward each other – an ethics predicated, at least in part, on the understanding that the taxonomies of race and species crucially energize and sustain one another. The next chapter offers some concluding thoughts on the themes of the book.

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