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What would Frederick Douglass and John Africa think of Michael Vick?

Fear of an Animal Planet

by JASON HRIBAL

There remains a good deal of speculation surrounding the events that occurred on the 13th of September 1916. What we know for sure is that a 30 year old circus performer named Mary was lynched in front of a large crowd in Erwin, TN. Apparently, "Murderous Mary," as she was subsequently deemed, had killed a local handler the day before, and a mob of county residents demanded that the owner of Sparks Brothers Circus turn over the elephant for immediate execution. He concurred and discussions began. Death by poisoning? Maybe electrocution? Perhaps, dismemberment by two train engines? Ultimately, they decided upon hanging via chains and a steam-powered industrial crane.

Following the matinee performance on the 13th, the attendants were directed into the nearby rail yards. Two thousand strong, the crowd might have been. Folklorists recorded two versions of that afternoon's events. Some county residents said that Mary was hung alone. While others were quite confident that she was not unaccompanied that day, as a "negro" or two was hung by her side. The little evidence available suggests the former: the lynching was singular. Yet, the latter memories remain more significant – as these witnesses (subconsciously, at least) blurred the distinction between species, as well as demonstrated the systemic nature of oppression. Hmm. . . . I can already see some readers becoming uncomfortable, and others angry, at such a provocative suggestion. In truth, comparing humans to other animals, in any manner, can certainly be dangerous business. Consider, for instance, the Michael Vick dog-fighting case.

Early on, there was a general feeling of outrage towards Vick and sympathy for the dogs. This exposé of dog-fighting shook people up. But just as quickly, much of the commentary – especially from the Left – turned reactionary in its tone. There were those who argued that this whole issue really boiled down to nothing more than a matter of race. In other words, the outraged expressed towards Vick was simply displaced racism. Some explained that this was a cultural issue: Southerners apparently enjoy blood-sports, and thus the general public needs be more considerate and accepting of such customs.

And others played the game of tit-for-tat: humans are worst off – in terms of need and want – than other creatures. Seriously, they contended, who has time to think about dog-fighting, when we have humans being killed in a war?

It is significant to note, that while each of the above commentaries seem to be taking a different approach, there is an underlying thread that connects all three: fear. What do I mean? Well, in almost every reaction that I have over-heard or read about the Vick case, a similarly phrased disclaimer has been used: 'I like dogs, but this is going too far.' This is talk about other animals and about their place in society. This is thinking about social and economic relationships, about hierarchy, and about equality and rights. This talk and thinking is a challenge to anthropoarchy: a challenge to the human domination of our fellow creatures. Thus the fear, to which I spoke of above, is one of losing status, power, and profit as humans. It is of little wonder then that most of (if not all) the reactionary essays written about dog-fighting contain no discussion of dogs. For this omission distracts us from the fundamental issue at hand: dogs, humans, and the nature of exploitation. Luckily, however, there are two key historical figures in the African-American freedom struggle that would have neither been offended nor afraid to think about such issues and what they might mean. Perhaps, then, Frederick Douglass and John Africa can help us continue our dialogue.

In Douglass's descriptions about his days trapped in slavery, he often made direct comparisons between the treatment and use of other animals and that of himself. When purchased, my old master "probably thought as little of my advent, as he would have thought of the addition of a single pig to his stock!" ". . . Like a wild young working animal, I am to be broken to the yoke of a bitter and life-long bondage." Indeed, "I now saw, in my situation, several points of similarity with that of the oxen. They were property, so was I; they were to be broken, so was I; Convey was to break me, I was to break them; break and be broken – such is life." But Douglass was not alone in making these recognitions of commonality, as such thinking was routine among African-American slaves.

Mary Prince, James Roberts, Henry Box Brown, William W. Brown, Martha Browne, William Hayden, Aaron, Leonard Black, Moses Grandy, Henry Bibb, Thomas L. Johnson, Harriet Jacobs, Josiah Henson, John P. Parker, Henry Williamson, and the list goes on. The African-American slave narratives are full of such direct and keen comparisons.

The above narrators spoke about being treated in the same manner that mules were treated – as a form of property, as a stock, as a machine. They wrote about being thought of in the same manner that oxen were thought of – as inferior, unintelligent, and soulless. They complained about having to work in the same manner as horses had to work – without recognition, without adequate food and water, without breaks, without wages. As Thomas L. Johnson was taught early on, "You must understand you are just the same as the ox, horse, or mule, made for the use of the Whiteman and for no other purpose."

The above narrators described being transported alongside sheep – on ships, boats, wagons, and chain-droves. They described being auctioned alongside cows – displayed, examined, sold, and separated from their families. "The cattle," Moses Grandy recalled, "were lowing for their calves, and the men and women were crying for their husbands, wives, or children." Grandy would lose four of her children in a similar fashion. The narrators described being housed with pigs – in barns, shacks, or sheds. They described being controlled and punished like dogs – with the tail of a whip, the point of a rod, or the end of a rope.

When William W. Brown wrote that "at these auction-stands, bones, muscles, sinews, blood and nerves, of human beings, are sold with as much indifference as a farmer in the north sells a horse or sheep," was he analogizing flippantly? When Harriet Jacobs said that women "are put on a par with animals" for "they are considered of no value unless they continually increase their owner's stock," was she playing loose with her comparisons? No. Rather, Brown and Jacobs were describing an actual historical reality: their experiences. Josiah Henson acknowledged that once "I was sent on some hasty errand that they might see how I could run; my points were canvassed as those of a horse would have been; and, doubtless, some account of my various faculties entered into the discussion of the bargain, that my value as a domestic animal might be enhanced." William Hayden recognized that slavery turned him "into a beast of burden – racked with toil, persecuted with stripes." Leonard Black knew that society had "prostituted them to the base purpose of his cupidity, and his baser beastly passions, reducing them to mere things, mere chattels, to be bought and sold like hogs and sheep!" John P. Parker understood that African-Americans ". . . were sold south like their [master's] mules to clear away their forests" and that he himself was "an animal worth \$2000."

At this point, some readers may be wondering if these descriptions might have been written on behalf of other animals. But such an inference would be incorrect. For while Douglass, Johnson, and Grandy may have felt empathy for the ox or cow, none of them challenged the system in regards to the treatment and use of the "brute creation." Rather these narrations were written on behalf of African-Americans, and they made a basic argument. Slavery is an instrument and institution by which other animals are socially oppressed and economically exploited. In other words, cows are slaves. Pigs are slaves. Horses are slaves. Humans should not be.

When Vincent Leaphart changed his name to John Africa, the transformation had been completed. He had become a revolutionary, and the world around him now turned upside down. Beyond race, beyond gender, beyond species, class became the key element in the struggle. His reasoning for this was straight-forward. All living beings come from the same source, and each is interconnected to and interdependent upon one other. Thus, only through cooperation – a cooperation that broke down the barriers of ethnocentrism, of patriarchy, of anthroparchy – could true social change and movement be achieved. This was the origin of MOVE.

From the beginning, MOVE fought against the system through a broad-based approach. For instance, they organized constant protests against prisons and zoos. Why both? Their

answer was simple: these two institutions are essentially the same. Each functioned in the service of the state or empire. Each imprisoned fellow creatures against their will. Each should be abolished. Some readers may decry that such thinking is anthropomorphic. But as I have explained before, anthropomorphism is a fundamentally unempirical but highly political term. It is a vacuous label wheeled as a blunt cudgel. This weapon seeks to retard critical thought, to create fear, and to prevent unity among fellow creatures. But John Africa was never easily intimidated.

The MOVE community itself had always been an extended one. It included men, women, and children. It included people with black skin, brown skin, and white skin. It included cats and dogs. These relations were familial. Indeed, on that May day in 1985, when police and the FBI dropped a bomb on their house, it was not just six adults and five children that were killed. It was six adults, five children, a large number of dogs and cats, and countless other creatures that were killed.

Before his death, John Africa was widely known as "the dog man." This was not a title of derision. Nor was it some sort of satirical statement. Rather, the title signified a true camaraderie, for Africa had a particular love of dogs and hatred of dog-fighting. Whether on the tough streets of Rochester, NY or Philadelphia, PA, he would seek out fights and put a stop to them. Africa would get right into people's faces and explain that slave-masters once organized fights for their pleasure and profit. Therein, it was the African-American slave who was forced to brawl, bloody, and kill each other. Now, we have African-Americans doing the same thing to another animal. Are these actions not full of hypocrisy? Are they not unjust and immoral? Is dog-fighting, in fact, not perpetuating the same system that oppresses and exploits ourselves? Shouldn't the cycle of violence be stopped where it first begins? Well, John Africa believed so, and he could not have been more correct.

There are two primary purposes to the blood-sports of dog-fighting, bull-baiting, and cock-fighting. The first was defined succinctly by the past British War Minister, William Windham: "When the spirit of a proud people is aroused by a call upon their honor, or even by a favorite war-cry, it is not difficult to bring them en masse in action; but no such armies could have been raised in such a space of time, had not the arts of military life been much cultivated throughout the land." Blood-sports, Windham defended and endorsed, functioned as to promote killing in the service of the state. Themistocles, the Greek politician, once staged a cock-fight on the eve of war with Xerxes as a direct means to instill a sanguinary thirst among his troops. In the film documentary, *Winter Soldier*, a Vietnam combat veteran described to the audience the final act of basic training. The commander appeared before his squad with a bunny, and proceeded to tear off the rabbit's head and gut the creature. Indeed, the dog-fighter Michael Vick was not so much a victim of societal violence, as the cause of it. Blood-sports lead to war – not the other way around.

The second purpose of blood-sports is money. Dog-fighting, for example, is big business and part of the vast gambling industry. It is an egregious mistake to see these fights as anything but highly organized, strongly funded, and very lucrative. People of different

ranks may participate (and lose their cash), just like in any other gambling activity. But big money is always somewhere in the background. Millions of dollars are pumped into the planning, promotion, and operational facilities of this industry. There are international, national, state, and local organizations that provide logistical and monetary support. As for the dogs, they are the workers: employed to fight in order to produce a profit for their owners. The multi-millionaire Michael Vick invested heavily into starting and operating a dog-fighting business – the Bad Newz Kennels. And it was from the dogs that his business made its money. This is a class relationship: with Vick on one side and his dogs on the other.

There is a growing consensus among the scholars of slave-studies that the origins of human slavery itself can be traced to the domestication of cattle, pigs, and horses. In other words, the enslavement of humans first appeared in those ancient societies where other animals had recently been domesticated. Slavery begets slavery. Would have either Frederick Douglass or John Africa been surprised or offended to learn of this? No. Nor would they have been shocked or angered to learn that the first modern abolitionist movement was led by Pythagoreans.

The 17th century Philadelphian Quakers – Benjamin Lay, Anthony Benezet, John Woolman, and Joshua Evans – were not just radicals who advocated for the abolition of slavery. They were not just the ones who influenced Granville Sharp, Thomas Clarkson, and John Wesley. Rather they were the radicals who advocated against the oppression and exploitation of all animals: human, pig, horse, and dog. Their actions took the form of writing pamphlets, preaching in the Southern States, schooling African-American children, using means of civil disobedience, boycotting of products, campaigning for the poor waged-laborer, refusing to eat the flesh of another creature, and refusing to ride in a horse-operated carriage. Indeed, named after the ancient Greek philosopher Pythagoras, these Pythagorean Quakers were part of a larger movement, one that stretched from the English Revolution through the French Revolution. Although small in number, this movement was nonetheless powerful in voice – for its struggle to turn the world upside down was one based upon a broad class vision. Thus, in addition to helping bring an eventual end to slavery, as well as leading the way in a myriad of other human causes, the modern Pythagoreans also forced mainstream society to deal with their treatment and use of other animals. These dealings took shape in two 19th century reforms: animal rights and vegetarianism.

But to return to Douglass and Africa, their status as humans would not have been threatened after the discovery of this history. Nor would have either of them been shocked or frightened to learn that the industrialist Henry Ford obtained the idea of the assembly line (as applied in the manufacture of automobiles) from studying the operations of the slaughter-house. Or that the first business schools at American universities and colleges were the Agricultural Departments. Or that the economist R.H. Coase himself – long before he developed his infamous neo-liberal theorem and accepted the Nobel Prize – sharpen his teeth in the 1930s by studying the labor-power of pigs and bacon production. Or that, in my parent's home county of Stephenson, IL, the old industrial factories have been all but replaced by new neo-liberal ones: Wal-Mart, a

prison, and a gigantic pig-processing facility. Or that standing behind the current expropriation and genocide occurring in Darfur, as the sociologist David Nibert has described, is the cattle industry – as it wants the land for beef production.

Neither Frederick Douglass nor John Africa would have been afraid of the above information. They would not have ignored or denied such comparisons between species and recognitions of commonalities. They would not have tried to intimidate others from thinking about such issues. They would not have attempted to prohibit discussion about such issues. Douglass and Africa did not fear an animal planet, for both fully understood the systemic nature of social oppression and economic exploitation. And, in the case of John Africa, one of them did something about it. These are lessons to be learned.

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