

Becoming in Kind: Race, Class, Gender, and Nation in Cultures of Dog Rescue and Dogfighting.

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“Becoming in Kind”: Race, Class, Gender, and Nation in Cultures of Dog Rescue and Dogfighting

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Abstract

Seen by some as innately dangerous and by others as victims of neglectful or abusive owners, pit bulls and pit bull-type dogs are central to numerous contemporary debates about both dangerous dogs and dogs in danger. This article takes up these debates in order to explore how specific relationships between humans and pit bulls reveal intersections among race, class, gender, nation, breed, and species. Beginning with the category problem of the pit bull, I turn to the recent arrest and imprisonment of NFL player Michael Vick. An African American man playing in a position traditionally occupied by white men, quarterback, Vick became the subject of a highly racialized media storm when revelations about his involvement in dogfighting were

made public. The storm intensified when the dogs formerly belonging to Vick were rehabilitated by rescue groups and placed in families or sanctuaries. Drawing from work by Donna Haraway and others on “becoming with,” I examine the intersections between ontology and identity revealed by not only the various representations of Vick, the people who rehabilitated his dogs, and the dogs themselves but also a series of narratives written by white southern dogfighters. I argue that these examples demonstrate that human “becomings with” nonhuman animals are often “becomings in kind,” becomings in which each shapes the categorical kind of the other.

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Harlan Weaver

In September 2002 I adopted a “pit bull” I named Haley. Rescued from euthanasia at the hands of animal control, Haley made the rounds of several foster homes before our meeting on a sunny San Francisco street. She proceeded to accompany me through the many life changes of a twenty-something graduate student: marching with me in protests and Pride parades, moving with me to Santa Cruz and then back to the Bay Area, and staying by my side as we walked through numerous public spaces. This last element of our relationship merits some discussion, because during our time together, I transitioned from female to male. While the social is always part of the personal in trans, transgender, and transsexual experiences, in my case Haley’s presence deeply shapes my world. In moments when my appearance has been at its most liminal, when I have felt vulnerable as a visibly transgender person, she has ensured my safety. Concurrently, my whiteness, queer identity, and middle-class status encourage other humans to read Haley as less threatening; in my presence, she is perceived as less dangerous. Each of us shapes who the other is. This enmeshment of our identities exemplifies what I term “becoming in kind.”

Becoming in kind signals the deep imbrications of identity and being that many relationships between humans and nonhuman animals entail. Consider gender—as the above story reveals, Haley helps make my gender expression possible, for my gender is shaped by the space between us, just as her experiences of species and breed are shaped by my race, class, and sexuality. The “kind” of becoming in kind indexes the role of these identity categories in relationships between humans and nonhuman animals. “Becoming” indicates the nonstatic, processual nature of these relationships, a sense of negotiating togetherness as an ongoing process, a becoming like that described by Rosi Braidotti as “an affect that flows, . . . a composition, a location that needs to be constructed together with, that is to say in the encounter with, others.”¹ Becoming in kind speaks to the joint building of a sense of togetherness, a we, and the kind of beings we become.

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