

**Abolitionary Advocacy:**  
Expanding Empathy Toward Total Liberation

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## **Abolitionary Advocacy: Expanding Empathy Toward Total Liberation**

*“There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle, because we do not live single-issue lives.”  
—Audre Lorde*

Dressed in a faded jumpsuit with hands cuffed behind my back, i<sup>1</sup> marched toward the cellblock in a single-file line. Anticipating our approach, prisoners gathered along the chain link’s opposite side to greet us. I cautiously locked eyes with a few as we passed, trying to discern their emotions without betraying my own. The tension underlying these silent interactions was palpable, and time slowed as i imagined the worst.<sup>2</sup> Suddenly, somewhere hidden from view, the tense uncertainty was torn by an inmate’s baritone yell: “Free the ducks!” The prisoners responded with cheers and smiles, and i breathed a sigh of relief. Evidently, news of our action had preceded us.

However, while the inmates knew that we were part of 79 peaceful activists arrested inside a Californian factory farm and slaughterhouse, they didn’t understand the complete rationale motivating our actions. Responding to their curiosity, we began to share details of our arrest as soon as the officers assigning our bunks had left. We explained that we entered the facility to rescue baby ducks from slaughter, liberating 32 individuals to live out their lives in sanctuary. We explained how we take fecal samples to expose the deadly pathogens brewing on factory farms, samples public health officials cite in their calls to shut these facilities down. And we explained how the pollution we document helps to pressure environmental groups to center the harms of animal agriculture in their advocacy.

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<sup>1</sup> When not the first word of a sentence i prefer to use the minuscule for personal pronouns as a reminder of humility, especially given English’s use of the minuscule for second- and third-person pronouns; it is a conscious decision to de-center the importance of the first person (myself) in relation to others.

<sup>2</sup> To justify incarceration, “criminals” must be framed as deserving of punishment. From CSI to CNN, popular culture is replete with media that serves this purpose by painting incarcerated individuals as dangerous outliers in need of reform. My (unfounded) nerves were a product of this social conditioning.

However, our audience wasn't entirely new to these issues. In fact, while dozens of prisoners had worked within animal agriculture, six were previously employed by the very slaughterhouse at which we were arrested. They unanimously condemned the conditions they suffered and celebrated our activism for exposing their former employer's rampant exploitation.

And yet, although excited by the challenge we posed to their ex-employer, so too were inmates critical of our activism. Specifically, they questioned our focus on farmed animals over themselves. For they could see what too many animal advocates have the privilege to overlook: animal agriculture's flagrant human rights violations. This tension hit home during a casual conversation over cards, when an inmate named Aaron<sup>3</sup> sincerely asked me, "Why do you care about freeing animals from cages, but ignore us caged humans?" Parallel discussions went silent as neighboring prisoners awaited my response. However, while many justifications immediately jumped to mind, none were satisfactory, an inadequacy that has left me deeply troubled ever since.

"Until every cage is empty" has long been a motto underlying the animal liberation movement. However, Aaron's question spoke to its historical hypocrisy. Every cage ought to mean *every* cage, and ignoring the plight of incarcerated humans fatally compromises this ethic. The chilling stories Aaron and other ex-slaughterhouse workers shared during my three days in jail—and the visceral pain with which they shared them—transformed my understanding of the motto, and committed me to centering the plight of marginalized workers within my animal liberation ethic.

Unfortunately, my activism's previous neglect of factory farm and slaughterhouse workers is not an outlier in the animal liberation movement. Rather, from individuals to institutions, callous indifference to the plight of workers runs rampant. A simple scroll through most vegan Facebook

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<sup>3</sup> Whose name has been changed to preserve anonymity.

groups is bound to turn up angry comments vilifying slaughterhouse workers as deplorables.<sup>4</sup> This grassroots animosity is then enacted institutionally, where animal-cruelty lawsuits are proudly filed against individual workers. In this book we refer to this stance—collaborating with the police state to target marginalized workers—as carceral veganism.<sup>5</sup> This mainstream practice makes Aaron’s question all the more serious, for not only do animal advocates commonly ignore the plight of caged humans, but we are actively responsible for putting them in cages.

In many ways, the vilification that leads to carceral veganism is understandable. We are horrified by videos of animal cruelty, violence we rightly identify as criminal. And we respond based on how we’ve been conditioned to understand crime—that individuals are responsible for their actions, and that crimes ought to be punished with incarceration. Within this framework, it perhaps makes sense that we should jail the individual workers we deem responsible.

But while perhaps understandable, this perspective is incomplete and inaccurate. Factory farm and slaughterhouse workers are not the source of violence, per se, but simply instruments of a violent system. Rather, responsibility for animal agriculture’s brutal (ab)use of more-than-human animals lies not with these workers, but with those who manufacture and fulfill demand for animal products—that is, the corporate interests marketing animal-based foods and the individuals consuming them. Ignoring this larger critique—i.e., missing the forest for the trees—distracts attention from addressing the systems responsible.

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<sup>4</sup> During the 2016 US Presidential election, Hillary Clinton infamously called “half” of Trump’s supporters “deplorables.” But while such generalized attacks on the moral character of others may feel good, they come at the expense of efficacy and accuracy. For the central issue is not the moral flaws of individuals, per se, but the systems of oppression that condition and constrain individuals to act in oppressive ways.

<sup>5</sup> I do not believe veganism as identify is a useful framework to the animal liberation movement. Rather, i believe terms like anti-speciesist or animal advocate are more appropriate, and instead understand veganism as a consumptive strategy for effecting social change. However, i use “veganism” in this context as it refers to individuals/groups who by-and-large still identify as “vegan.” For critiques that explore the shortcomings of understanding veganism as an identity rather than a practice, see Hsiung 2009 and Dickstein et al. 2020.

Simply put, carceral veganism targets a symptom of the violent system, not its source. Instead, by punishing the most marginalized humans amongst us, carceral veganism becomes a force of oppression itself. As i will argue, the animal liberation movement's ability to pursue justice depends upon our seeing workers not as the enemy, but as an oppressed group deserving of our support. Only then can the movement achieve its liberatory potential.

### **Expanding Empathy**

While it took my hearing stories firsthand and behind bars to honor the oppression suffered by slaughterhouse and factory farm workers, it needn't have. Just as most animal activists care deeply about farmed animals without stepping foot inside a factory farm or slaughterhouse—without meeting the victims themselves—so too can activists develop compassion for the workers we have yet to meet.<sup>6</sup> Empathy for humans and nonhumans grows from the same roots, and is not zero sum. Through providing a brief overview of the conditions endured by these workers, i hope this section empowers you to expand your empathy accordingly.

Meatpacking—that is, the slaughtering and dismembering of nonhuman animals—is by far the most dangerous occupation in the United States.<sup>7</sup> Any given year, 20-40 percent<sup>8</sup> of slaughterhouse workers suffer nonfatal injuries on the job.<sup>9</sup> According to the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), on average slaughterhouse workers lost a body part or were sent to the hospital for in-patient treatment every other day between 2015 and 2018.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Just as Liz Marshall's film "The Ghosts of Our Machine" aims to shed light on the nonhumans society exploits out of sight, it is important to illuminate the hidden exploitation of human workers as well. So too are these workers ghosts in our machine, and so too can sharing their stories compel activists and the broader public to support their plight.

<sup>7</sup> Smith 2017

<sup>8</sup> Aaron's stories helped expand my empathy by personifying the violence done to slaughterhouse workers. Similarly, i encourage you to imagine the faces behind this statistic and the statistics that follow.

<sup>9</sup> Worrall 2005

<sup>10</sup> McConnell 2019b, 2

However, because OSHA collects these statistics from only half the country, the strong disincentives that exist for limiting reporting, and the ease of under reporting, this number of serious injuries is surely *much* higher.<sup>11</sup>

Alongside these particularly gruesome traumas are an overwhelming number of less conspicuous overuse injuries. OSHA has reported that repetitive motion injuries amongst slaughterhouse workers were nearly seven times the national average when compared with other industries.<sup>12</sup> Few workers are able to escape this fate. For example, a 2015 report by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health found that three in four slaughterhouse workers suffer abnormal nerve conditions in at least one hand.<sup>13</sup> In large part due to these overuse injuries, another report found that—after a year of interviewing slaughterhouse workers from six different states—nearly everyone interviewed reported their lives centering around the management of chronic pain.<sup>14</sup>

Despite this sobering status quo, industry has been pushing to cut regulations, and they have been winning. For example, under Trump the USDA rolled back regulations to allow slaughterhouses to increase line speeds, in many cases without limit.<sup>15</sup> Increased line speeds equate to increases in both traumatic and overuse injuries.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, OSHA now has the fewest inspectors—workers charged with ensuring the compliance and safety of workplace conditions—

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<sup>11</sup> McConnell 2019b, 28

<sup>12</sup> Lowe 2016

<sup>13</sup> Lowe 2016

<sup>14</sup> McConnell 2019a

<sup>15</sup> McConnell 2019b

<sup>16</sup> Increased line speeds also increase nonhuman suffering, as it increases the percentage of nonhumans incorrectly “stunned” before slaughter as well as the total number of animals who are bred and killed, a clear example of how industry profits come at the expense of nonhumans and workers alike. What is good for animal agriculture is almost never good for its employees or for farmed animals.

in its history.<sup>17</sup> As a result, we are left with the most dangerous workplace in the country becoming even more dangerous and with even fewer safety measures.

However, the brutality of slaughterhouse work is not limited to physical injuries; rather, slaughterhouse conditions impact mental wellness just as acutely. Studies have found slaughterhouse workers to be especially susceptible to Perpetration-Induced Traumatic Stress (PITS), a form of post-traumatic stress disorder commonly linked with symptoms like anxiety, depression, increased paranoia, panic, addiction, dissociation, a sense of disintegration, and amnesia.<sup>18</sup> In looking to substantiate these outcomes, criminologists have measured the impact of slaughterhouse employment on crime rates, finding that such employment not only increases total arrest rates but disproportionately increases the rate of violent crime and sexual crime.<sup>19</sup>

Albeit marginally safer, factory farm workers also endure some of the country's most dangerous working conditions. At least 25 percent (though likely *much* higher) of factory farm workers suffer from serious respiratory and febrile diseases—including acute bronchitis, acute respiratory distress syndrome, acute organic dust toxic syndrome, non-infectious sinusitis, and asthma—just as they (and their families) face higher risk of infectious disease.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, occupational injuries are also common, as over 30 percent of factory farm workers will suffer a serious injury while on the job.<sup>21</sup>

To be clear, neither slaughterhouse workers nor factory farm workers are compensated for these devastating costs to physical and mental health. On the contrary, slaughterhouse workers earn 44 percent less than the national average for manufacturing work while factory farm workers

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<sup>17</sup> Rainy 2019

<sup>18</sup> Dillard 2007, 7

<sup>19</sup> Fitzgerald, Kalof, and Dietz 2009

<sup>20</sup> Andrews and Kautza 2008, 29; Merchant et al. 2008, 12–15

<sup>21</sup> Ramos, Fuentes, and Carvajal-Suarez 2018

earn 42 percent less than average wage and salary workers in the country.<sup>22</sup> As a result, nearly half of slaughterhouse workers live in families with incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty line.<sup>23</sup>

Importantly, these consequences do not afflict individuals at random, but disparately affect marginalized communities. More than 80 percent of frontline slaughterhouse workers are people of color, and over half are non-citizens—the vast majority undocumented—about three times the national average for manufacturing workers.<sup>24</sup> To put this into perspective, it is not uncommon for slaughterhouses to employ a workforce that speaks more than 40 different languages.<sup>25</sup> The same goes for factory farms, where a plurality (if not majority) of workers come from communities of color, are undocumented migrant workers, do not speak English as their first language, and have not completed a high school level education.<sup>26</sup> This reality, combined with the fact that farm labor is already excluded from many legal protections in the United States, leaves these workers especially susceptible to being exploited.<sup>27</sup>

Needless to say, workers do not happily pursue these positions. This truth is reflected by the industry’s astronomical turnover rate, with rates at many slaughterhouses exceeding 100 percent every year.<sup>28</sup> Rather, because these employees often don’t have another option, they are forced to accept brutal conditions at subpar pay.<sup>29</sup> These violent jobs tend to make desperate

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<sup>22</sup> McConnell 2019b, 14; Andrews and Kautza 2008, 17

<sup>23</sup> Fremstad, Rho, and Brown 2020

<sup>24</sup> Fremstad, Rho, and Brown 2020; Gelatt 2020; McConnell 2019b, 18–19

<sup>25</sup> Goodman and Benavides 2020

<sup>26</sup> Missouri Coalition for the Environment 2019; Farm Sanctuary 2017

<sup>27</sup> Schlottmann and Sebo 2019, 88

<sup>28</sup> Human Rights Watch 2004

<sup>29</sup> As a personal anecdote, consider Matias (whose name has been changed to preserve anonymity), a US immigrant whom I lived with for nearly two years in Nicaragua. Political persecution and economic desperation forced Matias to flee to the US in 2019. As an undocumented immigrant without English proficiency, a factory farm in Wisconsin is the only place he has been able to find work. And despite the hardship he endures on the job, his family’s economic needs and medical bills (his adolescent daughter has cancer) force him to continue. As tragic as Matias’ story is, it is not unique. Most of his coworkers have been forced into factory farm/slaughterhouse work for analogous reasons, and similarly lack viable employment alternatives.

conditions even worse. The preponderance of former slaughterhouse and factory farm workers around me in jail spoke to this truth.

And given their vulnerability, speaking out against abusive conditions is simply not tolerated. For example, in 2019, slaughterhouse employees brought a lawsuit against their employer for enabling rampant sexual and physical abuse in the workplace.<sup>30</sup> Soon thereafter, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) arrested 680 of these workers in their largest raid of the decade.<sup>31</sup> Raids like this send a clear message to marginalized slaughterhouse workers around the country: shut up, keep your head down, and survive.

It is this marginalized demographic that animal advocates target when we seek to punish individual workers. In doing so—in focusing our persecution on the victims of capitalism, racism, and nationalism—the animal liberation movement magnifies the injustice of these oppressive systems. That is, by ignoring the systems of oppression that force workers to accept intolerable work conditions, vilifying workers accentuates injustice.

To be fair, a more charitable explanation exists for animal advocacy's traditional focus on persecuting workers: perhaps we have simply worked with the tools available. For unfortunately—though not coincidentally—every anti-cruelty law in the US has been designed to exempt corporations from legal responsibility.<sup>32</sup> This leaves targeting individual workers as the only avenue available for legal redress. And in a perhaps well-intentioned attempt to defend farmed animals, animal advocates have pursued it vigorously.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Rosenberg and Cooke 2019

<sup>31</sup> Solis and Amy 2019

<sup>32</sup> Wolfson and Sullivan 2006

<sup>33</sup> Unfortunately, this charitable explanation only applies to legal strategies, not to animal advocates in general or to non-legal strategies in particular.

Regardless, just because individual workers are currently the only legal targets available does not justify their targeting. Simply put, doing the wrong thing right is worse than doing nothing at all. For not only is targeting marginalized workers unjust, but counterproductive. The issue is not desperate workers, but the systems that cause their desperation. Targeting workers hides this reality. Instead, in scapegoating the victims, this misguided focus shields the root causes from scrutiny. Moreover, it serves to alienate animal advocates from natural allies. That is, by targeting the victims of capitalism, racism, and nationalism, animal advocates position ourselves in opposition to movements fighting these oppressive systems.

### **Toward a Praxis of Consistent Anti-Oppression**

However, the fact that just avenues for legal action are currently limited does not mean that justice cannot be advanced. Rather, replacing carceral veganism with a sincere concern for workers would transform the ability of animal advocates to achieve the just ends we strive for. This path begins by recognizing speciesism's violent synergies with capitalism, incarceration, racism and nationalism.

Capitalism, like speciesism, is built upon exploiting the labor of the most vulnerable—human and nonhuman alike. In the process, both systems of oppression reduce the value of sentient beings to their profit potential. Covid-19 threw this reality into stark relief. Slaughterhouse workers—deemed as expendable—were denied basic safety precautions throughout the pandemic, and have suffered some of the US's highest rates of infection as a result.<sup>34</sup> While an “oversupply” of farmed animals—deemed as disposable—were exterminated early in the pandemic via methods like ventilation shutdown, wherein corporations conduct mass killings via hyperthermia and

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<sup>34</sup> This expendability is further highlighted by slaughterhouse supervisors (allegedly) betting money on the number of workers who would contract Covid-19 on the job (Hart 2020).

suffocation (a practice as savage as it sounds).<sup>35</sup> Because capitalism and speciesism depend upon the ability to render individuals as disposable, attacking the root issue of expendability poses a challenge to both.

Incarceration, like animal agriculture, depends upon the technological manipulation of life.<sup>36</sup> Both systems cage individuals, control their movement, and regulate their feeding. And both operate by hiding their victims from the public eye. Because these systems depend upon the same rationales and processes, defending one entails defending the other. Stated simply, as long as there are prisons, there will be factory farms.<sup>37</sup> For as long as society accepts caging humans, so too will we accept caging nonhumans.<sup>38</sup> As such, by pursuing and justifying the incarceration of humans, carceral veganism strengthens the very oppression it purports to address.

Racism and nationalism, like speciesism, are supremacist ideologies that devalue the moral worth of others based upon morally irrelevant attributes—i.e., an individual’s race, nationality, or species. Given their shared ideological roots, their maintenance or deconstruction are codependent. That is, these supremacist ideologies rise or fall together. For as long as we allow a human’s moral worth to be correlated with their skin tone or birthplace—or, for that matter, with their gender, sexuality, ability, etc.—what hope is there for separating moral status from species categorization?<sup>39</sup> Moreover, beyond their ideological interdependence,<sup>40</sup> animal agriculture functions primarily on the backs of non-whites and non-citizens. As such, not only does animal

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<sup>35</sup> Veterinarians Against Ventilation Shutdown 2020

<sup>36</sup> Foucault refers to this relationship as “biopower,” which he describes as the “power to foster life or disallow it to the point of death.” (Foucault 1976, 138.)

<sup>37</sup> This riff was inspired by Leo Tolstoy’s oft cited quote, “As long as there are slaughterhouses, there will be battlefields.”

<sup>38</sup> The same goes for draconian anti-immigrant policies; for example, as long as we tolerate family separation at the border, so too will we tolerate the dairy industry separating newborn calves from their mothers, and vice versa.

<sup>39</sup> Ko & Ko 2017; Taylor 2017; Adams 2015

<sup>40</sup> To be sure, it is important to note that each of these “isms” are unique in important ways. Even so, this caveat shouldn’t detract from recognizing their interdependence.

agriculture accentuate the harms of racism and nationalism, but it relies upon their very existence to function.

Recognizing these overlaps should spur animal advocates to embrace an ethic of consistent anti-oppression throughout our work—that is, to ensure our advocacy does not strengthen or benefit from other forms of oppression. And given the imbricated position of slaughterhouse and factory farm workers within these oppressive systems, centering our support for these workers is a good place to start.

But while ending carceral veganism is a necessary step, it is not sufficient. Instead, rather than simply ensuring our animal advocacy doesn't reproduce other systems of oppression—e.g., via carceral veganism's punishment of marginalized workers—we need to actively support other liberation movements. For example, not only do we need to end carceral veganism, but we need to actively practice decarceral veganism—abolitionary veganism. To be clear, by abolitionary veganism i do not refer to the work of Gary Francione and his so-called “Abolitionist Approach.”<sup>41</sup> Rather, by abolitionary veganism i refer to an anti-speciesist ethic that simultaneously rejects the validity of prisons to begin with. That is, not an ethic that appropriates the work of prison abolitionists,<sup>42</sup> but an ethic that expands our focus to support prison abolition as an end in itself.

Unfortunately, just as it is common to see animal advocates vilify slaughterhouse workers, so too do animal advocates frequently question the need to support other liberation movements.

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<sup>41</sup> Francione and Charlton 2015

<sup>42</sup> The same critique applies to animal advocates who appropriate rhetoric from Black liberation to further the cause of animal liberation (or who appropriate historic tragedies like the Holocaust, etc). For example, riffing off “Black Lives Matter” to declare “Animal Lives Matter.” Or, as Marjorie Spiegel does in *The Dreaded Comparison*, positioning imagery of Black bondage with nonhuman animal bondage (1996). These distasteful comparisons are “dreaded” for a reason. For at best this appropriation falsely insinuates that anti-Black racism is over. And at its worst it instrumentalizes Black oppression for the benefit of others. Rather, we need anti-racist animal advocacy that actively supports Black liberation as an end in itself. For a deeper discussion, see Claire Jean Kim's chapter “Abolition” from *Critical Terms for Animal Studies* (2018).

Specifically, given the scale and severity of anthropogenic nonhuman suffering,<sup>43</sup> animal advocates are often quick to argue the senior importance of the animal liberation movement above others.<sup>44</sup> Instead, to the extent many animal advocates are willing to acknowledge how parallel systems of oppression are built upon speciesism, they argue that other leftist movements must support our work first.<sup>45</sup>

But the notion of needing to prioritize liberation movements is a red herring. We shouldn't see various movements as either-or—e.g., pursuing anti-speciesism *or* anti-racism—but rather as all of the above.<sup>46</sup> In analyzing how animal activists have historically clashed with other social justice movements, Claire Jean Kim instead advocates for a practice of “mutual avowal,” of “open and active acknowledgment of connection with other struggles.”<sup>47</sup> Such a practice would identify common enemies—e.g., “neoliberal elites waging war against racialized groups, animals, nature, and others”—and unite previously disparate movements to fight common enemies for shared goals.<sup>48</sup>

But given speciesism's dominance across society alongside the animal liberation movement's continued marginalization, this collaborative work needs to start with us. We urgently need to stop instrumentalizing other struggles and instead begin to authentically join their fight. And once we do—once we begin to sincerely integrate consistent anti-oppression into our

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<sup>43</sup> Humans kill and consume over one trillion animals—1,000,000,000,000—every year (Schlottmann and Sebo 2019, 1). Yet this harm only scratches the surface when we consider the quintillions—1,000,000,000,000,000,000—of sentient nonhumans harmed by anthropogenic environmental change (Muehlhauser 2017).

<sup>44</sup> Even more problematically, many animal advocates are quick to defend their insular focus by pointing to the carnism and speciesism common in other groups, questioning why they should support freedom fighters who contribute to animal exploitation themselves. While childish at best, this vindictive justification hypocritically fails to note how animal advocates are similarly culpable of contributing to other systems of oppression.

<sup>45</sup> Kymlicka and Donaldson 2014

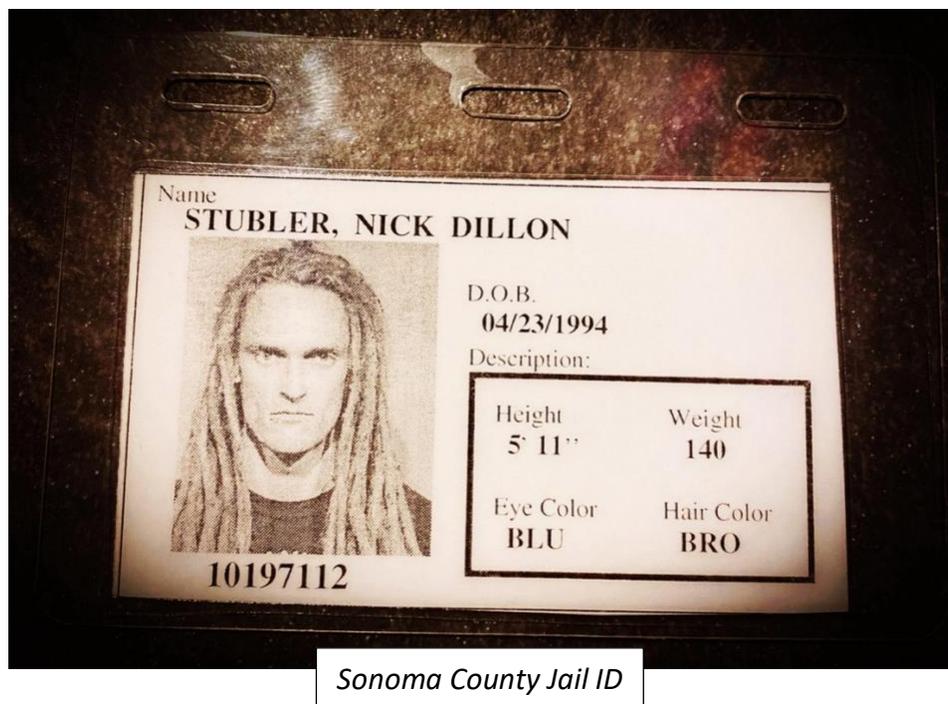
<sup>46</sup> When making this point, advocates often cite Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous words from jail: “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.”

<sup>47</sup> Kim 2015, 20.

<sup>48</sup> Id. Kim goes on to explain, “If we develop an ethics of mutual avowal in relation to other justice struggles, we not only reduce the chance we will reinscribe other forms of oppression (even inadvertently), but also open ourselves to new ways of imagining ourselves in relation to others.”

advocacy—there is reason to believe strong, multi-justice coalitions can be built. For just as animal agriculture disparately impacts marginalized communities, so too would ending animal agriculture disparately benefit them.

The animal liberation movement is at a crossroads. Will we take the enlightened approach of targeting underlying systems, or continue our short-sighted and oppressive practice of persecuting individuals? Will we develop powerful coalitions by centering consistent anti-oppression in our work, or remain “orphans of the Left”?<sup>49</sup> It is my dearest hope that soon humans like Aaron—my insightful cellmate—will no longer have reason to charge animal advocates with misanthropy, but that advocating for nonhuman animals will instead be seen as a basic litmus test for freedom fighters around the world. This future depends upon our leaving carceral veganism in the past. And until every cage is empty, i hope you will join us in effecting that change.



<sup>49</sup> Kymlicka and Donaldson 2014, 1

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