

# Fur Is Never Okurrrr: PETA and White Framing of Fur Consumption in the Case of Black Female Celebrities

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## Introduction

The general topic of animal rights has been a heated discussion, particularly for the last decade. However, the subtopic of fur consumption has been ongoing for several decades, with PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) initiating the cultural disavowal of fur in the 1980s. PETA is one of the world's most renowned animal rights organizations, dedicated to advocating for animal rights by fighting against animal cruelty, promoting veganism, driving legislative change, and raising public awareness. PETA continued its practice of publicly denouncing fur by targeting fur-wearing celebrities through its public 'naming and shaming' strategy.<sup>1</sup> The organisation uses its strategy in various ways, including attacking various companies as well as individuals. When it comes to individuals, PETA focuses its critique on celebrities as they are likely to have an impact on public opinion. In its critique on fur consumption, the organisation spares no one, regardless of gender and race. However, the focus of this essay is on PETA's critique of black female celebrities in the American (United States) context. This is, firstly, due to the fact female celebrities are more likely to be seen wearing fur than their male counterparts. Secondly, the essay focuses on black celebrities to show how PETA's strategy fails to be looked at through a racial lens.

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<sup>1</sup> In its original term, the 'naming and shaming' strategy refers to attempts of human rights organisations to build political influence through public exposure campaigns and elite lobbying efforts (Pruce and Budabin 2016, 409). PETA first used the 'naming and shaming' strategy to target the Australian wool industry over the cruel agricultural practice of mulesing (Bromberg 2021).

Therefore, the paper aims to explore how PETA engages in white normativity through the 'naming and shaming' strategy of black female celebrities wearing fur and consequently what type of public backlash it exposes itself to. The paper provides a brief overview of contemporary fur consumption and PETA's opposition to it as well as analyses three examples of public communication encounters between PETA and three black female celebrities. Based on the examples, the paper examines in which way PETA engages in white normativity that is consequently detrimental to the animal rights movement. The first example looks into PETA's communication with Aretha Franklin's family about the donation of the singer's fur collection after her death and examines how the organisation engages in the 'white saviour' narrative. The second example examines singer Kelis' response to PETA after receiving a private letter from the organisation about wearing a fur hat. The example investigates how white framing of animal rights issues can cause a backlash to PETA when engaging with black female celebrities on the topic of fur-wearing. Finally, the third example delves into the organisation's public shaming of rapper Cardi B for wearing a fur coat and the private harassment and racist behaviour showcased by PETA's members towards Cardi B's stylist.

### **Brief history of fur in the United States**

Fur has often been a site of controversy in contemporary Western culture. For a long time, this had much to do with fur's inaccessibility and the symbolism of luxury it represented in the early/mid 20th century in the United States. Meanwhile, in the last few decades, it became a hot topic due to the question of morality and its connection to animal suffering. The redirection of discussion on fur is connected to two main elements. Firstly, the establishment of PETA and its stance against animal cruelty and secondly, the expanded consumption of fur products. Between the 1970s and 1980s, there has been a swift change in the profile of the consumer of real fur as the average buyer switched from a middle-aged man in his fifties to a young woman in her mid-twenties (Belkin 1985). According to Lori Gruen (1994, 71), the fur industry not only plays a role in making women feel beautiful and glamorous but also weaponizes class since fur has had a "high-class status". As fur became more accessible, but still remained a symbol of luxury and beauty, more women than ever before went on to purchase fur coats for themselves, rather than receiving them as gifts, usually from men.

This 'class to mass' shift (Olson and Goodnight 1994, 255) changed the nature of selling fur. Merchandisers started selling fur in open places such as stadiums rather than intimidating places such as fur salons (Haynes 1987). Some fur chains, such as

Jindo fur, even had aspirations to become “the McDonald’s of the fur industry” (Leach 1993). Class is intrinsically intertwined with race and as Chester Higgins (2019) writes, this “cultural disavowal of fur” coincided with black women’s ability to purchase them. In other words, only when fur became less of a luxury and available to more people of different socio-economic backgrounds, was there an overlap of fur being perceived as a problematic and unnecessary item.

In its first decade of work, PETA decided to focus on fur as the main issue of animal rights. The organisation did state its stance against leather and meat eating, but considered those to be “big steps to take”, while fur was perceived as the easiest first choice for consumers to change their habits (Bushnell 1989, 77). As a result, many animal advocacy groups decided to portray fur-wearing as a selfish and distasteful act, with pioneers of animal rights such as Peter Siegel stating they are “going to make a fur coat mean ‘no class’” (quoted in Beck 1988). Elaborating further, Siegel stated: “we decided to make fur seem vulgar, a symbol of someone who is tasteless and uneducated, so that people would feel they were being admired if they didn’t wear fur” (quoted in Kasindorf 1990, 29).

To change people’s perception of fur, the general anti-fur campaign started with three main strategies: shaming, the presence of celebrities and mocking remakes of fur ads (Olson and Goodnight 1994, 262). Celebrities were seen as a powerful advocacy tool as they are the actors that set the agenda to the general public of what is considered to be ‘in-fashion’ (Horn 1975, 228). Today, PETA’s ‘naming and shaming’ strategy of celebrities combines all three strategies above. In the past, celebrities were only shown in a positive light as anti-fur campaigners, whereas today PETA either praises or shames celebrities. In addition, mocking remakes of fur ads in the 1980s today expanded to various types of visuals on social media. When it comes to media visibility, PETA’s President Ingrid Newkirk stated any press coverage, pro or con animal rights, is good as it pushes for more conversation on the issues (Reisner 1992). Thus, shaming celebrities in the public eye is killing two birds with one stone, since it spreads PETA’s negative message about fur-wearing and encourages media as well as individuals to talk about the issue.

PETA’s approach to addressing fur consumption through shaming celebrities falls short of viewing the problem through a racial lens. This failure happens due to what Arnold Farr (2004, 144–145) calls “white racialised consciousness” that shapes the campaigns of animal advocacy organisations in the West that predominantly consist of white people (Wrenn 2017, 32). This “white racialised consciousness” presents itself in different ways in PETA’s campaigns, beyond the anti-fur campaign. For example,

by presenting racial violence against black people as a thing of the past by showing images of antebellum USA or the Jim Crow era (Rodrigues 2020, 76), or by blurring the human-animal division without explicitly connecting it to the issue of racism, which then fails to acknowledge the animalisation of black people that still occurs today (Kim 2018, 17). On the other hand, comparing animal injustice to racial injustice does identify white people as the oppressor (Rodrigues 2020, 83), but arguably the lack of emphasis on the oppressor can make that comparison problematic. In any case, the animal liberation movement, unlike other social movements, is not seen as a struggle per se. Nonhuman animals are the oppressed group, while the people coming from the same group as the main oppressor are working towards liberating nonhuman animals (Nocella 2012, 144).

Moreover, white people practice domination when they urge a person of colour to change their socio-political and economic behavior (Nocella 2012, 150). Taking into account the element of class in the case of black female celebrities, the issue becomes more complex than that. Nevertheless, this is a viewpoint that should not be neglected. Following Nocella's statement, Singer's comment (Yanci and Singer 2015) that anti-speciesism and anti-racism go hand in hand and that is harder to support one oppression while fighting against the other, is looked through the "white racialised consciousness" and fails to look at the complexity of the problem in its entirety. Angela P. Harris (2009, 16–17) claims it is no surprise people of colour are not more active in the field of animal rights since oftentimes animal advocates fall short of acknowledging the importance of racial justice in their work. Harris' criticism, however, does not imply people of colour should not support animal rights, but aims to point out that ignoring to put social justice as the central point of discussion on the relationship between humans and the non-human biosphere risks "further entrenching white supremacy". Therefore, the following three examples aim to demonstrate how PETA's communication toward black female celebrities contributes to the entrenchment of white normativity in animal advocacy.

### **Aretha Franklin and the white saviour complex**

The first communication case concerns PETA's open letter to Aretha Franklin's niece Sabrina Garrett-Owens (PETA 2018b), asking her to donate Franklin's fur collection to PETA's fur donation program, which sends fur coats to those in need, such as people in refugee camps, homeless shelters and to wildlife rehabilitation facilities that reuse the coats as bedding for orphaned wildlife animals. The organisation's Vice President Tracy

Reiman saluted Franklin's dedication to social justice, especially the singer's devotion to the empowerment of African-American women, and urged her to now help animals and "end the cruel era of wearing animal fur". Moreover, PETA declared that Franklin's family donation would "secure Aretha forever as an 'Angel' for animals".

It is important to mention PETA reached out to Aretha Franklin during her lifetime and not in a positive manner. A decade earlier, PETA sent her the following note:

*Dear Aretha –*

*Music lovers may think of you as a "queen," but to animal lovers, you are a court jester. I'm sorry, Aretha, but your furs make you look like a clown. Why not shed the old-fashioned look that adds pounds to your frame and detracts from your beautiful voice? Won't you donate your furs to the poor as "queen of compassion," Mariah Carey, did? You'll get a tax credit for the donation, and we at PETA will all sing your praises. (PETA 2008).*

Not only did the former Vice President Dan Mathews use the question of animal rights to shame Franklin's weight, but also implied that the main reason for her donation would be due to a tax credit, further distancing Franklin from any caring of nonhuman animals whatsoever even if she donates her fur.

While PETA's request seems like a reasonable ask and the open letter is used as a tool for wider media coverage, this direct form of open communication in the given context can be problematic. Firstly, PETA asking the Franklin family to donate fur to their fur donation program seems to have PETA in the transactional process as an unnecessary intermediary between the Franklin family and the recipients of the donation. Theoretically, the family could, on their own terms, decide to donate the fur collections to various charities of their choice. By putting pressure on the family to donate directly to PETA which will then help those in need, Reiman here arguably presented herself as a 'white saviour' who will help end fur cruelty and use Franklin's fur coats solely for moral aims. As Anthony Nocella (2012, 149) argues, believing the oppressor can liberate the oppressed is ignorant and encourages a 'saviour mentality'. Arguably, that is why the animal advocacy movement is filled with conflict and contradictions, as there is no shared collective experience of oppression.

Nonetheless, the 'white saviour' mentality is not groundless. As W. E. B. Du Bois (2019, 141) claims, there are socio-psychological benefits to being white. The effect of black people not supporting the animal rights issue allocates white people a type of

“psychological wage” (Rodrigues 2020, 82). In the case of the Franklin family vs. PETA, there is a low chance of the family being perceived as the ‘ultimate saviour’. By refusing to donate to PETA’s program, they risk being seen as ‘uncivilised’ and ‘immoral’. If the family donates the fur collection somewhere else, it is highly unlikely that story will be covered in the media. The third option would be the Franklin family agreeing to donate. In that case, Franklin would not be ‘the villain’ of the story, but they would neither be the face of the animal liberation success story, as that position would be taken by PETA.

### **Kelis and white framing of animal rights**

The second communication case looks at the singer Kelis’ response to PETA on MySpace after receiving a private letter criticising the singer for wearing a fur hat (Minaya 2010). Although the original Kelis’ MySpace blog post is deleted, it is still possible to see the singer’s open letter to PETA through a hate post against Kelis’ response to PETA (ONTD! 2010). In the open letter, Kelis called the founder Ingrid Newkirk “batty” and “hypocritical” for being a diabetic and taking insulin tested on lab pigs as well as stated real fur “feels glorious” and that her “mouth salivates” as she types the word meat. Undeniably, Kelis had some strong speciesist statements. In spite of that, she gave some constructive criticism to PETA. In particular, she condemned PETA’s President Ingrid Newkirk for showcasing ignorance on the topic of black people and slavery.

Kelis refers here to an incident that occurred in 2005 (Miller 2018), where NAACP (The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) stated they were upset with PETA’s ad comparing cruelty against nonhuman animals to racialised cruelty. Newkirk’s response on the matter was that all humans are all animals so NAACP should “get over it”. By neglecting the race issue here, Newkirk failed to acknowledge the oppression of people of colour as she looked through the issue of racism through a ‘single-optic vision’ (Kim 2015, 19), as she only focused on the issue of animal liberation without taking into account the issue of racial injustice in her statement.

Furthermore, Kelis expressed she feels “very strongly about sweatshops that spin cotton and the blood on their hands” and criticised PETA for not standing up for other cruelties in the world such as “underpaid minorities picking your vegetables”. Kelis’ accusations are not unfounded as there are cases where PETA’s ‘white framing’ of animal rights issues has been troublesome. For instance, PETA’s chocolates are advertised on their webpage as cruelty-free, but are a product of black slave labour in West Africa (Harper 2010, 14–15)

Kelis' open letter exhibits that attacking black female celebrities on the topic of animal rights can cause a counter-reaction to shine a light on the mistreatment of race issues within the animal advocacy movement. As Tim Wise (2005) stresses, if PETA would commit to fighting racism and incorporated that aspect into their ads and campaigns instead of having high-position members practicing ignorance on the issue, potentially more people of colour would find sympathy in their movement and start viewing PETA's dedication to animal rights liberation as a fight for greater care of all living beings.

### **Cardi B's stylist and PETA's racism**

The third case concerns the topic of racism in the animal advocacy movement and white privilege. While animal rights advocates should be anti-speciesists and anti-racist in theory, this is not always the case in practice. In April 2019, rapper Cardi B wore a fur coat to a fashion convention in Los Angeles. After the event, PETA posted a photo on their social media comparing Cardi B to a fox with the caption "Who wore it better?" and tagged the rapper stating "Fur is never okurrrr", referring to Cardi B's signature sound. It was not only Cardi B who was heavily criticised, but her stylist Kollin Carter who received the heavier blow (Weinberg 2019). Carter revealed the harassment he experienced following the fashion convention through his Instagram post: "PETA and their supporters are one of the most hateful activists groups out there. I've been called a n— and gotten death threats because I chose to put my client in fur" (Weinberg 2019). What this demonstrates is not only the lack of intersectionality and ignorance that has been argued throughout this article, but even the unquestionable racism that occurs among PETA's members.

Moreover, it exhibits the double standards PETA's members have towards racism and speciesism. By all means, most PETA members who are white would not engage in racist language. However, the same individuals that have referred to Carter in a derogatory way are unlikely to engage in anti-animal language/animal slurs such as saying statements like "beat a dead horse" or "be the guinea pig" (PETA 2018a). Thus, it is the explicit racism, but also PETA's social disavowal of racial issues that feed the problematical framework in which the organisation operates. As a result, this type of racist behaviour through the 'naming and shaming' strategy further contributes to the public disapproval of PETA and its cause.

## Final remarks

The aim of this essay is not to claim PETA's organisational aim is to promote racism as such, but that the organisation fails to look at the issue of animal oppression with a racial lense and hence, by practicing ignorance, engages in racist behaviour. On the other hand, when PETA tries to connect issues of animal oppression to other forms of oppression, such as racial oppression, it oftentimes does more damage than good when aiming to promote animal rights. Take this example of PETA's President Ingrid Newkirk when she wrote this message to PETA's staff about Martin Luther King Day (MLK) day (Newkirk 2021):

*A few staffers thought it would be controversial to speak up for animal issues while honoring MLK Day. This is extremely saddening. For starters, MLK didn't just fight a single injustice, he wasn't a single issue person, and injustice isn't a single issue matter... Our mission is to get people to think about the harm caused by any form of discrimination, and how all forms of it are one thing. The "who you are" is not important... Using race as a reason to be quiet is actually racist, and if we start finding it too awkward to try to advance the cause of understanding for all, we might as well not just shut up but shut up shop. As a Trayvon Martin t-shirt read, "This is not a black or white thing, this is a wrong or right thing" and all issues of power over others is.*

Newkirk's decision to write about animal oppression is indeed controversial and showcases once again PETA's lack of understanding for racial discrimination. Newkirk demonstrates this in the simple statement, *who you are is not important*. In fact, who an individual is, in fact, important, as well as how and whom they approach. Understanding this concept, not denying it, should be the base of PETA's communication strategy. Moreover, it is important to note that Newkirk wrote this letter on January 2021, about half a year after the brutal police killing of George Floyd that caused a great wave of 'Black Lives Matter' protests across the US and beyond, which even more showcases how the organisation's most important person engages in white normativity to the issue of racism.

## Conclusion

In the given examples, PETA engages in white normativity through three main elements. Firstly, the organisation engages in a 'white saviour' mentality by publicly urging Aretha Franklin's family to donate her fur coats and by offering to be an intermediary between the family and the recipient of the donation. Secondly, PETA participates in white framing of the animal rights issue and approaches the topic through a 'single-optic vi-



sion'. In other words, the organisation looks at the issue of fur-wearing in a fragmented and disconnected way that fails to simultaneously look at the issue through a racial lens. Finally, it engages not only in white normativity but even in white supremacy, as some PETA members engaged in racist language toward Cardi B's stylist. As a result, PETA exposes itself to a backlash when engaging in criticism of black female celebrities, particularly seen in the case of Kelis who publicly called PETA out for its white framing of animal rights issues and Cardi B's stylist who exposed the racism he experienced from the side of PETA's members.

The 'naming and shaming' strategy of black female celebrities wearing fur is detrimental to the animal rights movement for multiple reasons. Firstly, based on the three examples, the media's focus almost exclusively is not on the topic of animal rights and how fur is immoral, but on the action-reaction situation between PETA and the attacked celebrity. Therefore, Newkirk's statement that any type of media coverage is useful as it encourages people to talk about the issue of fur appears questionable. Secondly, because PETA engages in white framing of animal rights issues in general, its strategy in fact allows for the celebrity to further emphasise PETA's entrenchment of white normativity in its work. Thus, in terms of communication in the public eye, the attacker becomes attacked. As a result, PETA risks losing its public credibility.

For all of these reasons, it is necessary for PETA to overall examine its approach towards racial injustice and how to better connect that issue to animal rights in a way that is not hurtful to communities of people of colour. For that matter, the organisation should re-evaluate its 'naming and shaming' strategy and identify new anti-fur campaigns that would have a greater public reception and a "cleverer" way of framing the animal rights issue. Meanwhile, further research in the field of Critical Animal and Media Studies should be done to examine which advocacy strategies for fur banning can be both inclusive and efficient. Moreover, as the paper focuses explicitly on the 'naming and shaming' strategy of black female celebrities, future academic and/or advocacy work should examine the effectiveness of the strategy in its entirety, incorporating elements beyond the racial lens.

Finally, despite this essay focuses on a somewhat narrow topic and gives few examples that are not recent ones, it should be considered relevant. Firstly, PETA's 'naming and shaming' strategy remains a part of the organisation's communication strategy. Secondly, PETA still has important decision-makers, such as Newkirk, that fail to look at the issue of animal advocacy through a racial lens. Therefore, potentially looking and addressing previous misdoings in the future could benefit the organisation's public perception, if PETA decides to address the issue of animal oppression in a truly intersectional way.

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