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# Veganism through a Racial Lens: Vegans of Color Navigating Mainstream Vegan Networks

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**Veganism Through a Racial Lens: Vegans of Color Navigating Mainstream Vegan  
Networks**

by

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An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Bachelor of Science degree in University Honors and Psychology.

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### **Abstract**

This study seeks to explore the diversity in perspectives regarding veganism and its intersections with race, food justice, and other identities such as class and gender, in order to answer the following research questions: Do the experiences of vegans of color differ in their relationships to other members of the vegan community? How do vegan politics intersect with racial politics and food politics? Do vegans of color show discomfort or resistance to whiteness and white privilege within mainstream vegan networks? Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted among vegans of color, as well as three interviews among white vegans to use this data as a point of comparison. Interview questions covered topics including identity, interpersonal relationships, community involvement, food access, and diversity. The content of the interviews was then transcribed and analyzed by coding for key concepts discussed by the interviewees. Key themes and trends of experiences emerged among vegans of color, including social norms of vegan communities, leadership and redefining activism, and food politics. These observations are situated within the context of mainstream vegan networks. Suggestions are made for creating a more inclusive veganism, including recognizing the challenges, culturally appropriate veganism, incorporation of human rights, and diversifying the leadership.

## Introduction

In recent years, veganism has become increasingly popular. Businesses have moved to capitalize on this trend as the plant-based food sector has grown 8.1% since 2016 (Simon, 2017). This suggests an increase in the prevalence of plant-based eating. For many vegans this is a step in the right direction, away from the animal cruelty and unsustainability of animal agriculture, towards the goal of creating a more environmentally friendly world in which animals are no longer used for their bodies. These issues present a serious threat to public health and must be taken seriously. However, many vegan activists working towards this goal come from a white, middle and upper class background which influences the style of their education, actions, and campaigns. Often times, this may lead to a limited, single-issue focus that does not resonate with people of color. For example, in the anthology *Sistah Vegan: Black Female Vegans Speak on Food, Identity, Health, and Society*, narratives of practicing veganism detail values important to them as black women, including physical and spiritual health influenced by their culture. (Harper, 2009). When operating in a post-racial and colonialist framework, the movement can become depoliticized and weakens the potential to reach a wider audience in solidarity for social justice.

The vegan movement is comprised of various organizations and individuals. The activist organization People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) is known for shock-tactic demonstrations such as dressing as the KKK to show the discrimination of favoring purebred dogs (Moore, 2016), as well as comparing human slavery to animal cruelty (PETA, 2009). PETA continues to use such tactics even when people voice their opinions that this behavior is offensive and further marginalizes groups. Others movement participants include grassroots

organizations such as Portland Animal Activism, celebrities in the community such as public speaker James Aspey, and large social media groups such as the VEGANS UNITED Facebook group are also involved. Participants use social media including Facebook, Youtube, and Instagram to share materials with a large audience to spread the vegan philosophy and recruit people to in-person events. In these spaces which often have a large audience, mainstream vegan culture is evident through the language used to promote veganism, which often assumes a white, middle class perspective.

### **Background**

From within the movement, vegan activists can bring attention to privilege in the vegan community, with the intent to encourage others to engage in intersectional advocacy. Privilege is defined as the invisible, unearned access to advantages based on group membership such as race, gender, or class, upheld by institutional conditions and societal norms. The blog *Striving With Systems - radical vegan perspectives on total liberation* offers racial commentary on privilege within mainstream veganism and animal rights, with posts including *Why are White Vegans SHOOK When You Talk About White Supremacy and Capitalism? (btw they should be)* (McJetters, 2017) and *Appropriation and Animal Rights: The Intersectional Activist* (McJetters, 2015). While human rights are not usually considered a part of vegan activism, mainstream tactics are prone to a wide scope of single-issue campaigns that is species or issue-specific (Wrenn & Johnson, 2013). The purpose of these campaigns is to gain publicity and challenge conventional thinking about the treatment of animals. Leafleting, displaying graphic videos, and food blogs are popular tactics used (Munro, 2005). Aside from campaigning for justice for animals, other issues of the industrial agricultural complex such as the exploitation of human labor are often ignored (Harper, 2012b). Given the potential of veganism to serve as a pathway

toward food justice, an intersectional approach toward animal liberation could work outside the normative systems of domination including racism, sexism, heterosexism, and class exploitation (Greenebaum, 2017). These critiques of veganism as a social justice movement often come from people who belong to oppressed groups, including women, people of color, and queer folks.

As sociology professor Greenebaum argues, “when vegans gloss over or ignore the structural access to food and food preparation, they encourage resentment and justifiable critique of privilege” (2017). Despite the potential barriers that marginalized populations may face to practicing veganism, universalism within vegan spaces is commonplace and has been assessed by several scholars (Greenebaum, 2017; Harper, 2012b; Navarro, 2011). The promotion of a “universal vegan” with the benefits of economic status, geographic location, and cultural traditions typical for a white, middle class community is unlikely to reach a larger audience that may not benefit from the same privileges.

This universalism may be attributed to mainstream vegan ideology being shaped with colonial influences in which the practices and perspectives of white settlers are used to show how veganism fits in with a modern lifestyle. For example, the production and promotion of commercial vegan products demonstrates how veganism assimilates into capitalism’s economic exploitation. The fatphobic promotion of veganism as a weight loss remedy is used to demonstrate how veganism is a way to achieve Eurocentric beauty standards. By recognizing how certain tactics and frameworks may contribute to oppression, activists can establish new, radical frameworks for conceptualizing veganism in order to diversify the movement (A. Ko & S. Ko, 2017; Polish, 2016). Veganism offers a “structural solution to a structural problem”, if it is applied with appropriate consideration of the struggles of marginalized populations (Greenebaum, 2017).

## **Methods**

This study seeks to explore spaces often neglected in the movement and the literature, with a specific interest in anti-racism and food justice. Much of the literature focuses on the omnivore's perspective in relation to how this affects vegans' mental health and social interactions, and the reputation of veganism (MacInnis & Hodson, 2017; Bresnahan et al., 2016; Greenebaum, 2012; Cole & Morgan, 2011). The aim of the current study is to expand on this discourse by analyzing the vegan perspective from within the community through a racial lens.

## **Positionality**

As a white-passing, privileged vegan with Lebanese ethnicity, I initially found myself situated in the mainstream animal rights movement, frequently attending protests and doing outreach to educate the public. However, I did not understand or even have awareness of many of its challenges, especially when it came to intersections of race and class. In time I started to gradually grasp the complexities as I read more diverse viewpoints which explain why white veganism can be ineffective in reaching communities of color and sometimes even harmful to other populations. With this project I hope to highlight some of those problems and potential solutions.

## **Research Questions**

Interview questions were formulated with the intent to explore the following research questions: Do the experiences of vegans of color differ in their relationships to other members of the vegan community? How do vegan politics intersect with racial politics and food politics? Do vegans of color show discomfort or resistance to whiteness and white privilege within mainstream vegan networks? By connecting academic literature to the lived experiences and perceptions of vegans of color, my intention is to gain more understanding of veganism as a

pathway toward social justice. This includes identifying its positive effects as well as inequalities in order to work towards eradicating them.

### **Interviews & Analysis**

Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted among vegans of color to explore the diversity in perspectives regarding veganism and its intersections with race, food justice, and other identities such as class, gender, and sexuality. In addition, three interviews were conducted with white vegans to use this data as a point of comparison. Participants were recruited from Facebook including the groups Portland Vegans of Color, Portland Vegans, and Portland Animal Activism. Some interviews were done with non-local participants via video calls. Questions covered topics including identity, interpersonal relationships, community involvement, food access, and diversity (see Appendix). The interviews ranged in length from 20 to 45 minutes, and were recorded with the consent of participants. The content of the interviews was then transcribed and analyzed by coding for key concepts discussed by the interviewees. Names have been changed to secure the confidentiality and anonymity of participants.

## **Results & Discussion**

### **Demographics: Race, Age, Education, & Duration of Veganism**

**People of color participants.** Of the seven participants interviewed, four identified as multiracial. This included one Mexican, Appalachian, and Polish participant; one Mexican American participant; one Hispanic/Latino, American Indian, and Mexican participant; and one Native American and Latino participant. One participant identified as African American, one identified as Arab, and one identified as Hispanic. Their ages ranged from 20 to 51. One participant had a high school education, five had some college education, and two had completed

a bachelor's degree with one working on their master's degree. The duration of their veganism ranged from 3 months to 8 years.

**White participants.** Three white participants were interviewed. The ages ranged from 23 to 48. One participant had some college education, and two had bachelor's degrees. The duration of their veganism ranged from 2 to 27 years.

### **Social Norms of Vegan Communities**

Interview questions were designed to assess participation in the vegan community and the experiences interacting with other community members. The majority of participants, both white and people of color, reported feeling welcomed or comfortable by other group members of the communities they were involved in. They were glad to be with others who share the same values. Bianca (Mexican American, age 26, vegan for 5 months) explains,

It's been a really positive experience. I feel like for the most part everyone is there for the same reasons. Everybody found their path differently, whether it was for health reasons or whatever, but in the end we're all there for the animals so that's pretty cool. We all share the same ethics.

A 20 year old, female participant notes:

I really enjoy it. It feels like family to me since when I first went vegan no one really supported me. I finally found the part of me that was missing (Daniella, Hispanic, vegan for 4 years).

Both participants describe the significance of being part of a community with like-minded individuals that work together towards the goal of animal liberation. Other research has demonstrated the key role of social support networks for maintaining veganism and vegetarianism (Cherry, 2006; Jabs et al., 1998). By refusing to consume animal products, vegans

may feel excluded during social situations, such as events involving food. They may feel isolated in the company of friends and family who do not understand or sympathize with their vegan identity. The significance of connecting with others who they can relate to within the vegan movement is observed.

However, not all participants reported primarily positive experiences, as their experiences coming from a marginalized community did not feel understood or even recognized. Given their positionality, they found activism in these spaces to be difficult:

The issues of racism and oppression against people of color and Native Americans, indigenous Americans, African Americans, those thing usually don't come up. I've definitely felt very uncomfortable at times. Since I didn't have as much privilege, trying to heavily do the activism was unbalancing for me (Miguel, Native American & Latino, age 30, vegan for 6 years).

It is common in the animal rights movement for those involved to be urging vegans to get involved, to be a part of activism because "activism is the moral baseline" - not participating in animal cruelty is not enough, they must also take action to stop others from committing such atrocities (DxE, 2015). This mindset suggests that there is a "right way" to be vegan and discounts the individual's unique perspective based on how they are situated in the world. Furthermore, it does not include activism against other social justice issues as part of the "moral baseline". Community members can become so concerned with animal rights to the extent that they devalue human rights. An African American participant expresses this:

I understand the emotions people get into in animal rights. I mean I understand because that's why I do it, but sometimes I think they actually just totally discredit being human

at all. They put down humans, and that's just silly to me (Adam, age 51, vegan for 3 years).

To counter this, black vegans have written works discussing “black veganism” which differs from aforementioned popular viewpoint by using their identity to inform what their veganism will look like (A. Ko & S. Ko, 2017; Harper, 2009). This may mean the center of their veganism is not on animal rights, but perhaps, for example, on the ways eating a plant-based diet is a way to decolonize and fight white supremacy (A. Ko & S. Ko, 2017; Brueck, 2017; Navarro, 2011; Harper, 2009). In the essay *Nutrition Liberation*, Melissa Danielle, a black female vegan, explains:

...most Black-identified Americans have a choice. We can choose to create health-supportive lifestyles that takes cues from our cultural heritage... or we can sit back as we lose access to local food systems, neighborhood food markets, and and experience an ever declining state of well-being (Harper, 2009, p. 48).

A direct mention of the term “vegan” is not used, but the power of eating a plant-based diet in the context of cultivating a healthy black community is described. By referring to Black-identified Americans as a whole and focusing on the steps they can take towards improving their community, the binary of vegan/non-vegan is avoided in order to include the steps individuals can take even if they don't identify as vegan.

In contrast to discussions in which the identifier “vegan” is not used, mainstream vegan networks tend to identify strongly with the term “vegan”. In this environment, vegans may have the propensity to isolate themselves and be and judgmental of non-vegans. Three participants discussed this trend:

It's like a brand new religion, or a brand new ideology. You can get into his fervor of suddenly hating or disowning anyone who is not part of that group. (Mark, White, age 48, vegan for 27 years).

Mark explains the strong negative feelings that some vegans feel towards non-vegans. For the majority of people that go vegan for ethical reasons regarding the treatment of animals, this decision was preceded by an exposure into animal cruelty, whether in person or virtually. Clinical psychologist Dr. Casey Taft explains the risks of the (sometimes frequent) trauma exposure of bearing witness to this extreme violence can have on animal advocates, ranging from substance use and depression to anger and aggression (2016).

Another participant detailed an account of a negative interaction they had communicating with other vegans:

I've been banned from a few, those run by white vegans... The last group I was banned from, the culture there, they like talking negatively of other who weren't vegan. My comments on that group were to be a lot more peaceful and understanding, and they couldn't process that and said I had an attitude or something, when I was keeping things peaceful and trying to point out the problems in their arguments... it was just very privileged and things should be done their way" (Miguel, Native American & Latino, age 30, vegan for 6 years).

Miguel expressed the values of having openness and sympathy for non-vegans, rather than judging them so harshly and expecting them to become vegan or be labelled a bad person. Maya (Hispanic/Latino, American Indian, and Mexican, age 26, vegan for 2 years) elaborates on this viewpoint:

The more that I'm in the spaces it can be a little bit isolating... people only talk to other vegans... for vegans, being around other vegans is comforting. But if you're continuously just doing that and the message of "veganism is great for these reasons" you start to reinforce this idea that everybody else who doesn't hold those beliefs or ideas is a bad person, which I don't think is true."

This style of activism and socialization has also been discussed by community members as indicating harmful and dangerous cult behavior. Animal rights organization Direct Action Everywhere has been identified as one that is particularly problematic for its style of coercing group members to spend most of their free time working on the group's projects, isolating members to a social circle within the group, and a sense of guilt if they cannot meet these expectations (Adams, 2018; Woke Vegana, 2018). Instead of being a healthy and meaningful part of their complex lives, veganism and animal rights are taken to an unhealthy extreme where other needs and interests are not deemed important enough to spend time doing.

### **Leadership & Redefining Activism**

By focusing heavily on animal rights, other issues which negatively affect group members may be downplayed. This includes racism, classism, and sexism. In regards to confronting these issues and counteracting the problematic ideas and behaviors seen in larger, mainstream groups, the role people of color in leadership positions was discussed:

When people try to say we should have more POC vegan leaders, I think that idea is not entertained or it's seen as not important. From what I've heard, the general dialogue is "let's just keep the people in leadership positions in leadership positions". They don't understand why we need a POC in a leadership position, why that's important. They try to be more racially diverse, but I think they do it for the cosmetic factor, not so much for

the inclusion of ideas, which would be the people in leadership (Maya, Hispanic/Latino, American Indian, and Mexican, age 26, vegan for 2 years).

In opposition to tokenization, the value of having people of color in leadership roles lies the value that their perspectives can bring. In the essay *Black Lives, Black Life*, Syl Ko argues that, besides the recognition that black *bodies* matter, it is necessary to acknowledge that black *life* matters. For instance, normative whiteness should be challenged by taking seriously black perspectives and using theoretical models devised by people of color that challenge Eurocentricity (A. Ko & S. Ko, 2017). One participant talked about the success of being involved in the leadership process:

In DxE we had all types of nonsense going on with racist and sexists and everything else, in Chicago. So that was not necessarily the best environment. So in our environment now we try to make sure to be on top of that, make sure everything is open, that people feel safe, and not cover stuff up. (Adam, African American, age 51, vegan for 3 years).

The success of this new community is described due to the fact that the leadership are diligent about not tolerating oppressive views and ensuring that all community members feel safe. It is also noted in the event that there is problematic behavior, it will be confronted and there will be consequences, rather than ignoring the situation or simply trying to move on.

One participant indicated the willingness of their community to get involved:

It's been mostly positive, pretty good support. Especially here in Portland we have like a you know, "whatever project or event you want to do, we'll support you" (Jake, White age 35, vegan for 3 years).

An open style of leadership is described in this animal activist community, where the members are highly motivated and will likely be interested in getting involved. This suggests a positive

environment where there is potential for anyone that wants to take on a leadership role.

Depending on the goals and interests of the leader, however, they may experience varying levels of support from the community.

In mainstream vegan spaces, the goal of animal liberation is commonly referred to. This idea focuses mainly on veganism as a tool towards achieving animal rights. Members of the community are concerned with if their actions are helping animals and thus take a direct stance that this is their main priority. Single-issue campaigns are well attended because the message is simple and fits in with the popular goals. In contrast, an intersectional approach challenges straightforward animal rights principles by considering issues beyond animal cruelty. Often times, this more complex framework is viewed as weak and too ambiguous. A white participant describes their experience:

I was working with Collectively Free and I got pushback from some people within [Portland Animal Activism] who were like “I don’t know, people don’t wanna bring all this in, it’s too much for people to handle and we just want to focus on the animals and not get caught up in social justice stuff and other issues and anti-capitalist stuff” (Jake, age 35, vegan for 3 years).

Jake observed community members’ resistance not only to expanding the breadth of their activism but also to their holistic understanding of injustice and oppression. In opposition, anti-intersectionality is mentioned as a stance they’ve heard within the community.

Three other interviewees also mentioned intersectionality as a key component of effective activism. Sara (Mexican, Appalachian, and Polish, age 28, vegan for 8 years) explains:

I just see that there’s a lot of systems of hate and oppression that aren’t inclusive. I just feel like veganism is a good way to counteract those systems, I don’t think it’s the only

way. I think that the idea of intersectionality in veganism and other movements would be key for that to work... and making part of the activism that people do including people more often, because, you can buy vegan chocolate, for example, but it's not fair trade. Just considering people as part of the equation is really important.

Operating from an intersectional framework, these participants discussed a sense of obligation to view human rights as integral to their vegan identity, whereas the majority of the ideology and discussion in mainstream vegan spaces does not accept this perspective. In the essay *Why Animal Liberation Requires an Epistemological Revolution*, Aph Ko argues that the dominant viewpoint that animal oppression is distinct and separate from other oppressions is false. On the contrary, racism and speciesism are entangled because “we exist on one massive field, where these systems are fused together and labelled *subhuman*” (A. Ko & S. Ko, 2017). Therefore, compartmentalized mainstream social justice movements including anti-racism and veganism which use Eurocentric logic to fight Eurocentric systems cannot create effective liberation movements. Jake (White, age 35, vegan for 3 years) expresses this sentiment:

So many people are like “it’s all about the animals. we can’t do both, we gotta choose”.  
We can do it all, really. You just gotta be creative.

Although abandoning the oppressive beliefs of the dominant framework leads to ambiguity and uncertainty, part of activism is exploring this new conceptual terrain (A. Ko & S. Ko, 2017).

The benefits of redefining activism is not always a welcome idea, however. The dominant beliefs in the movement affect not only the organization of real life events but also the communication using social media. As a platform for widely disseminating vegan philosophy and building the movement through supportive social networks, social media such as Facebook has played an integral role in vegan networks. In regards to using social media, some participants

reported that their views were shut down or ignored, especially when discussing racial issues. For example,

I was in [a] group and I actually left it because I noticed anytime anybody brought up anything about race or anything about intersectionality, they would shut it down... I do this thing on purpose sometimes, where I post some racially charged stuff. Not even racially charged, just something about blackness or anything, take a knee or something. Anything from Sistah Vegan, anything from A. Breeze Harper. So I'll lose about 5 or 6 friends immediately the day that I post that stuff. I do it on purpose so they'll go away. Cause I don't like a lot of racists (Adam, African American, age 51, vegan for 3 years).

An indigenous participant mentioned being banned from a group for disagreement, but also being disinterested in much of the content produced and shared in these spaces:

I don't really pay attention to all these "famous" internet vegan activists' videos on Facebook and such. You know, they're usually just talking to other privileged white people... It did seem and it's come more to the surface for other people of color that issues involving the racist, oppressive history of this country and other countries is sort of swept under the rug, not wanting to be talked about by many of the mainly white activists (Miguel, Native American & Latino, age 30, vegan for 6 years).

Facing such ignorance and resistance to their views, it is to be expected that people of color are upset with the discourse of mainstream vegan spaces. However, a newly vegan, Mexican American participant notices other vegans of color feel angry and excluded, but they are not taking appropriate steps to be active in their communities and represent vegans of color:

There are a lot of feelings of exclusion. I don't know if I'm just being super naive to it, or I kind of just force myself in, but I don't really feel that. I feel like yeah there have been

situations where I am the only person of color at an event, but it never feels like I'm targeted or anything like that. So in a way I kind of get angry sometimes when I read some of those posts where people are like really upset, I'm like "well then, do something about it. Go out there and be activists and try to change your families and bring other people of color into the community" you know? (Bianca, Mexican American, age 26, vegan for 5 months).

Those who wish to be involved in the community may resonate with this viewpoint, while others may feel that this is nearly impossible as they try to relate to others who cannot understand their experience. Mainstream communities may be missing opportunities to reach out not only to people of color who are already interested, but also the larger population. Holding an awareness for these concerns is observed as a relevant aspect of effective activism which is also culturally sensitive.

Despite the vegan and animal rights movements proclaiming to be part of a social justice framework, some participants expressed awareness of how oppressive systems are still at work, even with the liberatory ideals of most community members. One white participant explained,

No movement is perfect, no movement is pure. Even a movement that's supposed to be based in love and justice and nonviolence and peace is going to have oppression in some way, shape, or form. They're going to be corrupt in some way, there's just not really any way to avoid it (Erin, age 23, vegan for 2 years).

Although Erin acknowledges that there is corruption within the movement, she goes on to explain that it's inevitable, suggesting that no further actions or precautions will improve this situation. Miguel (Native American & Latino, age 30, vegan for 6 years) had a similar perspective on the issue:

It's not necessarily the fault of vegans or white vegans or privileged vegans. That's just a general issue that is across this country. So in any social group, those dynamics always come into play.

Miguel acknowledges that oppression within the movement is not inherent to the types of people involved, but rather it is just a byproduct of living in a society that operates under various systems of oppression. In contrast to Erin, they do not suggest that such phenomenon are inherently part of the social structure. While white participants had no personal experiences of racial tension, some reported observations of it. On the other hand, Miguel shared their firsthand experiences as a person of color facing discomfort within vegan communities. This variation in lived experiences may account for the difference in their responses.

### **Food Politics**

In order to create a more just food system, it is important to hold an awareness for how identity and lived experiences affect food access. The US food system was built upon genocide, slavery, and colonization. Racism within corporate control of the food system allows those with privilege to benefit greater food security and lesser vulnerability (Slocum, 2006). In the interviews, all participants were privileged enough to report experiencing good food security; they did not find that being vegan made it difficult to access nutritious and affordable foods, especially living in urban areas with access to a grocery store. Three participants reported that they save more money by avoiding processed foods. For example:

I found out that vegetables and fruits are the cheapest thing in the world cause all I gotta do is go to Aldi's or Walmart and get some stuff and I'm good. It is the cheapest thing ever. If you don't get out that phony processed crap and fancy peanut cheeses and all that

stuff. For me it's cheap, it's about what you eat, you know? (Adam, African American, age 51, vegan for 3 years).

Although participants reported enjoying the health benefits of their plant-based diets, three participants discussed dissatisfaction with the prominent foodie culture in the vegan community. While enjoying food was important, they also discussed how focusing on specialty vegan foods, such as “processed” and “fancy” items found in stores and restaurants can be problematic. This detracts from veganism’s potential to work outside of system of inequality and oppression such as capitalism, colonialism, and gentrification. Miguel (Native American & Latino, age 30, vegan for 6 years) notes:

People have been vegan for a long time but privileged people sort of warped it. You know, they take it away from people of color, and you know they add all these products and restaurants... Restaurants and products as I see it are inherently privileged and problematic to indigenous cultures for example, and people of color... I feel like there's two different sides to the vegan movement; the inclusive, balanced side and the more privileged exclusive side... I feel the way veganism is interpreted on the privileged side of it is very warped. It's like “oh there's finally vegan options at this grocery store” and myself and others are like “you know, there's always been vegan options.” The produce section is inherently vegan, inherently more cruelty free, inherently less problematic on the world. There's less plastics, you know anything that's more processed is not good for the environment or for the lesser privileged

Restaurants and processed vegan foods are seen as part of the problem because they are exclusive to those who are privileged enough to afford them, as well as contributing to

environmental degradation with their use of plastics. Moreover, many cultures have traditional foods are plant-based, therefore inherently vegan.

These comments highlight how food in mainstream vegan spaces tend to center the “universal vegan” experience that benefits from economic privilege, geographic location, and cultural traditions typical for a white, middle class community. This includes conversations about the latest vegan products, recipes adapted from the standard American diet, and popular vegan restaurants. This culture may contribute to the stereotype that veganism is for privileged, high-income people. To shift the reputation of veganism away from being a luxury lifestyle towards a social justice praxis, Miguel (Native American & Latino, age 30, vegan for 6 years) suggested, focusing on people of color, oppressed cultures, indigenous Americans, African Americans, and other people of color. Learning about how they practice veganism before the definition came into being.

This would help create a more inviting, holistic representation of veganism by embracing cultural diversity.

### **Implications: Creating a More Inclusive Veganism**

The final interview question asked participants “What do you think are some of the necessary steps to take to diversify the vegan movement?” This question implies that there is a diversity issue in the movement in which people from marginalized communities do not feel represented. For those that practice more mainstream ideology and tactics, it is necessary for them to recognize there are issues such as racism and classism and to listen to the concerns raised. It is important to question the willingness of these groups to diversify and become more inclusive. Adam (African American, age 51, vegan for 3 years) explains,

Well, for those that want to diversify they have to actually listen to each other, just like in life in general. In general, if you want to learn somebody's experiences you gotta listen to them and let them talk... When you talk, all you do is hear your own thoughts... So listening to somebody else talk might help you a little bit. That's one thing that always stunts the growth on any subject is people don't wanna let somebody else have space, or talk.

Many vegans of color are already talking about these issues. Blog posts and articles are a popular tool for calling out problematic views, for example, *Decolonizing Veganism to Make it More Accessible and Less Racist* (Oladipo, 2017). In addition, other tools such as trainings and workshops can create a more constructive learning environment. Jake (White, age 35, vegan for 3 years) explains,

I'm really keen personally on how we connect with each other, it's really tantamount. There's a way to connect with somebody, in a nonviolent communications sort of way, where it's like "I have these needs to be seen" or whoever it is "I really want this movement to be more diverse and pro-intersectional"... I think there's a way we can connect compassionately with that and avoid some of the messy infighting and, at least mitigate that.

Nonviolent communication is mentioned as a useful strategy, indicating that tone is important in how ideas are shared. In practice, this may be more challenging since it is an emotional, sensitive topic for many people. When people feel threatened, they are more likely to shut down or get defensive (Taft, 2016). To avoid this reaction, written pieces allow the reader to reflect without being personally targeted as part of the problem. A workshop which centers justice can also be used for the purpose of learning and having the opportunity to be vulnerable.

Often vegan advocacy is framed as being integral to justice. By considering human rights as important to their cause, advocates of justice for nonhuman animals can show solidarity with other oppressed groups in order to build a cohesive movement. Sara (Mexican, Appalachian, and Polish, age 28, vegan for 8 years) explains,

having more groups that have intersectional ideas would be helpful, and making part of the activism that people do including people more often, because, you can buy vegan chocolate, for example, but it's not fair trade. Just considering people as part of the equation is really important

Among three interview participants, the theory of intersectionality is mentioned. It is identified as an important concept to incorporate into vegan spaces. Considering the multiple identities that intersect and interact to shape the experiences of group members, intersectional awareness has been found to be “associated with positive intergroup attitudes, such as promoting diversity and interrupting prejudice” (Curtin et al., 2015). Community members who practice intersectional awareness are acknowledging human rights as part of their social justice activism.

An intersectional framework can be used as a tool for moving beyond the normative white, middle class “universal vegan” experience, towards culturally appropriate veganism. Not everyone has access to the same resources, thus people can practice veganism differently based on identity factors including race, economic status, gender, and sexuality. One aspect of this is food sovereignty, which necessitates liberation from colonized food systems. Both the production and consumption of food are key elements. Instead of focusing on how Western foods such as burgers and chicken nuggets can be made vegan, more familiar and preferred foods can be promoted by plant-based dishes from different cultures. Instead of promoting that all vegan chocolate is “cruelty free”, promote fair trade cocoa. There are already various resources

available that are good examples of inclusive veganism, including the Food Empowerment Project, the African-American Vegan Starter Guide, and the cookbook *Decolonize Your Diet* (Calvo & Esquibel, 2015). While anyone can access these resources, their cultural specifications target certain audiences.

The different motivations people have for being vegan are all valid, whether it's health reasons or animal rights. Considering this, the pressure to participate in activism for animal liberation, with protests and civil disobedience in particular creates an incomplete picture of the significance of veganism as a social justice movement. Ahmed (Arab, age 24, vegan for 3 months) explains how different forms of activism may be used:

diversify the literature, maybe, use different styles. Activism is really good when it's interwoven with art and other things like that, not just civil dissidence. So maybe engage with art, engage with academic spaces.

Having a broader interpretation of what is activism, and what is "effective" in particular will be helpful as it develops the idea that veganism is for everyone, and that different people will resonate with benefits of the lifestyle.

As different types of activism are valued, so is diversifying the leadership. For example, people of color, women, and queer folks all have lived experiences informed by their identities which will inform how they interact with community members. By assessing how an individual gets into a leadership role and what their duties are in that role, their purpose should be clear to serve the community. Good interpersonal relations with other group members are also necessary. The leadership's success is dependent on listening to the group needs and working with them.

## Conclusion

The findings of these interviews indicate some of the strengths and weaknesses of mainstream veganism in terms of being a diverse and inclusive social justice movement. Although many vegan and animal rights groups intend for all community members to feel safe and welcome in their space, much of the discomfort that the people of color participants discussed involved the attitudes and behavior of the more privileged community members. Being able to hold an awareness for systems of power and oppression outside of the vegan/animal rights realm would improve this dynamic. In order for this to happen, it is critical that collectively, the mainstream vegan networks recognize that there is an issue. Speciesism as a form of oppression is interlocked with other forms of oppression including racism and colonialism (Brueck, 2017; A. Ko & S. Ko, 2017; Polish, 2016). Considering this, it is critical to assess the current vegan and animal rights movements to see how they are operating within or against these systems.

In a racialized society, each individual's worldview and lived experiences will be constructed within the context of their identity. With a focus on race, an intersectional approach was used to explore how other identities such as gender and class interact to produce various outcomes. This includes access to social and monetary capital, geopolitically racialized consumption, and knowledge as a product (Harper, 2012b). Some trends and common themes of experiences among vegans of color included generally positive involvement and experiences in the community, pressure to do animal activism, observing isolation and ostracization of non-vegans, the power of leadership and redefining activism, finding unprocessed vegan foods to be the best option, and observing a larger societal problem of power and oppression. Elevating marginalized voices is critical to the goal of radicalizing the movement to become the most

successful in its efforts for social justice. This project informs how to move forward in creating a more inclusive vegan movement.

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## Appendix

### Interview Questions

The purpose of this interview is to gain more understanding of your identity and your experiences involving veganism, with an interest in interactions with other community members as well as an exploration of food security issues. For the first section, I'm going to ask you to describe yourself and how you identify in various ways.

1. What is your racial identity? Are there any other identities you'd like to share, such as gender, religion, or sexuality?
2. How old are you?
3. Where did you grow up?
4. What is your education level?
5. How long have you been vegan?
6. How do you define veganism?
7. Why did you become vegan?

The next section focuses on your experiences related to social interactions centering on veganism. This may include personal feelings, interpersonal relationships, and broader societal observations.

8. How did your close friends and family initially react when you became vegan? How do they feel about it now?
9. Have you been involved in any vegan community events or organizations? If so, what has your experience been like?
10. Have you been involved in any vegan outreach or animal rights activism? If so, what has your experience been like?

11. Are you involved in any vegan groups online? If so, what have you noticed about the discussion (or lack thereof) of race? [Probe: Have you experienced denial or ignorance from those with privilege?]

12. Have interactions with other community members been a positive or negative experience?

13. Do you have any experiences of racial tension in the vegan community, either in-person or online? What about experiences of denial or ignorance?

Now we will discuss issues related to food access and wellbeing.

14. Has veganism impacted your ability to access nutritious and affordable food?

15. Is veganism an important part of your health? If so, expand on the importance of veganism to your physical, mental, or spiritual health.

The last section is about your views on veganism as a social justice movement.

16. Do you practice veganism as a form of resistance or anti-oppression? If so, expand on the political significance of your veganism.

17. Do you think that veganism is a privileged position?

18. In your opinion, is the vegan movement inclusive of marginalized populations?

19. What do you think are some of the necessary steps to take to diversify the vegan movement?