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Veg(an) Tales: Vegan Identity Making in the United States

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ABSTRACT

Approaching veganism through the lens of race and class provides an interesting perspective and alternate understanding of the meaning of the diet and accessibility for marginalized groups in the U.S. and the way U.S. capitalism affects its mainstream construction and value. The anti-hegemonic foundational principles of veganism are the antithesis to the hegemonic foundational principles of United States culture, causing great tensions in the perception of veganism. Attributes of Christianity reproduce and naturalize dominant ideologies that support speciesism and anthropocentrism, which work to normalize the manipulation and exploitation of non-human animal bodies and livelihoods. These tensions manifest in stereotyping as a method of delegitimizing the movements' deeper purposes, making identity-making complicated. Positing veganism in the current capitalist framework adds another layer of nuance because of the methods in which products are available and marketed; understanding aspects of consumption and the breadth of the economic incentives involved aid in grasping the mainstreaming of veganism and the predominant media representations that center the white experience, resulting in the erasure of other cultural and racial experiences.

Keywords: *Veganism, identity construction, Vegan Society, Vegans in United States*

Introduction

In 2017, according to the Good Food Institute, the plant-based food market profited over $3.9 billion. In 2019, it profited over $5 billion, resulting in a 29% increase over the course of just two years (2021). The number of people identifying as vegan or plant-based has increased exponentially in the past ten years, according to a 2021 survey conducted by Statista. The demographics of vegans in the United States indicate a couple of factors. According to a 2018 Gallup study, 6% of Americans identify as vegans. The largest concentration of vegans was in the $50,000 and under/year income range. The average age was 42, with marginally

more vegans in the 30-49 age group (4%) and approximately 3⁄4 (74%) of vegans identifying as women. According to a survey done by the Pew Research Center, 8% of Black Americans are vegans or vegetarians compared to only 3% of the general population. Approaching veganism through the lens of race and class provides an exciting perspective and alternate understanding of the meaning of the diet and accessibility for marginalized groups in the U.S. and the way U.S. capitalism affects its mainstream construction and value.

Veganism is a practice that involves avoiding consuming or buying animal-based foods, materials, and products (The Vegan Society 2017: 1). Therefore, veganism is an alternative way of approaching food and consumption in the U.S. context. The embodiment and lived experience of opting into this particular lifestyle has cultural implications that result in certain perceptions being reproduced broadly. As framed by Gheihman (2021): "Lifestyle movements bring together the personal and the public, framing the individual choice as part of broader social, cultural, and economic issues" (9). The concept of individual choice is complicated because we do not exist or consume in a vacuum; we are consistently influenced and affected by the social world we are located within.

Popular vegan literature in the U.S. has been critiqued for not engaging adequately in analyses of "how race (racialization, whiteness, racism, anti-racism) influence how and why one writes about, teaches, and engages in vegan praxis" (Harper 2009: 8). Within this paper, my aim is to provide a synthesis of modern vegan identities within a U.S. framework and contribute to filling some gaps in the literature surrounding identity construction.

The Backdrop of Modern Veganism

The term "vegan" was coined in 1944 when the Vegan Society was founded by Donald Watson along with five of his contemporaries through extension from the already established Vegetarian Society. The definition (in full) provided by the Vegan Society website is as follows:

"Veganism is a philosophy and way of living which seeks to exclude—as far as is possible and practicable—all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing or any other purpose; and by extension, promotes the development and use of animal-free alternatives for the benefit of animals, humans and the environment. In dietary terms, it denotes the practice of dispensing with all products derived wholly or partly from animals."

The society was founded on anti-hegemonic principles and non-exploitation of sentient beings. The vegan movement gained popular headway during the 1960s counterculture era, which was a crucial time period in the onset of different types of activism. Critical social movements such as anti-war and anti-nuclear, feminist, LGBTQ+, and the greater environmental awareness movement were all coinciding. The reigning idea of this time period was that by changing aspects of one's daily life, one could in turn change the overarching system and changing one's diet became one of the more viable personal reforms people could make, and was less co-optable because it required more commitment and intention (Belasco 2007: 27). Belasco (2007) expands on this paradigm further: "The New Left had always insisted that the personal was political, what could be more personal than food? And what could be more political than challenging agribusiness, America's largest and more environmentally troublesome industry" (29)? Adhering to a plant-based diet can be a political expression in many ways; people are able to reform and protest mass modern food production by not consuming animal-based products (Boström & Klintman 2011; Lindkvist 2020). Veganism can serve as a form of resistance to a broad set of practices (Presser et al. 2020: 714). In all, modern-

day veganism is rooted in anti-hegemonic principles and can serve as an anti-hegemonic practice.

plant-centric diets are quite popular and long-standing in other parts of the world. Early human cultures consumed plant-based nutrition (Leitzmann 2014) predominantly. The consumption of plant-based proteins can trace back to ancient civilizations in Asia, and currently, 19% of the Asian population adheres to a vegetarian diet (He et al., 2020). Currently, India is the country with the highest prevalence, with nearly 40% of the population adhering to a plant-centric diet (He et al., 2020). The expansion of plant-centric diets has been associated with religions such as Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, and Buddhism (Hargreaves et al., 2021). Religion has a notable effect on social institutions and political power (Goh 2006).

Interestingly, in areas where Christianity dominated, plant-centered diets decreased in practice significantly (Hargreaves et al., 2021). Researchers have related meat consumption to settler colonialism, where the natural world is understood and organized through domination, ownership, and private property (Montford 2017; Murphy 2021; Perkins 2021). Settler colonialist ideology is linked to representations of heroic white men conquering "wild" land and in turn, making them safe (Arvin et al. 2013: 12). Christian ideals and settler colonialist myths and narratives are roots of U.S. culture, so the acquisition, exploitation, and industrialization of non-human animal bodies are normative. The typology of plant-based diets as "counterculture" makes sense under these paradigms.

Anthropocentrism

The westernized perspective of non-human beings delegitimizes their existence as a means for justification of domination and extraction. Centering on any other species would interrupt the notion that aspects of our existence, such as culture, are "uniquely human" and therefore require a more self-aware and critical look at the construction of human behavior (Carter and Charles 2018: 88). Maintaining hierarchy justifies inequities, which then are built upon one another, and contribute to the ideology of an "anti-ecological human supremacy" that dominates our way of being (Carter and Charles 2018: 40). Principles of traditional American institutions, namely religion and the hard sciences, further legitimize this ideology. Christian principles hold humans above all other organisms, including all non-human animals. According to work by Arthur Lovejoy (1933):

Thus Augustine, finding in it his answer to the old question, 'Why, when God made all things, he did not make them all equal,' reduces the Plotinian argument on the matter to an epigram of six words: *non-essent omnia, si essent aequalia:* 'if all things were equal, all things would not be; for the multiplicity of kinds of things of which the universe is constituted - first and second and so on, down to the creatures of the lowest grades - would not exist' (67).

Traditional theories in ecology and other hard sciences support anthropocentrism due to the prevalence of the mechanistic mode of thought. According to Merchant (1980), "Mechanism substituted a picture of the natural world, which seemed to make it more rational, predictable, and therefore manipulable "and "objective, context-free, value-free knowledge of the natural world" (227). The mechanistic view transformed views of nature and, by effect, eliminated ethical and cognitive constraints against the violation and exploitation (Shiva 1988). The concept of rationality has been legitimized through hegemonic institutions. Another example is the conception of HEP (Human Exceptionalism Paradigm), which centers on humans and human culture as unique and dominant, and the progress of culture as inevitable (Catton and Dunlap 1978). So, it is evident how much modern-day values rooted in scientific and religious

thought are influenced by placing humans above all other sentient beings. Shewmake (2012) explains that reorienting the human-centered hierarchy allows more space for "respect and kinship" rather than "domination and destruction" (18). Changing the relationship and norms to food consumption interrupts this type of hierarchy and challenges long-standing narratives. Non-commodified veganism can serve as an entry point into these conversations.

Additionally, speciesism is another ideology that has been naturalized in the U.S. Speciesism is "the idea that humans view their needs and desires as superior to those of other species" (Singer 2009: 9). Abiding by speciesism denotes that humans prioritize the needs and interests of their own species over others (Singer 2009). Furthermore, Black feminist vegan scholars Ko and Ko (2017) highlight the connection between racism and speciesism, explaining that "marking particular bodies as distinct from the dominant group based on perceived physical, cognitive, and cultural differences, and then employing this distinction to rationalize oppressive treatment" (129). Overlooking the significance of "animality" ends up preserving harmful hierarchies (Ko and Ko 2017). Patricia Hill Collins's work delves into this: "It is no accident that racist biology, religious justifications for slavery and women's subordination, and other explanations for nineteenth-century racism and sexism arose during a period of profound political and economic change. Symbolic means of domination become particularly important in mediating contradictions in changing political economies." Maintaining an intersectional framework is crucial for destabilizing harmful hierarchies in multiple realms.

Vegan Capitalism

The consumer market for products perceived as environmentally friendly is growing, and multinational, multibillion-dollar companies promote sustainability initiatives and "green" merchandise, and large food companies are taking part (Rotman et al. 2020: 418). Food is increasingly industrialized and produced and marketed in order to uphold the interests and values of those involved in the profiting (Leach et al. 2020; Vivero-Pol 2017). Food's value is less based on its propensity to provide security and health but on the "tradable features that can be valued and priced in the market" (Vivero-Pol 2017: 2).

Scholars have highlighted the greenwashing of vegan products (Rotman et al. 2020; Siebertz et al. 2022; Paasslita 2021). Greenwashing is a company's symbolic marking of its products as reflecting concern for ethical standards without actually changing their practices and regulations (Delmas & Burbano 2011). So, vegan mainstreaming consists of essentially advertising and selling products that are physical manifestations of associated liberation for profit means, with the "plant-based" label becoming a societal symbol of the liberation associated with the founding principles of veganism (Sexton et al. 2022; Scales 2017). Essentially, the market infiltrates the movement, and core messages and philosophies end up weakening and getting lost within the market, and political action then gets reduced to the act of purchasing a commodity (Munir 2021; Kelpin 2020). The symbolic benefits that veganism yields are capitalized on to foster a sense of greater environmental concern.

According to Sexton et al. (2022), issues arise because big agricultural food corporations market vegan offerings through the commercial pathway of health veganism, which results in more expensive products targeted at "wealthier health-conscious consumers" (609). Furthermore, the introduction of "flexitarianism" among marketing places vegan food at an interesting intersection. Flexitarianism ends up surpassing strict vegetarianism because aspects like food enjoyment and presentation and more consumer choice are centered rather on environmental or animal rights issues (Johnston & Baumann: 2015). The corporatization of

any movement also ends up being the argument against said movement. The corporatization of the environment and the greenwashing of corporate practices contribute to the growth of green capitalism, defined as: "a form of environmentalism that emphasizes the economic value of ecosystems and biological diversity and attempts to reduce human environmental impacts by ensuring that the importance of environmental services is reflected in the way that markets operate" (Scales 2017:1). The private sector's embrace of green capitalism is a method of avoiding true structural change, neutralizing a movement's anti-establishment aims, and partaking in greenwashing that minimizes the consumer's perception of the affected harm (de Jong et al. 2020; Pistor 2021; Sexton et al. 2022).

In order to greater contextualize green consumerism, it is important to understand the appeal from the customer/consumer side. According to Gabriel and Lang (2006), consumers can be understood through multiple lenses; consumers are potentially seen as "choosers, communicators, and explorers for new products, experiences, and fulfillment." Consumers are constructed as identity-seekers, individuals that "build identity and boost self-esteem with goods" (Jallinoja et al. 2020: 20). Consumers may also be seen as rebellious based on consuming differently stylistically or in frequency or activist-minded consumers who participate and buy based on seeking meaning or for a metaphorical cause (Gabriel & Lang: 2006). In regards to green consumerism, companies can market and manipulate their image and product by connecting them to certain causes that are socially relevant. Part of this draws on concepts and myths surrounding ethical consumption practices. Ethical consumption denotes that individuals have a "sociopolitical role to play" when engaging in consumption, but there is little effort to understand additional issues that underpin aspects of social consumption because that requires a closer look at aspects of daily life that are intrinsically harmful (Devinney et al. 2009: 31). Essentially, consuming is confusing and structurally designed to be made normal and an inevitable practice of modern life.

In the mainstreaming of veganism, the foundations of capitalism are still upheld. Capitalism operates on the assumption that the private sector always has better answers and that investing in new and improved technologies will effectively handle climate issues (Pistor 2021) and is founded upon the ideology that solutions must be found through further development and through *progress* while continually pushing to withdrawal natural resources, create more waste, and extract labor at ever-increasing rates (Schnaiberg and Gould 1994). Consumerism is such an integral aspect of livelihood and survival that it is mentally difficult to come to terms with and understand the breadth of harm that is required to maintain the current level of U.S. consumption.

Mainstream Representation

It is noted that the vegan diet has tended to be constructed as a lifestyle available and realistic only to the upper classes (Aiswarya 2019). Gheihman's (2021) research has insight into why veganism has been launched into the mainstream and altered culturally, naming shifts in leadership from "social rights and animal activists" to "athletes, academics, doctors, entrepreneurs, and investors," which tend to have a higher socio-cultural standing and value (7). The popularity induced by and marketed by white celebrities is commonplace (Skinazi 2019). The surge of the wellness industry, which is the growing market and promotion of healthy foods, supplements, and fitness (Edington et al. 2016), over the last ten years has contributed to the growing "trendiness" of the health-focused vegan influencer lifestyle (Skinazi 2019: 104). This white woman-centered version portrayed by popular vegan

influencers puts an emphasis on purity and avoidance of foods, foods that induce weight loss, and an "achievement of hegemonic beauty standards, devoid of political or ethical stance" (Parker et al. 2019: 72). Plant-based eating has been associated with health, namely among the middle and upper class, where eating organic products is in a sense "performative" of a type of elite-ness (Guthman 2003: 53). Additionally, according to Harper (2012), "Popular media ...only centralize white socio-spatial epistemologies of veganism, reflecting the collective history of white middle-class people's privileged relationship to consumption, space of power, and production of what is ethical" (159). Greenebaum (2018) mentions that stereotyping is commonplace, using tropes of "the privileged hipster", "the radical animal rights activist", and "the free-spirited hippie" (686) when discussing the vegan movement overall and individually. These stereotypes are coded as white, which in effect centers the vegan movement around whiteness and those experiences. So, the media representations most available predominantly center on a rich white feminine experience, a proxy for aspirational, dominant aesthetic constructions.

In other representations, the mass media present the notion that meat, dairy, and poultry products are essential to a whole, healthy diet (Aiswarya 2019:28). This is due to partly that there is a relationship between the meat industry, lobbyists, and the USDA (McMillan 2020). Research shows that conflicting goals exist within the USDA induced by financial incentives that influence the lack of recommendations against red meat consumption in the available Dietary Guidelines for Americans (McMillan 2020). In turn, the capital interests of the meat industry have shaped the dietary recommendations and overarching beliefs about how much we should be consuming.

Additionally, there is an underlying assumption that alternatives for meat are inaccessible to people in lower socioeconomic classes. 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 (Chatila 2018: 21). Another factor is that animal product alternatives, such as plant-based milk and cheeses, are likely to be pricier than conventional animal products (Bryant 2019). The current status of such products as still "relatively niche" affects supply (Bryant 2019: 13). Broader issues too are the lack of healthful products in general located in vicinities in which the population is classified in lower socioeconomic status, contributing to food swamps and the opportunity even to access healthier food (Cooksey-Stowers et al. 2017). So, there are multiple contributing factors to the assumed inaccessibility.

The anti-hegemonic roots of modern-day veganism have influenced social perceptions. Meatless diets contradict many anthropocentric values that are intrinsic to the U.S. The pushback and niche-ing of veganism are in part to the predominance and power of meat industries, which have influenced health perceptions and what constitutes a nourishing diet. The mainstream popularity of experiences of veganism from those who are white, rich, and effeminate erases other experiences from the public perception. Veganism popularly gets treated as niche, feminine, and elite.

Constructing Identity

Since veganism is inherently anti-hegemonic, the diet itself and those that partake are associated with certain characteristics. The vegan identity is chosen, and in part, for that reason, it does not hold the same discrimination and stigma that communities of marginalized races, sexes, genders, and classes are subjected to. Veganism may be considered a type of boycott tactic, "a refusal to participate in exploitation as part of a political conviction and strategy of

political change" (Rothman and Zimmerman 2019:5), with a focus on ideals of equity and non-violent practices (Stepaniak 1998). According to the ecological dominance- social competition model in social ecology, "humans will not stop dominating nature and treating it as a resource until we stop dominating each other and treating each other as resources" (Stibbe 2013: 121; Flinn et al. 2005).

In the U.S., veganism differentiates individuals from others because of cultural norms of a meat-eating diet; therefore, a certain amount of consciously other-ing oneself occurs with the diet (Stepaniak 1998), which becomes an embodied concept (Terry and Urla 1995: 2). Bodies have become social constructs under capitalism, rather than natural entities, partly due to the ways we are incentivized to consume and partake in the market economy through our physical being (Adelman and Ruggi 2015; Featherstone 1991; Shilling 2003). Every part of our body, what goes on it and into it, is shaped by consumer culture in one way or another. Specifically, the vegan body is produced in complex ways because it is "co-produced with human, animal, and socio-cultural worlds" and via encounters with others in their social world (Oliver 2021:11).

Identity and action are mutually constructive, so, in the case of meat-eating or meat-resisting application, identities are in the process of crucial formation of distinction (Presser et al. 2020: 716). Identity is contingent on social forces, which makes the vegan diet so nuanced. As Ciocchetti (2012) puts it: "Each of us finds ourselves in a world where certain identities are available to us and others are not. To some degree, the social world offers us a "script," really more like a broad outline, for how to live as a particular kind of person. We can modify it, of course, but we can't just erase it and start over" (406). Identities are constructed through interaction with others, rendering them situational, relational, and part of a constant process of negotiation (Greenbaum 2012). We construct part of our identity through food and are affected by a variety of factors.

Pursuing veganism as a lifestyle is contingent on certain social factors. According to Cherry (2014), maintaining veganism as a lifestyle requires: "social support from friends and family as well as the cultural tools to provide skills and reinforce motivations to remain a vegan" (73). Cherry (2006) also maintains that supportive social networks were a critical aspect of a long-lasting commitment to veganism as a lifestyle and, in effect, critical to "sustaining the vegan movement" (167). Social movement organizations also function in a way that "provide a structure within which networks and culture can interact to create collective identities" (Cherry 2006: 168). Performing veganism can get complicated within groups. Oliver (2021) points out the contentions and construction of virtuousness that has become associated with this mode of eating in particular: "Veganism requires a political and social performance of *goodness* at different scales – bodily, ethical, and global through the environment – to be reproduced" (10). This performance aspect further complicates identity and meaning-making. In the following sections, I explore punk vegans and masculine vegans in order to expand upon the concept of constructing identity through food and associated praxis.

Subculture (Punk Vegans)

Bringing in the associations of punk culture and veganism provides a lens to look at identity reproductions through a countercultural lens. The associations between veganism and punk subculture are well researched in literature. The non-hierarchical structure of the punk subculture has been shown to allow for situations that "encouraged and reinforced vegan

activism" (Cherry 2006: 168). According to Cherry (2014), there are important distinctions between authentic versus inauthentic subcultural involvement and participation, also characterized as subcultural "production" versus "consumption" (57) when developing realized subcultural identities (Lewin and Williams 2009; Williams 2006). According to Clark (2004), typologies of punk food attempt to interrupt the commodification of food and "from the fetishism of food as a commodity" (3). In the daily praxis of punk, vegetarianism and veganism are strategic ways punks resist hegemonic institutions and structures (Clark 2004), which results in creating cohesion in movement groups (Fominaya 2010). The integration of veganism into punk culture provides an interesting look at the way two countercultural groups intersect and build upon one another and create sets of values.

Vegan Masculinity

Meat is incredibly symbolic to the performance and understanding of hegemonic masculinity (Adams 1990; Fiddes 1991). In agrarian societies, meat consumption was very low for the majority and was understood as a status symbol (Sage 2014). With the industrialization of animal agriculture, meat has become a widely popularized product, and its previous status as a sign of luxury has been altered (Fiddes 1991). Sage (2014) has referred to this as the "meatification of the human diet," which denotes the naturalization and prevalence of meat consumption. Adams (2010) identifies meat as "a symbol and celebration of male dominance" (58). According to Mycek (2018), "performances of masculinity must be responsive to current social dynamics in order to maintain its dominance, and individual performances of masculinity must similarly adapt" (241). This provides an interesting implication for masculine identifying people who partake in a vegan lifestyle. According to Greenebaum and Dexter (2018), "vegan men often threaten the concept of a stoic and domineering view of hegemonic masculinity." Johnson (2011) found that veganism has traditionally been marketed to men by emphasizing health benefits like sexual potency and fitness aesthetics, essentially communicating the notion that veganism can be a vehicle for achieving normative body aesthetic standards. There has been a lack of research regarding masculine perceptions and veganism, but it has been found that vegan men demonstrate "hybrid masculinity" by "expanding and altering the traditional definition of masculinity, yet they do not fundamentally change it" (Greenebaum and Dexter 2018: 645). Analyzing the gendered aspects of vegan foods poses an interesting jumping-off point for continuing to understand the way gender is dichotomized.

Conclusions

Throughout this paper, I have outlined the various socio-cultural factors that affect vegan identity formation. The anti-hegemonic foundational principles of veganism are the antithesis to the hegemonic foundational principles of United States culture, causing great tensions in the perception of veganism. Attributes of Christianity reproduce and naturalize dominant ideologies that support speciesism and anthropocentrism, which work to normalize the manipulation and exploitation of non-human animal bodies and livelihoods. These tensions manifest in stereotyping as a method to delegitimize the movements' deeper purposes, which makes identity-making complicated. Posting veganism in the current capitalist framework adds another layer of nuance because of the methods in which products are available and marketed; understanding aspects of consumption and the breadth of the economic incentives involved aid in grasping the mainstreaming of veganism and the predominant media representations that center the white experience, resulting in the erasure of other cultural and racial experiences.

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