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Vegans of color: managing visible and invisible stigmas

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ABSTRACT

Associating veganism with whiteness and privilege is not only wrong, it marks and marginalizes vegans of color in the vegan movement and makes veganism unappealing to people of color. This qualitative study employs Goffman's (1953) theories to explain how vegans of color experience both visible and invisible stigma from mainstream vegan movements and from their ethnic communities. I emphasize three reasons why my participants believe people of color are resistant to veganism: it is linked with whiteness, affiliated with privilege, and deemed incompatible with ethnicity. My participants engage in a process of differentiation and normalization from white veganism to destigmatize veganism to communities of color.

KEYWORDS

Veganism; vegans of color; people of color; stigma; privilege

Introduction

Veganism is a diet, lifestyle, and social movement that centers on animal rights, environmental protection, and human health. The vegan movement has been perceived as a white, privileged lifestyle movement, which reinforces neoliberal attitudes of universalism, colorblindness, and capitalist consumption (Harper 2011a, 2011b, 2012, 2010b, 2010a; Wrenn 2016; Wrenn and Johnson 2013; Polish 2016). Veganism has been charged as elitist for its promotion of white vegans in the media, the emphasis on veganism as a consumer movement in which one "votes with their forks" (Navarro 2011), and prioritizing animal rights over human rights. Consequently, the vegan movement has also been described as alienating people of color by promoting veganism as a post-racial movement (Harper 2012; Guthman 2008a, 2008b), but the current scholarship is based on theory, media analysis, and personal narratives.

This qualitative study hopes to fill the gap of existing scholarship by providing empirical data on the subject of race and veganism. The association between veganism and white privilege has consequences: it alienates people of color and creates stigma toward vegans of color. Despite these negative connotations, my participants believe veganism is a healthy diet and lifestyle that would counteract the health problems plaguing communities of color. Thus, this qualitative research explores how vegans of color navigate the tensions and conflicts of veganism to normalize and destigmatize veganism to communities of color.

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Literature review

Within the interdisciplinary field of food studies, vegan studies is a scholarly enterprise that analyzes and deconstructs the history of veganism, vegan identity, and the representation of veganism in popular and academic discourse (Wright 2015). Classic research on vegetarianism and veganism focused on motivation and the process for adopting a vegetarian or vegan diet (Asher and Cherry 2015; Beardsworth and Keil 1991; Fox and Ward 2008; Jabs, Sobal, and Devine 2010; Larsson et al. 2003; McDonald 2000; Janda and Trocchia 2001). Both McDonald (2000) and Hirschler (2011) explored the process of becoming a vegan and emphasized a catalytic experience that created a shift in worldview. Often that shift is not enough to keep people committed to veganism, as there is so much pressure in a non-vegan world to eat animal products, particularly from friends and family. Thus, scholarship has emphasized the importance of social networks to support and maintain vegan identity and ideology in order to counteract opposition from friends and family (Asher and Cherry 2015; Cherry 2015, 2006; Larsson et al. 2003).

Vegan studies have also revealed high levels of stigma toward vegans (Greenebaum 2012; Cole and Morgan 2011; Lindquist 2013; Potts and Parry 2010; Twine 2014; Bresnahan, Zhuang, and Zhu 2015; Romo et al. 2012). According to Twine (2014), vegans are perceived as "killjoys" because their mere presence threatens ideologies of carnism (Joy 2011). Vegans experience online harassment for identifying as a "vegan-sexual," one who prefers a sexual relationship with others who share their cruelty-free vegan values (Potts and Parry 2010). Cole and Morgan (2011) analyzed media representations of veganism and found that the discourse ridiculed and mocked veganism as a fad that required a strict and difficult ascetic, derided vegans as sentimental animal lovers, and accused vegans of being hostile animal rights activists. The discourse, which Cole and Morgan define as "vegaphobia," stereotypes vegans as a deviant and the marginalized other, while normalizing speciesism and violence toward animals.

Research has identified ways that vegans attempt to counteract the stigma they face. Greenebaum (2012) found that vegans engage in a process of impression management by carefully monitoring conversations with non-vegan family and friends in order to avoid conflict. Romo et al. (2012) also found that vegetarians engage in a process of goal framework to communicate about vegetarianism. Although they want to be honest and truthful about their identity and lifestyle, they engage in communication strategies to avoid being defined as a deviant. Further studies on discourse analysis explore how vegans promote veganism as "easy" or "doing being ordinary" on online vegan forums in order to neutralize the stigma of being perceived as difficult and unhealthy (Sneijder and Te Molder 2005, 2009).

A major limitation in these studies on veganism is that the research population has been limited to a mostly white, heterosexual, middle-class population. This assumes a race-neutral experience of veganism, meaning that the motivations, opportunities, and experience of adopting a vegan lifestyle will be similar without regard to race, class, and gender. Vegan scholars expose the neoliberal ideology of "post-racial," which reinforces ideologies of colorblindness, individualism, and veganism as consumer lifestyle (Harper 2012, 2011b, 2010a, 2010b; Ko and Syl 2017; Navarro 2011; Polish 2016; Wrenn 2016).

Harper's (2010b) anthology *Sistah Vegan* explores the different motivations for black women becoming vegan, including animal rights, personal health, and environmental reasons. *Sistah Vegan's* most monumental contribution highlights how black women use plant-based veganism as a tool to decolonize the body from a colonial diet that is killing the black community. In her contribution to the *Sistah Vegan* volume, Danielle (2010) argues, "collectively, we can embrace [veganism] as more than just a change in our way of eating. It is a political statement, another weapon in our fight for economic, social, and political empowerment" (p. 48). Thus, veganism can be a form of resistance to the industrial food complex that oppresses and disenfranchises poor people of color who lack access to healthy, affordable food (Harper 2012, 2011b, 2010a, 2010b; Project, Food Empowerment 2010).

Like previous research on veganism, more than half of my participants became vegan for animal rights reasons, and face stigma by communities of color, who tend to be critical of the animal rights movement use of "post-racial" narratives in their campaigns (Drew 2010; Harper 2010a). This paper, however, focuses on the representation of vegans and the food they eat, rather than the image of the vegan animal rights activist. More specifically, this paper draws upon Goffman's (1963) theories of stigma to explain why people of color are hesitant to adopt a vegan lifestyle and diet. While race and ethnicity are often visible social identities, veganism is an invisible and chosen social identity; thus, the resulting stigmas are both visible and invisible and change in relation to the social interaction.

As the literature revealed, vegans experience invisible stigma from non-vegans. Although some vegans of color face a visible stigma within the mainstream vegan community, this paper highlights the invisible stigma that both veganism and vegans of color face from family and friends in their own communities of color. Participants reveal three reasons why they believe people of color are resistant to veganism: it is linked with whiteness, affiliated with privilege, and deemed incompatible with ethnicity. To counteract the visible stigma of being associated with white veganism, vegans of color engage in a process of *differentiation* from white veganism and highlight how they do veganism differently. By challenging stereotypes, vegans of color also engage in a process of *normalization* to show people of color that anyone can be vegan (Goffman 1963; Joachim and Acorn 2000; Clair et al. 2016).

Methods

I used multiple outlets including the social networking site Facebook to interview twenty-seven people of color who self-identified as vegan. I contacted organizers of various vegan groups on Facebook to ask permission to recruit volunteers for a study on vegans of color. Facebook groups enable people who share common interests to create a virtual community of like-minded people. Other participants were found using snowball techniques or from personal and social networks.

The goal of in-depth qualitative interviews is to understand attitudes, beliefs, and experience of participants, rather than producing a representative sample. Some of the interviews were face to face, while others were conducted over the phone in an effort to reach a more geographically diverse group of participants. The length of interviews ranged from 22 to 83 minutes, with a median of 43 minutes.

Table 1. Participant demographics.

Name	LGBTQ	Age	Years vegan	Gender	Education	Household income	Race–ethnicity	Motivation
Sada	No	21	5	Woman	College	$50,000 – $75,000	Multi-racial	Animal rights
Sofia*	No	21	1.5	Woman	Some college	Less than $25,000	Latino or Hispanic or Hispanic	Animal rights
Jada*	No	35	12	Woman	Some college	No answer	Black or African American	Animal rights
Kayla*	Yes	39	15	Woman	Graduate degree	$25,000 – $49,000	Black or African American	Animal rights
Owen*	No	32	1	Man	Some College	$25,000–$49,000	Black or African American	Health
Gabriela	No	23	1.5	Woman	High school	Less than $25,000	Latino or Hispanic	Animal rights
Tia*	No	40	6	Woman	Graduate degree	Over $100,000	Black or African American	Health
Carla	No	35	1	Woman	Graduate degree	Over $100,000	Black or African American	Health
Alayna	No	19	4	Woman	Some college	Less than $25,000	Arab/Middle Eastern	Animal rights
Caleb*	No	37	7	Man	High school	$25,000–$49,000	Black or African American	Health
Jasmine*	Yes	28	4.5	Woman	College	$25,000–$49,000	Black or African American	Animal rights
Leah*	No	45	11	Woman	Graduate degree	No answer	S. Asian or Indian American	Animal rights
Daniela*	No	35	16	Woman	Graduate degree	$50,000–$75,000	Black or African American	Health
Cecilia	No	60	30	Woman	College	$25,000–$49,000	Latino or Hispanic	Animal rights
Bianca*	No	49	9	Woman	College	Less than $25,000	Multi-racial	Animal rights
Carlos	No	34	3	Man	Some college	$50,000–$75,000	Other	Health
Amit*	No	26	2	Man	Graduate degree	Over $100,000	S. Asian or Indian American	Animal rights
Marco	Yes	42	30	Man	Some college	Less than $25,000	Multi-racial	Other
Vira*	No	25	1.5	Woman	Some college	Over $100,000	S. Asian or Indian American	Animal rights
Nathan*	No	26	3	Man	College	$50,000–$75,000	Multi-racial	Environmental
Jerome*	No	48	30	Trans Man	Graduate degree	Over $100,000	Black or African American	Health
Paitlyn	Yes	24	8	Man	College	$50,000–$75,000	Multi-racial	Environmental
Anthony*	No	43	6	Man	Some college	Over $100,000	Multi-racial	Other
Shanti*	No	49	10	Woman	College	$25,000–$49,000	S. Asian or Indian American	Animal rights
Isabella*	No	35	5	Woman	College	No answer	Multi-racial	Animal rights
Rafael*	No	38	16	Man	Graduate degree	Over $100,000	Latino or Hispanic	Other
Emmet*	No	27	6	Man	High school	$50,000–$75,000	Black or African American	Animal rights

A reference guide of questions was used to help focus the interviews, yet all the interviewees had the opportunity to discuss issues that we may not have addressed. Some questions were revised after reviewing the first few interviews. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured via consent forms, and all names were changed. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for accuracy before being systematically coded into categories using Dedoose, an online software application. Data and codes were then analyzed using grounded theory and an inductive approach; thus, the concepts and theories emerged from the data (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

I interviewed sixteen women, ten men, and one transgender man. Four people identified as members of the LGBTQ community. The ages of the participants ranged from 19 to 60 years old with the median age being 35 years. Ten identified as black or African American, four identified as Latino or Hispanic, four identified as South Asian or Indian American, one identified as Arab American, seven identified as multi-racial, and one identified as "other." All but three had some level of education past high school: six people had either an associate degree or some college experience, ten individuals were currently attending a four-year college or were college graduates and eight individuals were either in graduate school or completed a graduate-level degree. The participants earned a wide range of incomes. Five people earned under $25,000, six people earned between $25,000 and $45,000, six earned between $50,000 and $74,000, seven earned over $100,000, and three declined to answer.

Ten of the participants have been vegan for one to four years, eight have been vegan for five to nine years, and nine have been vegan for over 10 years. My informants endorsed veganism for a multitude of reasons. Fifteen people promoted veganism for ethical reasons (i.e., against animal exploitation), seven adopted veganism to improve their personal health, two were vegan for environmental reasons, and three had "other reasons" for being vegan. Eleven of my participants identified as activists and the other sixteen individuals adopted an apolitical stance on veganism, see Table 1.

It is important to note that as a Jewish, white vegan, I come to this project with both outsider and insider status. I recognize that my experience with veganism is significantly different than the vegans of color I interviewed. However, I also understand the difficulties of reconciling family wishes and traditions with veganism. This position informed my methodology and research questions.

The role of race in veganism

For the most part, race and ethnicity was not a motivating factor in the participants' decisions to become vegan. Tia was one of the few participants to link the catalyst to go vegan with the larger health disparities of the African American community.

> I am vegan for health reasons and to avoid health issues. So, I would say that being African American influenced the decision in that I was and am working to avoid the multitude of health issues that plague our community in general [such as] diabetes, heart disease, etc.

At least five participants stated that race was irrelevant to veganism. To these individuals, veganism is a belief, ethic, and mindset that anyone, regardless of race, could share. Caleb, a black man who has been vegan for seven years, explains,

> I don't think race is relevant. It depends on the person. If you know you have a disease and you are trying to get help, you are going to do what you've got to do. It doesn't have anything to do with race, it has to do with your mindset.

Sofia, a Latina woman who has been vegan for over a year maintains, "It doesn't matter what race you are. What [does] a different pigmentation have anything to do with whether you go vegan or not?" Jerome, a black man who has been vegan for thirty years, got angry when I questioned if he faced challenges as a vegan of color.

> None at all, zero. I don't even think it's relevant. I almost backed out of this study. I was like what does this have to do with anything. [But] maybe there's something I'm missing. It's just sad that in 2017 there's a racism issue in veganism. In general, it's veganism; what does that have to do with race?

He then admitted that the association of whiteness and veganism would deter people of color from veganism.

> I guess race plays a part in everything these days but it's so sad. The reason I say it's sad is because the people who need [veganism won't be reached]. They think it's a white thing and a privileged thing and its not.

For Daniela, a black woman who has been vegan for four and a half years, growing up in Jamaica, race was rarely discussed. This changed for her when she moved to the USA and felt that "others were questioning me as a black person who was vegan." Emmet, a black man who has been vegan for six years, also maintains that race did not influence his decision to become vegan. However, he perceives it differently now because he "knows how taboo it is to [be] vegan in the black community."

These statements emphasize a colorblind and apolitical stance toward veganism. However, as the interviews progressed, conversations about race became more nuanced. Race did not manifest itself in the foreground of analysis as it does for those embracing veganism to decolonize one's diet (Esquibel 2016; Harper 2010a; Navarro 2011; Polish 2016). A prominent theme, however, is the problematic connection between the representation of whiteness and veganism.

Confronting the representation of white veganism

There are many stereotypes of vegans, including the privileged hipster, the radical animal rights activist, and the free-spirited, nonconformist hippie. All of these portrayals assume whiteness, making it difficult for people of color to envision themselves in these representations of veganism. Jada, a black vegan activist for twelve years, explains that, "The stereotypical image in my dealings with the black community of what a vegan looks like is a hippie white guy, throwing up the peace sign with a joint in his mouth and like peace man." Tia, a black vegan for six years agrees. "I don't think if you asked somebody, black, white, or whatever background, to picture a vegan in their head it would be somebody black. Honestly, I thought vegans were kind of crazy myself."

This invisibility is exacerbated by mainstream vegan organizations and the mass media tendency to promote celebrities, book authors, chefs, and activists who are white and privileged. As a result, veganism is perceived as a lifestyle that seems foreign and

inaccessible (Harper 2012), and thus stigmatized. Jasmine, a black vegan and animal rights activist for over four years, states:

> I think the reason why it's associated with whiteness is because a lot of white vegans have pushed themselves to the forefront and [have become] the face of veganism. The kale smoothie movement and being raw veganism makes veganism to appear elitist, and as a result basically makes it a white thing.

Most of my participants find these stereotypes to be humorous, yet their own experience contradicts the stereotypes. They emphasize an alternative vegan scene that is disconnected from the elitist stereotype in order to promote veganism as ordinary (Sneijder and te Molder 2005, 2009). Jada exclaims:

> My real life experience has been very different. I know people of all different races and nationalities and socioeconomic conditions that are turning to veganism … So, yeah, the movement is spreading and it's not discriminating. It's not just a white thing; it's not just a rich person thing. It's something that people are embracing everywhere.

Vira, who is South Asian and vegan for over a year, concurs.

> Veganism from the inside is so different from what veganism appears to be from the outside. I think letting people know that there is no one stereotype or one identity associated with veganism could actually [be] very strong and powerful. I think if a lot of other people saw that you could be vegan without having to fit into a particular stereotype, I think it would be much more relatable and that people would more willing to consider it.

It is so important that vegans of color are visible in the vegan movement to alter the depiction of veganism as white. As Jasmine states, "If people don't see themselves being represented then why would they go vegan?"

Currently, vegans of color are marked as "other" within the vegan community as they lack representation within the vegan movement. While mainstream media and vegan/animal rights organizations promote thin, white, female vegans, vegans of color are using social media and the internet to highlight the work of other vegans of color (Shah 2018; Ko n.d..) More than half of the vegans of color in the study were neither involved in activism nor were they involved with local vegan community. Their vegan education took place online through social media. They point to the potential of this medium to challenge and differentiate themselves from the image of the white vegan. Social media has also enabled people of color to get support from and see other vegans of color online.

Three black men interviewed have their own YouTube channels and Instagram, with different levels of production. Caleb describes his YouTube channel as basic and unedited due to his ADHD/ADD, learning disabilities, and limited income. Rather than seeing this as a liability, he feels it's important to show people that you can prepare vegan foods in a tiny kitchen without any fancy equipment. Owen uploads videos on his YouTube page in which he shops at grocery stores to teach people how to purchase vegan food, and so they can see how much it costs. Jerome uses YouTube and Instagram to show people the food he grows in his backyard and the recipes he cooks. While these men are not famous on the internet and do not have a massive following, they use social media to educate viewers about the vegan lifestyle. They show

their audience how veganism is an affordable and accessible lifestyle. Their presence on social media is an important and effective way to highlight different representations of vegans on the internet. Vegans of color are using social media to educate and empower agency and choice among people of color who may feel deterred by the constraints of veganism. By emphasizing the "ordinary" and the familiar, vegans of color normalize and depoliticize veganism as a way to make veganism seem attainable (Sneijder and te Molder 2005, 2009). Additionally, amplifying vegan voices of color helps change the narrative of white veganism, which is a critical step toward decentering whiteness in veganism.

Challenging the notion of vegan privilege

The notion that veganism is elitist and requires wealth and privilege is a common critique of veganism from non-vegans as well as vegan scholars and activists who work within the field of Critical Animal Studies. Greenebaum (2016, p. 4) argues that while vegans' critiques of privilege are motivated by the desire "to move beyond a limited focus on equality and justice for animals and broaden our circle of compassion to people," non-vegans focus on "vegan privilege" as a way to discredit the ethical argument for veganism in order to justify eating animals and reinforce the invisible ideologies of carnism and speciesism.

The participants in my study deliberate among themselves over the legitimacy of the concept of vegan privilege. Most agree that there is a level of privilege in being vegan, but they ultimately critique this concept as a construction of veganism as a consumption lifestyle, marketed to middle-class white vegans without regard to issues of race, class, and privilege. Clearly not everyone has the same opportunity to choose the food they eat, particularly those who live in food deserts and lack access to fresh fruits and vegetables.[1] Shanti, a South Asian woman who has been vegan for ten years, recognizes that people do need access to food, information, and time, but rejected the notion that veganism requires significant privilege and wealth.

> There is some truth to [the claim of privilege] because I know there are food deserts and neighborhoods that don't have access to fresh produce and healthy products. Some neighborhoods only have the corner convenience store and not many products that they can buy. They also don't have land where they can grow their own fruits and vegetables, so in some ways it is privileged.

Isabella, a mixed-race Latina vegan activist for five years, also understands that veganism is not possible for all, especially those who live in food deserts.

> Yes and no. In some ways yeah, in order to be aware of veganism you kind of have to have access to this information whether it be access to an internet, or events where someone happens to be handing out vegan flyers. You also need to have access to a store where you can buy grains and tofu and fresh vegetables, which I know a lot of people, don't have . . . I would never say to someone in the San Joaquin valley [California], why aren't you vegan when you can't even find frozen peas at your store. So yes and no, I think it depends on where you live and who you are.

Although they recognize that not everybody has access or income to buy vegan food, many people who do have the money still choose not to adopt a vegan diet. One reason

for this is the stereotypical image of vegan consumers who shop at grocery stores like Whole Foods, independent health foods stores, and farmers markets which can be expensive, inaccessible, and intimidating to people of color and working-class people (Paddock 2015b).[2] As Caleb states,

> When I picture a vegan I see someone going into Whole Foods and buying all this organic stuff, driving a Lexus and going to a nice house. It doesn't have to be like that. Veganism is a lifestyle. You can eat canned food and still be vegan. You can go to the dollar store and buy some beans and soak them and cook them. But people are just stuck on some mindset of what they had in their head as a vegan that they are stubborn to try it and especially my people … You can associate veganism with privilege and some people think about it for ten or fifteen seconds and say, nah, I'm not going to try it, and keep on doing what they are doing.

Rafael, a Latino man who has been vegan for sixteen years, argues that vegan organizations market a privileged version of veganism when they pass out pamphlets to advertise highly expensive vegan products that imitate traditional meat and dairy products.

> If you go to a poor neighborhood with those pamphlets people would just laugh at you. It probably costs ten times the amount of money they spend on food right now to buy all the stuff they tell you to buy so no one is going to take that seriously. The way that it's marketed is a privilege.

Many of my participants critiqued this dominant narrative of veganism as false and dangerous as it keeps people from thinking veganism is for rich, white people, not for people like them. All of my participants agree that vegan boxed foods, premade foods, and convenience foods are more expensive than mass-produced conventional food. Yet my participants argue that veganism can be affordable regardless of income. Being vegan does not require shopping at Whole Foods, farmers markets, or health food stores. You can eat at fast food establishments such as Taco Bell, buy frozen vegetables, iceberg lettuce, and canned food, and still be vegan. They point out that the basic foods of rice and beans are cheap, accessible, and affordable. As Tia states, "I always tell people that vegan food is expensive when you are trying to make it be like regular food. The faker the food the more it may cost relatively speaking." Jasmine agrees, "the conception that it's expensive is a product of white veganism and this idea that you have to buy all organic and that it has to be all fancy whatever, $12 for a little small, tiny, thing of vegan cheese, which I could probably make at home for less."

My participants reject the notion that veganism is an expensive and unaffordable lifestyle. In fact, many claim that they now save money as a vegan, especially when they stick to buying whole foods. To make veganism affordable, they emphasize the importance of cooking simple foods, even though not everyone has the time, ability, and desire to cook from scratch (Paddock 2015a; Bowen, Elliott, and Brenton 2014). Furthermore, my participants argue that veganism seems complicated until one learns which ingredients to shop for, where to shop for the best deals, and how to cook as a vegan. Anthony, a multi-racial black man who has been vegan for six years, states,

> I've gotten pretty good at it. I buy quinoa and rice in bulk. I cook probably four or five days a week. It's not expensive for me. It's really not. I've got to feed four mouths a day and granted I get stuff from work as well. I don't think it's that expensive once you know how to do it. It's definitely a process of knowing what to buy, when to buy it, what's in season.

Kayla, Owen, and Caleb are both on a tight budget. Kayla, a black woman who has been vegan for fifteen years, does not eat organic produce and still feels like she's being a healthy vegan.

> I hear a lot about veganism not being affordable. I'm a graduate student, I have very little money but the things that I eat are pretty simple … I do eat fresh fruits and vegetables everyday but I don't have the luxury of everything being organic … It sounds really basic but you can definitely soup up some beans and rice. Basic whole foods are not that expensive compared to various types of fish and other meats. I don't think being vegan is expensive. I don't eat a ton of vegan-boxed foods, which is going to be more expensive.

Owen agrees:

> It saves me a lot of my money, it really does. I'm serious. Buying a pound of rice and lentils is like $1 each. That can last you a whole week. It's really not as expensive as people claim it is. Now of course [if] you are purchasing the processed stuff and the ice creams and your fake chicken and fake bacon it will add up.

Caleb, who also has a low income, finds it a challenge to budget food, especially as he prefers to eat organic. However, he decided to prioritize his health over material goods.

> The biggest challenge for me is trying to budget and trying to eat healthy and trying to get organic stuff. So, it's like organic, do I need it or not? I'm learning to budget everyday and I'm trying to listen to the information and go to farmers markets to save money. Most of my income does go toward food and rent [so basically] I don't have any furniture. I have a bed, a desk, a TV and I've got basic cable. I want to get a computer but every time I do stuff happens. But I'm putting my health first before any materialistic things. So, that's a big challenge for me. But as far as from eating, I'm good.

The assumption that vegan food is expensive, unaffordable, and unattainable is not only false, it is dangerous. Many of my participants argue the concept of vegan privilege is being used by industries with a profit motive to keep people unhealthy. Nathan, a multi-racial black man, who has been vegan for three years, speculates:

> I think because they like to promote the idea that it's expensive to eat healthy as a vegan. They want to deter less affluent people to that lifestyle and they want [to keep them in] a more unhealthy [*sic*] lifestyle because they can continue to profit from pharmaceuticals, or different food trends that they're promoting … I think it's more or less a form of propaganda to deter other people from that lifestyle to think that they can't associate with veganism.

Although my participants recognize that some people have limited access to fresh fruits and vegetables, they promote that one can be vegan on any budget. They challenge the idea that veganism is expensive and only possible for those with economic privilege. By emphasizing cooking simple recipes rather than relying on expensive premade foods or vegan junk food, they attempt to create an alternative image of veganism to counteract the stigma of white veganism. Furthermore, they offer simple, everyday ways to challenge the standard American diet that has been ravaging communities of color

with health problems. Although they rely on individual solutions rather than structural changes, their unpretentious attitude toward veganism has the potential to empower individuals and communities.

Disputing vegan food as incompatible to ethnic identity

The issue with veganism for many people of color is not just that vegan food is seen as expensive; it is deemed as incompatible with one's ethnic culture and history. Because food is tied to culture, refusing to eat the food provided by the family is interpreted as a rejection of the culture and the family. As a result, many vegans in this study were stigmatized by members of their community and treated as deviant. More specifically, many were charged with "acting white" for going vegan. Isabella and Bianca, both mixed-race Latina women and vegans for five and nine years, respectively, were accused of acting white and rejecting their culture.

> I will never forget all the teasing I got from my friends and family in high school. Some people did think it was cool, but I always got called whitewashed and gringa by my family. Going to family events were awful because everyone would make a huge deal about me not eating meat … There was a stigma that was associated of me being less than as a person and me definitely being less of a Latino for being vegetarian and not eating [garda saza], you know, the things that all Mexicans eat. (Isabella)

> I've been asked if I thought I was white because I talk like a white girl, I eat like a white girl. I usually say, "I really didn't realize that compassion had a color." I include everybody in my circle of compassion and if that's being white then I'm white. (Bianca)

In addition to being blamed for shunning her culture, Vira was charged with rejecting her family. Vira, who's been vegan for a year, lives at home with her traditional Indian parents, explains her parents' reaction to her transition to veganism.

> When I became vegan and there was so much more push back [than when I became a vegetarian]. My parents were very against the idea ... because I think that was the first thing that I was doing that separated myself from the identity my family encapsulates … My dad said, "it's so weird, we are a family, we cook together, we eat together and … for you to eat to be eating something different from us, he basically said, it seems like you are not part of the family."

Amit, also Indian American and vegan for two years, argues that for immigrant families, veganism threatens the desire to hold onto the culture of one's homeland as they integrate into American life.

> I think sometimes when it comes to people who are white the idea of preserving [an ethnic] culture is not as prevalent ... it's not that they don't have a culture or that there is no tradition but that it's not [as] necessary to preserve [a European culture] as [it is for] an Indian-American who has Indian cultures and an Indian family.

Previous research supports claims of conflict among families when one member becomes vegan (Asher and Cherry 2015; Beardsworth and Keil 1997; Hirschler 2011; Jabs, Devine, and Sobal 1998; Jabs, Sobal, and Devine 2010; Greenebaum 2012; McDonald 2000; Roth 2005; Twine 2014). Most of my participants experienced an extra layer of stigma from their families and communities due to the stereotypical image of white veganism. Yet, it is important to note that all my participants have

expressed that they experience less stigma today than they did just a few years ago. Some of my participants have facilitated friends and families to adopt a more plant-based diet. Others have families who continue to eat meat and dairy, but will now accommodate the vegans in their lives. A unique finding of this study is that being vegan as a member of a marginalized community is often perceived as a betrayal of one's ethnic identity and a rejection of one's culture. Although vegan food is deemed antithetical to ethnic food, many plant-based ingredients are already an integral part of ethnic cuisines. My participants highlight the need for culturally appropriate vegan foods to encourage a vegan shift to eradicate health disparities in communities that face economic and structural barriers.

Many of the African American participants in the study blame Southern food, or soul food, for the health problems of their community. Anthony suggests that food traditions and customs are killing his community.

> I would like people to know that we have a very, very unhealthy community … [suffering from] obesity, diabetes and high blood pressure ... We got to break out of that or we are just dying off … Something needs to be done. You can't just sit here and eat like this and pass it onto our kids and then they eat like that and they get diabetes so ingrained in the genes and high blood pressure ... They need to know [that] the health issues with black people are coming from is related with what they put in their bodies.

Emmet is a black man who has been vegan for six years and lives in an impoverished, urban neighborhood, and he shares a similar concern about how members of his community eat.

> The food that we love and crave so much that we grew up on due to what we ate in slavery times, like fried chicken and the pork chops and all the scraps, we are so used to this so we are not used to eating healthy. Generation wise, we weren't raised to eat healthy.

Soul food, rooted in slavery, conjures up negative images of an unhealthy diet high in saturated fat, salt, and sugar. Scholars, chefs, and food activists trace the culinary roots of soul food to unmask a cuisine created by enslaved Africans to address nutritional deficiencies and inadequate caloric intake needed for intensive forced manual labor (Witt 2007; Terry 2014; Mitchell 2009; Twitty 2017; Yentsch 2007). Award-winning vegan chef Bryant Terry (2014) wants black communities to embrace the essence of soul food for maximum health. "People of African descent need not look any further than our own historical foodways for better well-being. It is vital that we incorporate African and Afro-diasporic vegetables, grains, legumes, fruits, nuts, seeds, and cooking techniques into our kitchens" (Terry 2014, p. 12). Chefs, like Terry Bryant and Tracye McQuirter are creating healthy, plant-based soul food that relies on their nutritionally dense and culturally appropriate ancestral Southern diet.

That's why Anthony, a vegan chef, is starting a business selling soul food from his food trailer in the urban center of a food desert. He recognizes that soul food has a deep and rich meaning to black communities. His goal is to not only help blacks and Latinos in his community to eat better, it's also to show his community they can enjoy the same taste and mouth feel without eating animals.

> When I say soul food I mean fried mock meats and cashew cheese and macaroni and cheese, collards and cabbage, and beans. I've got this mean fish recipe with seaweed, old

> bay, kelp and all that. It tastes just like fish. I do a barbeque tofu type thing that people really like. I just want to meet people halfway. A lot of people are like, "I'm gonna miss my ribs, I'm miss all my fried fish." And I'm like no, you can still have it, man, but you just won't be killing anything and this is somewhat healthier than what you normally be eating … Soul food is not something we should eat all the time … I just want to give you an alternative to know you don't have to eat animals to get that flavor. All the flavor that you get comes from plants. The meat doesn't taste like anything until you season it with a plant.

While he believes people should not eat fried food on a regular basis, vegan or not, it is important to introduce these culturally appropriate alternatives to make veganism appealing.

Emmet also emphasizes the need to highlight the spices used by one's culture. He argues that we crave the seasonings and marinades more than meats, and that these seasonings can be replicated in plant-based foods.

> I tell them every time you eat meat you put something that's plant-based on top of it. You are not just eating straight meat. You are putting salt, you're putting pepper, you're putting garlic, onions, then you're going to put your taco sauce on it that's made from plants and tomatoes. I'm eating the same things you're putting on it but I'm just not eating meat. You're in love with the seasoning, not the meat itself. I've never heard of anyone just putting [chicken] in the pan and throwing it in the oven. You add garlic, salt, lemon pepper, and all these plant-based [foods] to make it good.

Vegan recipes must be reimagined to taste like the comfort foods that are reminiscent of our home, family, and culture. This will make vegan food seem less weird and alienating and hopefully entice more people of color to go vegan.

Tia emphasizes the need for vegan ethnic chefs and cookbook authors to veganize recipes in a healthful way that captures the emotions and flavor of ethnic comfort foods.

> I try to find recipes by people who are black or maybe at least southern or something because it we have a very strong culinary tradition down here and it just not the same in other places. People are like "this is the best [vegan] macaroni and cheese recipe ever." And I'm like, that looks disgusting; that is not [traditional] macaroni and cheese … vegans of color need to find ways to recreate food in a soulful way or even [southern way].

Leah and Kayla agree that culturally appropriate cookbook authors are important in order to make veganism accessible and attractive to others. Leah, who is South Asian, and vegan for eleven years, reports:

> I've had people say, "I can't go vegan because we're Indian and dairy is the lifeblood of our people." So getting an Indian cookbook from a Jewish author isn't going to make them be like, "Oh yeah, well I can go [vegan]." But getting an Indian cookbook from an Indian writer who is vegan [will].

Kayla believes that promoting cookbooks by black vegan chefs is a critical component to connect the black community to veganism.

> Um, I think its definitely changed and made veganism more accessible for people of color. For instance, I got [the cookbook] *By Any Greens Necessary* [by Tracye McQuirter] for my cousin a few years ago and that was written by a black woman for people of color … Having access to books like that written by people of color for people of color just makes it

> a lot more accessible…. Also, I think it also shows white people that they don't have the lock on veganism. Like this isn't their thing, their movement, or what have you.

Promoting culturally appropriate foods challenges the dominant narrative that veganism is for white people and vegan food is "white" food, making veganism more appealing to communities of color. It also rejects the notion that ethnic foods are unhealthy. With the help of innovative chefs, ethnic foods such as Indian, Thai, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Mexican, and Ethiopian can easily be veganized and therefore normalize the concept of ethnic vegan cuisine.

Conclusion

There is no monolithic or universal experience of veganism for people of color. Although some participants felt that race was irrelevant to veganism, others believed race was integral to how veganism was perceived and interpreted. This is due to the various social locations of race, ethnicity, culture, socioeconomic class, gender, and sexual identity. Nonetheless, the majority believed that people of color's reactions to veganism were shaped by the affiliation of veganism to whiteness. Although the mainstream vegan movement portrays itself as post-racial, race is very much connected to the image of vegans for people of color.

Because veganism is associated with whiteness and privilege in the popular media, many of my participants have been accused of "acting white" because they either engage in healthy eating and/or feel compassion toward animals. Thus, veganism is treated as a stigma. Their families often believed that their vegan lifestyle was a rejection of their ethnicity and culture and saw vegan food as antithetical to ethnic food, rather than seeing fresh produce as the backbone of ethnic cuisine.

My participants acknowledge and validate some of the critiques of veganism as a privileged diet and recognize a limited amount of structural inequalities and barriers, mostly for those most marginalized by food deserts and extreme poverty. Yet they simultaneously reject the critiques, which act to delegitimize veganism and mark people of color.

They also engage in acts of distinction from "white veganism" by challenging the consumer culture emphasized by vegan groups and consumer culture, in order to challenge the invisible stigma of veganism. Rather than promoting expensive processed foods that mock animal products, they advocate cooking simple plant-based foods that can be seasoned to accommodate taste. Some of the more politically savvy participants argue that the association of veganism with whiteness, privilege, and wealth is used to keep vegans of color disempowered and unhealthy by making veganism seem unaffordable, unattainable, and subversive.

To further attempt to normalize and destigmatize veganism, my participants suggest ways to make veganism more welcoming and accommodating to people of color. They endorse educating the public about the accessibility and affordability of a vegan diet, the importance of highlighting vegans of color, and the importance of promoting culturally appropriate vegan foods. Although these solutions advance individual change rather than structural transformation, decentering whiteness and changing the depiction of veganism is a profound step in reforming the vegan movement and eradicating the visible and invisible stigma vegans of color face.

This study adds to the sociological research on race and veganism, although there are limitations to the data and analysis. Because participants were gathered using convenience and snowball sampling, the findings are neither representative nor generalizable. Although interviewing people of various race and ethnicities in one study is useful to gain an understanding of difference and differentiation from white veganism, vegans of color as a whole are not a monolithic category. Therefore, future research should focus on individual ethnic and racial groups in order to highlight the specific issues of inclusion and exclusion faced by the community. In addition, I encourage future research to focus on the experience of people of color within the animal rights movements, as similar assumptions about race and whiteness link both movements.

Notes

1. Critical race theorists in geography have critiqued the cause and solutions of food deserts, which often rely on market-based solutions without addressing the problem of poverty. For an in-depth analysis, please read Guthman (2008a, 2008b), Howerton and Trauger (2017), Kurtz (2013), Ramirez (2015), and Slocum (2006, 2013).
2. For more information on whiteness and alternative food movements, please read Alkon et al. (2013), Alkon and Christie Grace (2011), Johnston, Szabo, and Rodney (2011), Guthman (2008a, 2008b), Paddock (2015a, 2015b), and Slocum (2006, 2013).

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