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Being a Bad Vegan

Lelia Green

Abstract

According to *The Betoata Advocate* (Parker), a CSIRO (Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation) paper has recently established that “it takes roughly seven minutes on average for a vegan to tell you that they’re vegan” (qtd. in Harrington et al. 135). For such a statement to have currency as a joke means that it is grounded in a shared experience of being vegan on the one hand, and of encountering vegans on the other. Why should vegans feel such a need to justify themselves? I recognise the observation as being true of me, and this article is one way to explore this perspective: writing to find out what I currently only intuit. As Richardson notes (516), writing is “a way of ‘knowing’—a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it. Form and content are inseparable” (qtd. in Wall 151).

Autoethnography, the qualitative research methodology used for this article, is etymologically derived from Greek to indicate a process for exploring the self (*autos*) and the cultural (“ethno” from *ethnos*—nation, tribe, people, class) using a shared, understood, approach (“graphy” from *graphia*, writing). It relies upon critical engagement with and synthesising of the personal. In Wall’s words, this methodological analysis of human experience “says that what I know matters” (148). The autoethnographic investigation (Riggins; Sparkes) reported here interrogates the experience of “being judged” as a vegan: firstly, by myself; secondly, by other vegans; and ultimately by the wider society. As Ellis notes, autoethnography is “research, writing, story and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social and political. Autoethnographic forms feature concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection” (xix).

Introspection is important because researchers’ stories of their observations are interwoven with self-reflexive critique and analysis: “illustrative materials are meant to give a sense of what the observed world is really like, while the researcher’s interpretations are meant to represent a more detached conceptualization of that reality” (Strauss and Corbin 22). Leaving aside Gans’s view that this form of enquiry represents the “climax of the preoccupation with self [...] an autobiography written by sociologists” (542), an autoethnography generally has the added advantage of protecting against Glendon and Stanton’s concern that interpretive studies “are often of too short a duration to be able to provide sufficiently large samples of behaviour” (209). In my case, I have twelve years of experience of identifying as a vegan to draw upon.

My experience is that being vegan is a contested activity with a significant range of variation that partly reflects the different initial motivations for adopting this increasingly mainstream identity. Greenebaum notes that “ethical vegans differentiate between those who ‘eat’ vegan (health vegans) and those who ‘live’ vegan (ethical vegans)”, going on to suggest that these differences create “hierarchies and boundaries between vegans” (131). As Greenebaum acknowledges, there is sometimes a need to balance competing priorities: “an environmental vegan [...] may purchase leather products over polyvinyl chloride (PVC), thinking that leather is a better choice for the environment” (130). Harrington et al. similarly critique vegan motivations as encompassing “a selfless pursuit for those who cared for other beings (animals)” to “a concern about impacts that affect all humans (environment), and an interest mostly in the self (individual health ...)” (144). Wright identifies a fourth group of vegans: those searching for a means of dietary inclusivity (2). I have known Orthodox Jewish households that have adopted veganism because it is compatible with keeping Kosher, while many strict Hindus are vegan and some observant Muslims may also follow suit, to avoid meat that is not Halal certified.

The Challenge of the Everyday

Although my initial vegan promptings were firmly at the selfish end of an altruism spectrum, my experience is that motivation is not static. Being a vegan for any reason increasingly primes awareness of more altruistic motivations “at the intersection of a diversity of concerns [...] promoting] a spread and expansion of meaning to view food choices holistically” (Harrington et al. 144). Even so, everyday life offers a range of temptations and challenges that require constant juggling and, sometimes, a string of justifications: to oneself, and to others. I identify as a bit of a bad vegan, and not simply because I embrace the possibility that “honey is a gray area” (Greenebaum, quoting her participant Jason, 139). I’m also flexible around wine, for example, and don’t ask too many questions about whether the wine I drink is refined using milk, or egg-shells or even (yuk!) fish bladders. The point is, there are an infinite number of acid tests as to what constitutes “a real vegan”, encouraging inter-vegan judgmentality. Some slight definitional slippage aligns with Singer and Mason’s argument, however, that vegans should avoid worrying about “trivial infractions of the ethical guidelines [...] Personal purity isn’t really the issue. Not supporting animal abuse – and persuading others not to support it – is. Giving people the impression that it is virtually impossible to be vegan doesn’t help animals at all” (Singer and Mason 258–9).

If I were to accept a definition of non-vegan, possibly because I have a leather handbag among other infractions, that would feel inauthentic. The term “vegan” helpfully labels my approach to food and drink. Others also find it useful as a shorthand for dietary preferences (except for the small but significant minority who muddle veganism with being gluten free). From the point of view of dietary prohibitions I’m a particularly strict vegan, apart from honey. I know people who make exceptions for line-caught fish, or the eggs from garden-roaming happy chooks, but I don’t. I increasingly understand the perspectives of those who have a more radical conception of veganism than I do, however: whose vision and understanding is that “behind every meal of meat is an absence: the death of the animal whose place the meat takes. The ‘absent referent’ is that which separates the meat eater from the animal and the animal from the end product [...] keeping] something from being seen as having been someone” (Adams 14). The concept of the global suffering of animals inherent in the figures: “31.1 billion each year, 85.2 million each day, 3.5 million each hour, 59,170 each minute” (Adams dedication) is appalling; as well as being an under-representation of the current situation since the globe has had almost two further decades of population growth and rising “living standards”.

Whatever the motivations, it’s easy to imagine that the different branches of veganism have more in common than divides them. Being a vegan of any kind helps someone identify with other variations upon the theme. For example, even though my views on animal rights did not motivate my choice to become vegan, once I stopped seeing other sentient creatures as a handy food source I began to construct them differently. I gradually realised that, as a species, we were committing the most extraordinary atrocities on a global scale in treating animals as disposable commodities without rights or feelings. The large-scale production of what we like to term “meat and poultry” is almost unadulterated animal suffering, whereas the by-catch (“waste products”) of commercial fishing represents an extraordinary disregard of the rights to life of other creatures and, as Cole and Morgan note, “The number of aquatic animals slaughtered is not recorded, their individual deaths being subsumed by aggregate weight statistics” (135). Even if we did accept that humans have the right to consume some animals some of the time, should the netting of a given weight of edible fish really entail the death of many, many time more weight of living creatures that will be “wasted”: the so-called by-catch? Such wanton destruction has increasingly visible impacts upon complex food chains, and the ecosystems that sustain us all.

The Vegan Threat to the Status Quo

Examining the evidence for the broader community being biased against vegetarians and vegans, MacInnis and Hodson identify that these groups are “clear targets of relatively more negative attitudes” (727) towards them than other minority groups. Indeed, “only drug addicts were evaluated more negatively than vegetarians and vegans” (726). While “vegans were evaluated more negatively than vegetarians” (732), there was a hierarchy in negative evaluations according to the underlying motivation for someone adopting veganism or vegetarianism. People motivated by personal health received the least negative evaluations from the general population followed by those who were motivated by the environment. The greatest opprobrium was reserved for vegans who were motivated by animal rights (732). MacInnis and Hodson reason that this antipathy is because “vegetarians and vegans represent strong threats to the status quo, given that prevailing cultural norms favour meat-eating” (722). Also implied here is that fact that eating meat is itself a cultural norm associated with masculinity (Rothgerber).

Adams’s work links the unthinking, normative exploitation of animals to the unthinking, normative exploitation of women, a situation so aligned that it is often expressed through the use of a common metaphor: “‘meat’ becomes a term to express women’s oppression, used equally by patriarchy and feminists, who say that women are ‘pieces of meat’” (2002, 59). Rothberger further interrogates the relationship between masculinity and meat by exploring gender in relation to strategies for “meat eating justification”, reflecting a 1992 United States study that showed, of all people reporting that they were vegetarian, 68% were women and 32% men (Smart, 1995). Rothberger’s argument is that:

Following a vegetarian diet or deliberately reducing meat intake violates the spirit of Western hegemonic masculinity, with its socially prescribed norms of stoicism, practicality, seeking dominance, and being powerful, strong, tough, robust and invulnerable [...] Such individuals have basically cast aside a relatively hidden male privilege—the freedom and ability to eat without criticism and scrutiny, something that studies have shown women lack. (371)

Noting that “to raise concerns about the injustices of factory farming and to feel compelled by them would seem emotional, weak and sensitive—feminine characteristics” (366), Rothberger sets the scene for me to note two items of popular culture which achieved cut-through in my personal life. The evidence for this is, in terms of all the pro-vegan materials I encounter, these were two of a small number that I shared on social media. In line with Rothberger’s observations, both are oppositional to hegemonic masculinity:

one represents a feminised, mother and child exchange that captures the moment when a child realises the “absent referent” of the dead animal in the octopus on his plate—[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SrU03da2arE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SrU03da2arE;);

while the other is a sentimentalised and sympathetic recording of cattle luxuriating in their first taste of pastureland after a long period of confinement—https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huT5_BqY_U.

Seeing cows behaving like pets does call attention to the artificial distinction between “companion animals” and other animals. As Cole and Stewart note, “the naming of other animals is useful for human beings, while it is dangerous, and frequently lethal, for other animals. This is because the words we use to name other animals are saturated with common sense knowledge claims about those animals that legitimate their habitual use for humans” (13). Thus a cat, in Western culture, has a very different life trajectory to a cow. Adams notes the contrary case where the companion animal is used as a referent for a threatened human:

Child sexual abusers often use threats and/or violence against companion animals to achieve compliance from their victims. Batterers harm or kill a companion animal as a warning to their partner that she could be next; as a way of further separating her from meaningful relationships; to demonstrate his power and her powerlessness. (Adams 57)

For children who are still at a stage where animals are creatures of fascination and potential friends, who may be growing up with *Charlotte’s Web* (White) or *Peter Rabbit* (Potter), the mental gymnastics of suspending identification with these fellow creatures are harder because empathy and imagination are more active and the ingrained habit of eating without thinking has not had so long to develop. Indeed, children often understand domestic animals as “members of the family”, as illustrated by an interview with Kani, a 10-year old participant in one of my research projects. “In the absence of her extended family overseas, Kani adds her pets to [the list of] those with whom she shares her family life: ‘And my mum and my uncle and then our cat Dobby. I named it [for Harry Potter’s house elf] ...and the goldfish. The goldfish are Twinkle, Glitter, Glow and Bobby’” (Green and Stevenson). Such perceptions may well filter through to children having a different understanding of animals-as-food, even though Cole and Stewart note that “children enter into an adult culture habituated to [the] banal conceptualization of other animals according to their (dis)utilities” (21).

Evidence-Based Veganism

Those *M/C Journal* readers who know me personally will understand that one reason why I embrace the “bad vegan” label, is that I’m no more obviously a pin-up for healthy veganism than I am for ethical or environmental veganism. In particular, my BMI (Body Mass Index) is significantly outside the “healthy” range. Even so, I attribute a dramatic change in my capacity for stamina-based activity to my embrace of veganism. A high-speed recap of the evidence would include: in 2009 I embarked on a week-long 500km Great Vic bike ride; in 2012 I successfully completed a Machu Picchu trek at high altitude; by 2013 I was ready for my first half marathon (repeated in 2014, and 2017); in 2014 I cycled from Surfers’ Paradise to Noosa—somewhat less successfully than in my 2009 venture, but even so; in 2016 I completed the Oxfam 50km in 24 hours (plus a half hour, if I’m honest); and in 2017 I completed the 227km Portuguese Camino; in 2018 I jogged an average of over 3km per day, every day, up until 20 September... Apart from indicating that I live an extremely fortunate life, these activities seem to me to demonstrate that becoming vegan in 2007 has conferred a huge health benefit. In particular, I cannot identify similar metamorphoses in the lives of my 50-to-60-something year-old empty-nester friends. My most notable physical feat pre-veganism was the irregular completion of Perth’s annual 12km City-to-Surf fun run.

Although I’m a vegan for health reasons, I didn’t suddenly wake up one day and decide that this was now my future: I had to be coaxed and cajoled into looking at my food preferences very differently. This process entailed my enrolling in a night school-type evening course, the Coronary Health Improvement Program: 16 x 3 hour sessions over eight weeks. Its sibling course is now available online as the [Complete Health Improvement Program](#). The first lesson of the eight weeks convincingly demonstrated that what is good for coronary health is also good for health in general, which I found persuasive and reassuring given the propensity to cancer evident in my family tree. In the generation above me, my parents each had three siblings so I have a sample of eight immediate family to draw upon. Six of these either have cancer at the moment, or have died from cancer, with the cancers concerned including breast (1), prostate (2), lung (1), pancreas (1) and brain (1). A seventh close relative passed away before her health service could deliver a diagnosis for her extraordinarily elevated eosinophil levels (100x normal rates of that particular kind of white blood cell: potentially a blood cancer, I think). The eighth relative in that generation is my “bad vegan” uncle who has been mainly plant-based in his dietary choices since 2004. At 73, he is still working three days per week as a dentist and planning a 240 km trek in Italy as his main 2019 holiday. That’s the kind of future I’m hoping for too, when I grow up.

And yet, one can read volumes of health literature without stumbling upon Professor T. Colin Campbell’s early research findings via his work on rodents and rodent cells that: “*nutrition [was] far more important in controlling cancer promotion than the dose of the initiating carcinogen*” and that “*nutrients from animal-based foods increased tumor development while nutrients from plant-based foods decreased tumor development*” (66, italics in original). Plant was already an eminent scientist at the point where she developed breast cancer, but she noted her amazement at learning “precisely how much has been discovered already [that] has not filtered through to the public” (18). The reason for the lack of visible research in this area is not so much its absence, but more likely its political sensitivity in an era of Big Food. As Harrington et al.’s respondent Samantha noted, “I think the meat lobby’s much bigger than the vegetable lobby” (147). These arguments are addressed in greater depth in Green et al.

My initiating research question—Why do I feel the need to justify being vegan?—can clearly be answered in a wide variety of ways. Veganism disrupts the status quo: it questions both the appropriateness of humanity’s systematic torturing of other species for food, and the risks that those animal-based foods pose for the long-term health of human populations. It offends many vested interests from Big Food to accepted notions of animal welfare to the conventional teachings of the health industry. Identifying as a vegan represents an outcome of one or more of a wide range of motivations, some of which are more clearly self-serving (read “bad”); while others are more easily identified as altruistic (read “good”). After a decade or more of personal experimentation in this space, I’m proud to identify as a “bad vegan”. It’s been a great choice personally and, I hope, for some other creatures whose planet I share.

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