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Original Research Article

Progress in Environmental Geography
1–21
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DOI: 10.1177/27539687241307954
journals.sagepub.com/home/peg

The geographies of veganism: Exploring the complex entanglements of places, plants, peoples, and profits through vegan food practices

Agatha Herman **and Kirstie O'Neill**
School of Geography and Planning, Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK

Abstract
The increasing visibility of veganism and plant-based eating makes it timely for environmental geographers to critically engage with these unfolding debates. In this review, we unpack the complex socio-environmental entanglements of contemporary vegan food practices (VFPs), drawing on food geography literature to reflect on the extent to which veganism can, and does, challenge and transform the hegemonic industrial globalised food system. We consider the productive conversations to be had with sustainability, food sovereignty, food justice and vegetal geographies in promoting the collective potential of VFPs beyond the individualisation of mainstreamed, 'plant-based' business-as-usual; re-centring production, hitherto relatively invisible in the hegemonic consideration of veganism as just consumption praxis; and engaging with 'multi-elemental' plant ethics. This offers a cross-pollination of ideas through a focus on the geographies of veganism, which promotes the development of relational, placed and scaled analyses of vegan identities, experiences and practices while also bridging the intradisciplinary silos within environmental geography. Engaging with the geographies of veganism offers a timely and grounded lens to critically interrogate key contemporary debates around diverse knowledges, sustainability and justice. As such, the alternative ways of doing, being and relating offered by VFPs show real potential for hopeful, responsive and constructive research.

Keywords
vegan geographies, more-than-human, food system transformation, food justice, food sovereignty, neoliberalism, plantationocene, sustainability

Introduction

Veganism has witnessed significant changes historically, but over the last ten years, it has been subject to considerable flux and fluidity. While growth from 2014 onwards led some to claim that vegan food practices (VFPs)[1] had 'mainstreamed' (Oliver 2022, among others), the rise of a depoliticised *plant-based consumption* has threatened more radical understandings of veganism, while the growth in vegan food

Corresponding author:
Agatha Herman, School of Geography and Planning, Cardiff University, Glamorgan Building, King Edward VII Avenue, Cardiff, CF10 3WA, UK.
Email: HermanA@cardiff.ac.uk

businesses and products through increasing corporatisation (Giraud 2021) has recently stalled (Ungoed-Thomas 2023). In 2024, 4.7% of the UK population (approx. 2.5 million people) identified as vegan, while in 2022 around 50% of the UK population consumed some plant milk and meat replacements (Chiarelli 2022). The growth of people consuming plant-based products but not becoming fully vegan is a key area of contestation, generating challenges to historically dominant animal- and activist-interpretations of veganism. Nonetheless, veganism has never been monolithic (Oliver 2022; Williams 2023) with varied motivations for becoming vegan, although typically focusing on animal welfare/ rights, health and the environment (Green, Costello and Dare 2010; Giraud 2021; Oliver 2022). For some, this is through 'flexitarian' practices to reduce meat consumption; for others, being 'social omnivores' (eating animal products in social circumstances); or embarking on a full 'vegan transition'. Contemporary veganism therefore comprises multiple movements, motivations, practices and discourses (Wright 2015; Dutkiewicz and Dickstein 2021).

Although more apparent in high income countries, these production and consumption trends are increasingly reflected globally (Radnitz, Beezhold and Dimatteo 2015; The Vegan Society 2022). Such consumption practices are finding greater traction with consumers and policymakers in response to climate change and the increasingly widely recognised violence of animal agriculture. Institutions, events, campaigns and reports, including Veganuary (2014 onwards), the EAT-Lancet Commission Report on Healthy Diets (2019), the IPCC Special Report on Climate Change and Land (2019), and the Vegan Society's (2024) Vegan Manifesto call for dietary and food system transformation (Janssen et al. 2016; Edwards, Sonnino and Cifuentes 2024). However, climate arguments by both policymakers and scholars frequently encourage a *reduction* but not removal of animal products from diets (Scarborough et al. 2023).

Therefore, although once dismissed by academia as a serious topic of enquiry (Yilmaz 2019), veganism is undergoing a surge of interest from multiple disciplines. Geographers have come relatively late to researching veganism, but as Oliver (2023a) argued, it is a timely empirical subject, opening up contemporary food system debates around scale, place, power and relationality. Historically, veganism has been explored by scholars through diverse cross-cutting approaches such as vegan studies and critical animal studies, philosophy and ethics, and much recent research in these arenas continues to focus on the social practices associated with vegan food consumption, exploring how eating more plant-based foods changes and *repurposes* practices, knowledges, materials and local spaces (Fuentes and Fuentes 2022; Godin 2023; Wendler 2023). Less attention is paid to how such vegan consumption practices are changing the wider food system, to explore their impacts on the individuals, communities, spaces and political economies of production, and the metabolic interactions of these with consumers and consumption spaces (Cusworth 2023). New studies by Hodge et al. (2022) and Oliver (2022) brought *vegan geographies* to the fore. In this critical review, we centre the *geographies of veganism* to examine the multiple entanglements that constitute contemporary VFPs by bringing these into conversation with food geographies research to unpack the distant-and-local relational impacts in the wider food system.

> Through long-standing practices of mixed methods research, sensitivities to interactions between people and landscapes, recognition of ways in which simultaneous processes shape multiple spatial scales from the body to the state to the long reach of commodity chains, geographers have a diverse, analytical tool kit for making meaningful investigations into slow violence. (O'Lear 2021, 1)

Following O'Lear (2021), we argue that geographers are both well-suited to critically exploring the slow (and fast) violence that veganism aims to combat (yet can also reproduce), and the entanglements of diverse veganisms with the key debates on capitalism; neoliberalism; identity; coloniality and the decolonial; the more-than-human; ethnicity and race; gender; and sustainability, which have long engaged critical environmental geographers. This is imperative given that the growing popularisation of veganism risks a homogenising narrative that elides significant tensions; amidst calls for food system transformation (Edwards, Sonnino and Cifuentes 2024) research must attend to the unfolding and dynamic politics and injustices that are occurring in places and among peoples where plants are being commodified for neoliberal Western markets.

We began work on this paper in 2020 and this longitudinal engagement has allowed us to follow the debates in this changing and dynamic arena. The earliest iterations of our ideas have been superseded by new research, and it is beyond the scope of any paper to fully trace all the lines of these evolving debates. We have therefore chosen to focus on three facets of contemporary research around VFPs that we find particularly compelling in terms of their connections to our own research interests, and the opportunities they present for cross-pollination with food geographies. What has particularly intrigued us is the seeming disconnect between the emancipatory potential presented by activist veganism's discourses and how veganism has become co-opted by corporate and industrial values as it has 'mainstreamed'. Our aim in this review is therefore to respond to a guiding question: to what extent can and does veganism challenge and transform the hegemonic practices of the contemporary industrialised and globalised food system? We do this through drawing on longstanding discussions within food geography literature, with a focus on food justice and food sovereignty.

In what follows, we offer a synthesis of research pertaining to three specific and interrelated aspects of VFPs, followed by reflections on how and where environmental geographers might further engage. Our contribution seeks to generate productive research conversations about the fuller food geographies of which vegan and plant-based eating form a part. In Section 2, we push beyond the individualisation of mainstream, corporatised, 'plant-based' business-as-usual to explore how veganism might engage with the alternative and collective endeavours of food sovereignty. Section 3 proposes shifting the dietary focus of contemporary veganism as consumption practice to recentre the hitherto invisible production spaces drawing on the food justice movement. In section 4, we reflect on veganism's challenge to structural anthropocentrism to promote a genuinely multi-species and decolonial ethical praxis. These debates not only highlight the opportunities for geographers to develop relational, (em)placed and scaled analyses of vegan identities, experiences and practices, but the potential disruptions veganism presents to environmental geography. Engaging critically with the geographies of veganism necessitates a move beyond the intradisciplinary silos of, but not limited to, agri-food, animals, health, ecosystems, consumption, activism, decolonisation, feminism and posthumanism, demanding a contextual, practise-based and 'multi' perspective on who we should care for, where, how and why, to better engage with the key socio-environmental challenges of our times.

Challenging globalised, corporatised mainstreaming: the placeless foodscapes of depoliticised plant-based diets

Contemporary veganism is commonly positioned as a consumption practice (Hirth 2020) typically focused on food, although many vegan organisations extend this to 'a way of

living which seeks to exclude … all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for *food, clothing or any other purpose*' (The Vegan Society 2020*a*, emphasis added). As White (2018) stated, such an activist conceptualisation of veganism offers a radical praxis grounded in trans-species justice and demands wider (food) systems change (Giraud 2021; White 2021). The increasingly popularised and corporatised 'plant-based' diet, in contrast, obscures such radical politics and can reverse vegan activists' success in drawing attention to the animal condition in neoliberal, capitalist and patriarchal systems of exploitation (White 2018; Giraud 2021; Sexton, Garnett and Lorimer 2022). The mainstreaming of 'Big Veganism' (Sexton, Garnett and Lorimer 2022) as an individualised consumption practice therefore acts to dilute activist veganism's critical and emancipatory energy.

It is widely argued that ethical consumption can connect across scales and remediate socio-ecological challenges (Johnston, Szabo and Rodney 2011). Gills and Morgan (2020; see also Kortetmäki and Oksanen 2021) encouraged us to reduce or eliminate meat and dairy, and buy local and/or organic as much as possible; while the controversial EAT-Lancet diet advises substantial, population-level dietary changes focused on plant-based eating (Lawrence et al. 2019). Nevertheless, veganism as a form of ethical consumption continues to treat the consumer as a rational economic actor disembedded from context, using their purchasing decisions to facilitate socio-environmental justice without needing to *do* anything differently (Stanescu 2019). Despite more radical vegan ideologies standing in opposition to capitalism's consumption mandate (Wright 2017), mainstreamed plant-based eating as dietary praxis remains dependent on corporatised consumption (Garnett 2019). Indeed, the rising popularity of plant-based foods can be seen as veganism without the ideological baggage (Pendergrast 2016), and is actively constructed by mainstream actors as 'just' a diet (White 2018; Giraud 2021). Within this, plant-based foods have become depoliticised and, while naturalised as solutions to 'climate change, animal welfare, and human health challenges' (Clay et al. 2020, 946), in many incarnations are promoted for health and aesthetics rather than animal liberation and environmental issues. This 'project of the self' represents a performance of a neoliberal 'will-to-health' through individualised responsibility and accountability through consumption (Pirani and Fegitz 2019).

Reflecting on the 'Meatless Mondays' campaign, critiqued by Morris (2018) for being an unthreatening and apolitical lifestyle choice, the potentially problematic mobilisation of meat-free eating is highlighted since it 'perpetuates an exploitative industrial food system to maximise profits' (Singer 2017, 352). 'Meatless Monday' brand partners use vegan/vegetarian products to expand their markets rather than replace conventional meat products, not challenging the fetishised position of meat in our diets (Dilworth and McGregor 2015) and leaving the 'meatification' (Morris 2018) of the food industry untouched. As Twine (2018) suggested, the expanding market for meat substitutes continues to normalise the eating of animal products in attempting to imitate a 'cooked dead animal's body: its taste, texture, physical appearance, smell, and, sometimes, name' (Chauvet 2018, 401) and, therefore, the politics that underlie these practices (Singer 2017). As such, plant-based diets have been co-opted by the corporate agribusiness complex, which conceals its activities of exploitation, dispossession and cultural abuse in a new round of capital accumulation (Singer 2017; Clay et al. 2020), where plant-based consumption neither challenges omnivorism nor neoliberal capitalist approaches to food commodification. For example, Clay et al. (2020), in their work on 'mylks', argued that such plant-based substitutes effectively hide agri-industrial production systems through mobilising discourses of sustainability, alterity and disruption. However,

mylks (and other plant-based 'substitutes') represent 'palatable disruptions' that 'encourage people to rebel just enough to switch from dairy milk to plant mylk while entreating them to remain devoted consumers of commodity mylk (and dairy milk)' (Clay et al. 2020, 948). This, like 'Meatless Mondays', enables the reproduction of globalised, capitalist systems of provision through green-washed consumerism, which responsibilises the citizen-consumer without challenging the politico-economic status quo, facilitating the systems which perpetuate violence to diverse peoples, animals, ecosystems, and lands.

In contrast, VFPs offer a 'widely enacted form of trans-species direct action' (White 2021, 190) that intentionally seeks to destabilise the hegemonic food system, which has contributed to our existing climate, biodiversity and geopolitical perma-crisis. Feminist, indigenous, and degrowth scholars have argued that radical action is required to change world views and enact a 'cultural transformation that re-establishes livelihoods, relationships and politics around a new suite of values and goals' (Paulson 2017, 430). This position is also advocated by food sovereignty movements, which depart from a critique of capitalism's impact on the environment and inequality, and develop a vision that stresses the 'right to act' (Patel 2009); working towards 'the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through sustainable methods and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems' (Nyéléni 2007). While food sovereignty and VFPs share certain framings, '…as a comprehensive attack on corporate industrialised agriculture for its devastations, both environmental and social… as a programme for the constitution of a new, sustainable and socially just world food order…' (Bernstein 2014, 1032), they differ in their central figures of the (peasant) producer and (activist) consumer. Nonetheless, both advocate for marginalised food actants (either/both themselves or non-human others) and thus challenge the associated power imbalances of the current neoliberal food regime. As such, VFPs could offer an alternative valuation of the natural world, drawing on food sovereignty to resist appropriation by the political economy of industrial agri-business and replace food systems.

Harper (2013, 5–6) maintained that veganism represents a potent political challenge since 'it is about the ongoing struggle to produce socio-spatial epistemologies of consumption that lead to cultural and spatial change'. Although all eating impacts the land and resource use (Dal Gobbo 2018), and ultimately 'involves death' (Heldke 2012, 68), through practising a vegan diet, people can become 'aware of the gravity of the planetary ecological situation' (Dal Gobbo 2018, 241). Nevertheless, within the dominant nonconfrontational 'veganism' (Cole and Morgan 2011; Overend 2019), politics has been reduced to individual consumption and purchasing decisions, and power remains with corporations (Clay et al. 2020), doing little to allow alternative, collaborative food systems to grow. Beacham and Jackson (2022) argued more widely that citizens need to engage in food politics, as with activist veganism (this is not homogenous, see Véron 2016; Sanford and Lorimer 2022), yet this is an underexplored area in relation to understanding the impacts of 'plant-based eating'. We need to be attuned to how vegan-industrial food complexes can reinforce the power of globalised corporate food actors in shaping food futures, presenting themselves as 'ethical' while conducting business-as-usual. Indeed:

> If ethical eating is judged solely on an animal/nonanimal food divide, we obscure and relegate other forms of food politics, including but not limited to the conditions of migrant workers who produce vegan food; how vegan food production affects local people, environments, and ecosystems; and how some vegan food movements overwhelmingly feed an affluent white middle class. (Overend 2019, 82–83)

While food sovereignty has been critiqued for its essentialising rhetoric of 'we are all the same' (Park and White 2015) and the difficulties its local, producer focus makes in up-scaling this political project (Bernstein 2014; Grey and Patel 2015), its emphasis on relationality, context and multi-scalar networks offers valuable opportunities for veganism as a movement to contextualise and attend with care to the metabolic flows and political economies of its global commodity networks (GCN) (Cusworth 2023). Mares and Peña (2011) argued that a food sovereignty approach to veganism shifts the focus from White, middle-class urban consumers to embrace diverse, rural producers, and addresses justice concerns around working conditions, hunger and food poverty. Others have argued that veganism can enhance urban food sovereignty, and that by linking veganism to food justice and food sovereignty as well as Black cultural movements like hip-hop, it offers a means for food system transformation (Nocella et al. 2017). Such moves promote resistance and activism, to overcome the domination of the industrial food system (Cadieux and Slocum 2015) and relocalise food systems in ways that are more ethical and ecological, through building resilient and collective food movements. We suggest that Cusworth's (2023) concept of 'metabolic agricultural ethics' offers one avenue for veganism to draw from food sovereignty to 'disrupt the hegemony of the globalised food regime and do so in a way that is not just about privileging the "local" but instead reconfigure scale' (Wald and Hill 2016, 209). Focusing on the in- and out-flows from any site along a GCN enforces the conceptualisation of 'both the distant and local outcomes being produced through the activities' of that site (Cusworth 2023, 67).

Engaging with these debates acknowledges the potential of veganism's more expansive, activist relations of care and justice, offering routes beyond the individual consumer embedded in globalised, commodified food regimes. Veganism can build on the systemic, scaled and collective challenge to neoliberal and industrial ideologies presented by food sovereignty to extend this into a more inclusive resistance in which the human is de-centred and the non-human right to define their systems is foundational. Although recent trends in veganism may be 'little characterised by ethical and political concerns but … strongly related to a neoliberal focus on the self' (Pirani and Fegitz 2019, 60), the struggle against the destructive forces of capitalism is both global *and* personal, across multiple geographical scales and embodying differential politics (Klein, 2014 in Pilgrim 2019). Food has always offered a platform allowing everyday interdependencies to be felt and practised but, whatever the underlying ideology, these always need to be critically and reflexively interrogated to maintain their connective, progressive, and expansive potential. Despite veganism frequently being presented as a more ethical option (Wright 2017), it remains entangled in the injustices, violences and inequalities that structure neoliberal market relations (Mares and Peña 2011; Featherstone 2013; Trauger 2022). Thus, we need to question how the politics of VFPs manifest in production spaces; the extent to which the realities of such production practices are visible to consumers; how consumers interpret and remake vegan food identities in multiple spatial contexts; and the implications for contested power relations throughout.

Knowing and caring for 'invisible' places: constructing and connecting spaces of vegan practices

All ideologies require bodily interactions to perform their foundational discourses and practices; indeed, 'it is the doings and sayings of vegans themselves which have been responsible for the successful reproduction and growth of the practice' (Twine 2018, 167). Yet, recent

market growth does not reflect the ideals and politics of long-term vegans (Giraud 2021); with veganism increasingly positioned as an *eating* practice, the relations within broader commodity networks are masked, which prevents an acknowledgement of the relationalities of food provisioning (Hirth 2020). Hirth (2020) therefore proposed a move from 'veganism' to 'VFPs' to highlight the non-exclusive relationship between vegan identities and practices (Niederle and Schubert 2020) and recognise the role that producers (and processors, policymakers and businesses) also play in defining and materialising food relations (O'Neill 2014). Here, we can see opportunities for engaging with food justice debates, which offer insights into 'the historical inequalities and marginalities across the whole of the food chain…making visible the persistent inequalities that have been hidden by the changing discourses and motivations of alternative food systems' (Herman and Goodman 2018, 1042). Following Herman and Goodman (ibid), we argue that the more holistic framing of food networks through food justice's explicit attention to *(in)justice* more broadly demands action across the scales and places of contemporary agri-food systems.

After all, everyone in a GCN makes political and ethical choices; acknowledging this moves VFPs—like other ethical consumption movements—beyond questions of the practices and responsibilities of the citizen-consumer and of activists combatting the violent injustices of explicitly animal agri-food systems to take a more expansive view of the potential for 'vegan justice' to shape the praxis of GCNs. Adopting a deontological perspective that positions 'vegan' as a diverse and fluid practice (Herman 2018) rather than an attribute establishes it as something that must be constantly performed by the diverse actants that constitute its networks. As such a carrot becomes vegan through its (animal-free) production rather than being an inherent quality or due to the identity of its consumer (Hirth 2020). Seymour and Utter (2021) suggested that further research is needed to explore these emergent 'veganic' agricultural practices and how they relate to environmental indicators such as soil health. Veganic farming presents changes in human-environment relationships, affecting and challenging local cultures and food practices, and need to be examined in different parts of the world, paying close attention to how geopolitical and climatic shifts are playing out in tandem.

Vegan activism commonly focuses on consumers' care for animals, through challenging the use of animals as food, pets (and pet food), entertainers and clothing as well as in the pharmaceutical industry (see, for example, PETA UK 2020; The Vegan Society 2020*b*; Baker 2023). While this connects the 'meatification' (Weis 2007) of global diets to broader, environmental issues around 'global warming (sic), widespread pollution, deforestation, land degradation, water scarcity and species extinction' (The Vegan Society 2020*b*), 'care' for the injustices and violence perpetuated against humans and non-humans in both corporate and alternative GCNs producing vegan foodstuffs is only slowly being recognised. The focus on being a consumer 'forecloses many possible avenues of change that would be opened to us if we also saw ourselves as citizens, neighbours, or just humans' (Werkheiser and Noll 2014, 204) and 'the opacity of the supply chain obscures the condition of production such that consumers have little to go on in terms of making ethical choices of any kind' (Trauger 2022, 640). Like with consumer movements more broadly, to enhance its ethical capability to enact change within GCNs, veganism arguably needs to better connect into its networked and performative practices, resisting its corporate reduction to a consumer-facing attribute.

Food justice's focus on 'access to sufficient, affordable, healthy, culturally appropriate food, and—very importantly—respect and self-determination' (Bradley and Galt 2014, 173) demands attention to the racialised and class-based

relations, practices and inequities *throughout* agri-food systems (Agyeman and McEntree 2014). Food justice scholarship has continued to evolve, moving beyond the race emphasis engendered by US-centric research (Glennie and Alkon 2018), and has become united by a focus on 'just sustainability' (Agyeman 2013), which promotes a recognition of the intersectional justice issues within food systems. There are clear parallels here with activist veganism's foregrounding and championing of trans-species justice, which offers:

> …a statement of intent that rejects the intentional suffering of other animals and acknowledges the intrinsic violence, brutality and exploitation that humans endure when caught up in key spaces of animal violence… (White 2021, 191)

However, we argue that this needs to be extended beyond the admittedly critical arenas structuring the animal condition to acknowledge that trans-species violence also happens elsewhere. For example, environmental arguments for veganism tend to focus on the greenhouse gas emissions associated with animal agriculture (Scarborough et al. 2014; Aleksandrowicz et al. 2016), with little recognition of the land use changes and consequent justice issues that accompany the growth of 'new' commodities that support plant-based eating and VFPs. The ecological impacts of replacement industries for animal products are rarely considered in detail (McGregor and Houston 2018); Australia's emerging soy plantations are highly water intensive, creating challenges for sustainable socio-agro-ecologies in biomes that already suffer significant water stress, which is further exacerbated by a changing climate. Such shifts in production systems require in-depth analysis to expose the potential for transformation or reproduction of monocultural industrial agriculture, and its biodiversity and climate-related damages (Figueroa-Hellend, Thomas and Aguilera 2018), as well as social justice issues (see Oxfam report into labour violations in chicken processing plants (cited in Roeder 2021), which Trauger (2022) suggested may be replicated in the production of industrialised animal protein substitutes). The environmental and animal-welfare impacts of 'modern' industrialised forms of agriculture are long-documented (see Steinfeld et al. 2006; Kemmerer 2015). However, comparatively little is known about the wider impacts of the burgeoning globalised corporate vegan food system, which relies on similarly contentious socio-economic, environmental and political relations and practices to conventional industrial agricultural complexes.[2] The expansion of plant-based markets therefore has the potential to perpetuate socio-environmental destruction (Vijay et al. 2016) through displacing biocultural diversity in distanciated places. The large-scale production of many commodities iconic within VFPs (such as almonds, avocados, coconuts and soy[3]) are tied into neocolonial industrial supply chains (Garnett 2019) with deeply problematic human-environment relations, such as monocultural plantations, use of agro-chemicals, exploitative labour practices, and contentious breeding systems. An emphasis on trans-species justice must not mask the global concerns, raised by food justice and food sovereignty activists, around labour rights, representation, trade relations and sustainable market access that persist for many small producers and hired labour (Glennie and Alkon 2018; Apostolidis 2020; Dickstein et al. 2020).

GCN scholars have directed their attention to the continuing legacies of colonialism as well as forms of neocolonialism in relation to both carnist and VFPs (Overend 2019). Nevertheless, for Harper (2013, 133), veganism can 'decolonize the negative effects of colonialism on our bodies and minds' and offers a potent political tool to dismantle dominant, racialized, and systemic health structures and injustices. While Dean (2014, 138–144) acknowledged that the practices of veganism cannot fully step outside of all systems of oppression, she maintains that veganism *is* 'less governed by

normalizing, patriarchal power' than omnivorism and that, when adopted as an ethical practice of freedom, veganism 'allows us to eat with the least amount of domination possible'. However, persistent monocultures (Figueroa-Hellend, Thomas and Aguilera 2018) and industrialised and globalised supply chains (Clay et al. 2020; Sexton, Garnett and Lorimer 2022) reproduce distanced, placeless foodscapes and systems of oppression. A geography of veganism approach could critically excavate the extent to which contemporary food systems are reproducing or challenging these aspects of the industrialised food system through vegan GCNs.

With a global population predicted to reach nine billion by 2050, there are frequent claims that shifting to a plant-based diet is a structural necessity—especially for affluent countries (Cole, 2008, Vinnari and Vinnari, 2014 cited in Dal Gobbo 2018, 236). Although disputed, the 'Anthropocene' (Steffen, Crutzen and Mcneill 2007) is leading to an increased emphasis on the role of globalised food production and consumption systems in causing unprecedented ecosystem destruction and greenhouse gas emissions (Gills and Morgan 2020). These socio-ecological concerns are regularly used to promote veganism as sustainable dietary praxis (Ripple et al. 2021), representing a significant shift from its original ethical motivations around animal liberation (Watson 1944) and challenging speciesism (Greenebaum 2017). Adopting a socio-ecological lens can, therefore, elide critical questions associated with VFPs; shifting attention to counting carbon and developing new, 'efficient' production systems and associated certification schemes (Freidberg 2014) results in an epistemologically different understanding of what it *means* to be vegan (Dutkiewicz and Dickstein 2021; Sexton, Garnett and Lorimer 2022). Focusing on the socio-ecological effects of VFPs may obscure broader concerns around labour and trade justice; power and informational inequalities; biocultural connectivities; food quality and safety; and even animal rights as the discourse of 'plant-based' or 'meatless' absents animals (Pendergrast 2016). It is therefore critical that research examines the discursive shifts that occur as different vegan-*isms* are espoused in diverse fora (Dutkiewicz and Dickstein 2021; Kortetmäki and Oksanen 2021). Such research will be key in developing detailed accounts of veganism's evolving and relational nature, and the challenges presented by 'plant-based' diets.

Writing from an indigenous perspective in Australia, Yandarra et al. (2022) noted how industrial agriculture perpetuates colonisation, of land, bodies and animals, especially on lands stolen from indigenous communities (see also Dal Gobbo 2023). They argued for a more culturally embedded and relational approach to veganism, one that reflects indigenous cosmologies to living with kin. Future research on vegan food networks should pay close attention to the potential for challenging and dismantling industrial systems of oppression, and the extent to which the growing adoption of plant-based diets offers an opportunity to substantively transform food systems, while not universalising the sovereignty of different communities to practice culturally significant ways of eating. As such, and despite challenging discourses of speciesism and imperialism, lived VFPs must be analysed to understand the role plant, as well as animal, bodies and materials play in the neocolonial vegan project. In what ways are plants instrumentalised for nationalistic ends? How are plants re-made and commodified into (neo)colonial subjects, continuing to normalise settler modes of colonial life and further displacing alternative epistemologies?

(Re)centring the Other: deconstructing human–multispecies hierarchies

A key question underpinning veganism is 'what and for whom are animals for?' As Davis (2011, in Pilgrim 2019, 89) argued 'our use becomes

their ontology… and their teleology' and - under dominant, meat-centric discourses (i.e., carnism) - '…animal bodies that are inserted into capitalist spaces of commodity production are always already scheduled for death…' (Belcourt 2015, 9). Scholars have argued that anthropocentrism is '**the** anchor of speciesism, capitalism and settler colonialism' (Belcourt 2015, 4) and myriad forms of violence and oppression: in order to challenge unsustainable global practices, we, therefore, need to confront structural anthropocentrism (Dal Gobbo 2018). How we relate to, and care for, animals in particular becomes an indicator of our relations with non-humans, women and the environment (Pilgrim 2019), as well as indigenous and ethnic communities, since the animal-centric discourses, which dominate both conventional and alternative food systems, are colonial, violent, anthropocentric and hetero-patriarchal (Cudworth 2008; Collard, Dempsey and Sundberg 2015; Gillespie 2021).

While Cole and Morgan (2011) argued that animal rights are the primary rationale for veganism, evidence suggests that personal, health-centred lifestyle drivers (White 2018) have been foregrounded as veganism has mainstreamed (Pendergrast 2016; Overend 2019; Pirani and Fegitz 2019). Indeed, MacInnis and Hodson (2015) suggested that non-vegans are more likely to accept health than animal rights as a motivation for veganism (O'Neill et al. 2019). While changing diet can destabilise 'the mindless repetition of taken for granted ways of thinking, doing and sensing' (Dal Gobbo 2018, 242), engaging in VFPs for health reasons does not automatically translate into an interest in, or activism around, animal rights and liberation or other justice-related concerns. Historically veganism has sought to re-centre animals by abstaining from systems that oppress them (Giraud 2021), supporting the work of critical animal geographies in advancing our understandings of the agency of the more-than-human within social relations, structures, practices and environments (Philo and Wilbert 2000; Collard, Dempsey and Sundberg 2015). Although changing motivations mean that veganism's capability to challenge conventional relations with non-humans cannot be assumed, its longstanding aim of decentring humans offers a clear route to rethinking and contesting these relations (Giraud 2021), although analysing the *geographies* of these remains underdeveloped. Considering veganism as 'a radical departure from oppressive colonial and patriarchal power relations' (Overend 2019, 85) offers the potential for wider food system transformation, through challenging globalised, industrial food systems. Nonetheless, such alternatives need to be rooted 'beyond anthropocentric, modern, colonial, capitalist, and heteropatriarchal civilisational frames' (Figueroa-Hellend, Thomas and Aguilera (2018, 175). Tracing the roots of the contemporary food system, vegan or otherwise, presents Eurocentric masculinised epistemologies and ontologies as shaping hegemonic industrialised production methods, exploitative and violent relations through human supremacy and racialised categories of sub-humans (Nocella et al. 2017; Roeder 2021).

The cultural politics of food have always been 'deeply entangled with discourses of race, nationalism, and colonialism', with animals and animality long playing a central role in boundary work (Joy 2010; Hirth 2020) and 'nation-making projects of inclusion/exclusion' (Gillespie and Narayanan 2020, 2–3). Vegan discourses are not immune to place-specific, politicised and racialised interpretations that sculpt particular national narratives, as evidenced in Israel's self-positioning as an 'animal-friendly' nation (Alloun 2020). Here, veganism provides moral legitimation to Israeli nationhood while sedimenting Palestinian 'unbelonging and exclusion' and obscuring settler-colonial violence and occupation (*ibid*: 25). Discussions of animal welfare enable the construction of a progressive Israel against a backwards Palestine and, thus, silences the

voices and narratives of Palestinian animal activists. Alloun (2020) reflected that this is an 'ambivalent, complex, lived, uneven terrain of power' that overlooks and depoliticises 'the injustices of the [Israeli] State's expansionist policies': such 'depoliticised framing obscures intersections of colonial and racial oppression' (*ibid*: 30–36). Such debates highlight the important role attitudes towards animals play within national imaginaries, and how they can be mobilised to shape intra- and inter-national geopolitical relations. It is critical to further explore the spatial and racial politics of *all* food networks, especially those that are plant-based or vegan, to expose the potential offered by an expansive trans-species justice.

Decolonial theory presents a radical challenge to the colonialist thinking that shapes the ongoing experiences of exclusion, exploitation and extraction of communities and individuals in "developing spaces" (Noxolo 2017). There are, then, productive connections with vegan practices, and critical engagement with the more-than-human by decolonial geographers, offering a route to engaging with collective agency and co-becoming; challenging the value of knowledge and relations; and exploring how to care through complex, politicised and historic entanglements (Bell 2019; Krzywoszynska 2019; Puig de la Bellacasa 2019). Drawing from other disciplines, this work acknowledges how settler colonialism, and therefore contemporary international relations, are grounded in the placed and politicised inclusions and exclusions of particular plant, animal and human bodies, with the indigenous often being erased in favour of imports (Belcourt 2015; Gillespie and Narayanan 2020) via industrialised and globalised systems of provision. Scholars such as Dunford (2017) argued that pluriversality is critical for engaging with other cosmologies that can represent equal and different ways of knowing and being in the world, which offer potential to transform relations in place, across and within species. Further, those who have been dehumanized through centuries of colonialism and coloniality, have important perspectives that need to be heard in debates relating to veganism and the food system more broadly (Maldonaldo-Torres 2008; Yandarra et al. 2022).

Haraway's (2015) concept of the 'Plantationocene' seeks to reflect this Eurocentric genealogy of racism, homogeneity, efficiency, control and accumulation, which underpins modern industrialised agriculture (Jackson 2020*a*) and foregrounds the violent human–plant entanglements that are central to racialised capitalism (Lawrence 2022):

> …the alienation of people, plants, and land, the domination of powerful and predatory institutions over workers and nature, the violent compartmentalization, hierarchization, and economization of human and other-than-human life in plantation societies past and present…Thinking-with the Plantationocene thus opens fertile avenues for engaging with the necrobiopolitics of the plantation as an assemblage of human and non-human life, whose fates and futures are thoroughly, if often unevenly and violently, enmeshed…the concept invites a critical interrogation of the possibilities for social, environmental, and multispecies justice in plantations as 'landscapes of empire' (Besky 2013)… (Chao et al. 2023, 546)

As Mares and Peña (2011) observed, it is important to attend to the historical and contemporary projects of settler colonialism that continue to extract and disperse peoples, animals and plants. Such injustices, discrimination and appropriation endure in contemporary foodscapes, including corporate vegan food systems. When indigenous foodstuffs are '(re)discovered' through VFPs, this can have significant socio-cultural, environmental, economic and political impacts on their origin communities (Mares and Peña 2011). This can be seen in discussions around the impacts of the changing demand for so-called "vegan superfoods" such as maca and spirulina among international consumers. However, few foods are vegan

specific and those perceived as 'vegan' can be subject to uncritical purity politics by those wishing to delegitimise and discredit vegan praxis, as has been the case with quinoa (Ofstehage 2012; Walsh-Dilley 2020; Giraud 2021). These socio-economic, environmental and cultural impacts demand attention to the power-laden politics of such food choices, leading to consideration of when appreciation becomes appropriation (Julier 2019). How then are, for example, key proteins in VFPs, such as soy, coconuts, almonds and chickpeas understood, valued and consumed in their native production spaces? Sportel and Veron (2016) highlighted that coconut and copra are one of the most globalised commodity markets, yet we know little about the implications of this within producer communities. Where are the plants themselves, their unique and 'Other' temporalities, agency and ethics (Lawrence 2022)?

Vegan geographies, and philosophies more broadly, continue the wider consensus that considers even staple, well-distributed or economically important plants as invisible, overlooking them as passive objects or a collective backdrop to human/animal activities (Atchison and Phillips 2020). Yet, 'interrogations of 'life' which refer only to animal bodies—while valuable—can only take us so far' (Lawrence 2022, 630). As Trauger (2022) stated, a hierarchy of care is shaped by 'types of closeness' and 'degrees of harm', which privilege some humans, animals and places over others. Proponents of a new 'vegetal geography' argued that attending to plants challenges hegemonic ethical imaginaries grounded in reciprocal relations and the avoidance of death, enforcing a broader consideration of how care is enacted and for whom (Atchison and Phillips 2020; Lawrence 2022); 'for people to live, something must die' (Trauger 2022, 651). Engaging with a multispecies necropolitics of the plantation allows us to explore 'who is *disposable* and who is not' (Mbembe 2003, 27), with arguably the native species (plant and animal) removed to make space for the plantation, and the commodity crops there to be extracted both experiencing 'the status of living dead' (*ibid*: 40). In these spaces, death is always imminent and in a system of total human control. Within this framing, Lawrence's (2022, 638) provocation—'how should a vegan ethics respond to the acknowledgement that all consumption involves some form of violence and death?'—does not seek to denigrate the suffering of animals. Likewise, we are not arguing for a diminishing importance of critical animal geographies but seek to push veganism to champion a more diverse justice through the inherently multispecies, multi-scalar and 'multi-elemental' nature of 'plant ethics' (*ibid*). This would make space for us to acknowledge the plant but also human and 'animal lives lost to a plant-based label [which] are unaccounted for and obscured from view with deceptive marketing' (Trauger 2022, 650). Plant instrumentalism underpins all industrial agricultural systems (*ibid*); to truly challenge structural anthropocentrism, geographies of veganism need to subject the place of plants in the GCNs of vegan and 'plant-based' foods to critical and reflective enquiry.

As an activist ideology, veganism challenges the hegemonic patriarchal, racialised, colonial and anthropocentric discourses, which ground relations from the personal to geopolitical (Overend 2019; Pilgrim 2019). Indeed, 'a core feature of veganism is the recognition that food connects us to systems and structures beyond ourselves…' (Overend 2019, 89) and yet contemporary veganism is typically portrayed as a white, middle-class identity (Harper 2013; Wright 2017; Pirani and Fegitz 2019; Oliver 2023*a*). That blackness and veganism are popularly perceived as mutually exclusive (Pirani and Fegitz 2019) is promulgated by mainstream 'plant-based' literatures writing for a specific audience, which fail to address the relationship between blackness and veganism, and so generalise what is actually highly specific (Harper 2012). Yet, for Greenebaum (2017, 359) the issue around

'privilege' arises 'when the idea of veganism as a privileged diet or lifestyle is couched as a fundamental or essential characteristic of veganism itself'. The capability to choose any kind of 'speciality diet' entails some degree of consumer privilege but the targeted attention on 'vegan privilege' in particular, 'deflects the moral and ethical ideology of ethical veganism and reinforces the legitimacy of carnism' (ibid: 362; see also White et al. 2022), limiting the scope for more fundamental critiques of human–non-human relations (Giraud 2021). Nevertheless, the increasing connection of veganism to healthist ideologies ignores the systemic barriers 'to accessing and maintaining health' (Overend 2019, 93) and a 'repulsively post-racial' green and healthy eating agenda ignores its foundational grounding in particular experiences of white, socio-economic privilege (Harper 2013).

Nevertheless, Overend (2019, 85) argued that veganism *can* offer 'a radical departure from oppressive colonial and patriarchal power relations'; as Harper (2013, 133) suggested, veganism challenges the industrialised, 'colonised' diet and bodies that have established nutritionally grounded health disparities, particularly among non-White US communities. It is important to recognise that veganism in and of itself is not an immediate solution for overlapping oppressions (Breuck 2017) or removing more-than-human inequalities. To do so, veganism needs to engage in more active connections with other socio-environmental justice movements, such as food justice and food sovereignty, to promote deeper and wider change, particularly in relation to the roles of neoliberalism and neocolonialism in reproducing oppression and violence in the food system and beyond. Research that focuses solely on White, Western, female and privileged 'consumers' can neither reveal the experiences of the colonised and marginalised 'Other' nor offer insights into food system transformation. It is critical to investigate where power lies in food production, distribution and consumption systems and who has the authority to define 'universal' truths and 'core' values in nutrition and healthy eating (Hayes-Conroy 2013). Decolonising VFPs is therefore critical in learning, unlearning and relearning inclusive and diverse genealogies and practices of activism, labour, health and values.

Conclusions: the geographies of veganism

Eating is a political act (Mackendrick 2014): engaging with the geographies of veganism encourages foodscape analysis—including food justice and food sovereignty—to move beyond the dominant anthropocentric 'meatscape'. This illuminates food's relations across environments, places and communities alongside the multiple practices of (in)equality, (in) justice, exclusion, exploitation, and domination that exist. Exploring the emerging, alternative ways that foodscapes can be 'Other' solidifies the idea of the economy as a site of ethical action and citizenship instead of solely capital accumulation and consumption (Gibson-Graham and Roelvink 2011; Raj, Feola and Runhaar 2024). Being open to multiple food practices uncovers new ways of living with nature (Buck 2015), new forms of economy (Paulson 2017) and new ways of caring and co-becoming (Puig de la Bellacasa 2010) to transform socio-economic structures and norms in the Anthropocene (Roelvink and Gibson-Graham 2009) or Plantationocene (Haraway 2015). Thus, as Ko (2019, 10) argued, veganism is about more than food and lifestyles, with the potential to trigger 'powerful conversations for change' not only within but also beyond the food system.

As an embodied practice, veganism seeks to destabilise 'mindless eating' (Greenebaum 2017) retraining tastebuds (McGregor et al. 2023) to unlearn and relearn food practices (Hayes-Conroy 2013; Godin 2023; McGregor et al. 2023). However, the increasingly depoliticised, placeless and individualised corporate incarnation of 'plant-based' eating presents

challenges for ethico-political veganism to retain its radical, emancipatory and activist ideals, and develop a more critical and inclusive interrogation of all the places, scales, relations and agents that co-constitute its food practices. Fundamentally, the networked practices of inclusive trans-species justice *should* destabilise and challenge the status quo of contemporary food systems. Fetishised, corporate, industrialised vegan GCNs are accelerating the permacrises in climate, social justice and geopolitical terms: a dramatic social shift is needed to challenge them, not 'business as usual' as encapsulated in a 'chicken-less nugget', which continues to fetishise the corpses of animals, even amongst those choosing to go 'meat free'. As such, we consider that while veganism as a food practice has the potential to challenge the hegemonic globalised food system, further critical interrogation is needed. Through engaging with food sovereignty to resist corporate appropriation, food justice to acknowledge connections throughout its GCNs, and plant geographies to develop a more expansive and decolonised trans-species justice, VFPs could offer an Othering that offers an inclusive, sustainable and care-full transformation.

In conclusion, we are advocating for more attention to be paid to the geographies of veganism. We are not attempting to 'first' or suggest that this represents a *new* research agenda (Oliver, Turnbull and Richardson 2024); however, engaging specifically with spatially centred questions that can both build on geographic research focused on the food system more widely, and veganism specifically, is critical. We suggest a number of productive routes for research into the geographies of veganism through engaging with key contemporary debates in environmental geography: the more-than-human; vegetal geographies; the decolonial; Indigeneity; sustainability; climate change; GCNs; and food justice and sovereignty. Veganism represents a microcosm of the food system and embodies a space for critical environmental geographic work to explore issues of justice, power and politics as being changed by, and changing, veganism. Thus, veganism presents an effective assemblage for what remain often siloed concerns within environmental geography, offering a lens to understand and analyse relations with animals, plants and nature more broadly through a trans-species and multi-scalar praxis of care-full justice. We conclude by advancing four provocations connecting VFPs to the broader food system and environmental debates through:

- **Multi-scalar food systems change.** Veganism's ideological opposition to hetero-patriarchal, colonial, capitalist and anthropocentric frameworks presents an opportunity to challenge, and critically and reflexively investigate, the alternative ways of connecting across scales such an epistemology offers. However, there is also a need to acknowledge and analyse the environmental, socio-cultural and economic impacts of plant-based and vegan GCNs and cultures to problematise VFP's ethical relations, exploring its politics across scales, knowledge systems, distance and context. To critically explore veganism's intra- and inter-national labour and trade relations, racial and spatial politics, and role in global environmental change, there is a need to move beyond the existing focus on consumer identities and behaviours, and connect explicitly into these critical, contemporary debates.
- **Assembling inclusive connections.** Veganism's inherent foregrounding of non-humans presents opportunities to develop conceptual frameworks to critique and reflect on the relations and practices of the Anthropocene/Plantationocene, offering opportunities for rethinking future food systems *within* planetary

boundaries. Decentring humans also offers critical opportunities for reflecting on the collective and performative discourses and practices of a care-full agency within decolonial scholarship. This focus on the 'more-than-human' must involve a critical examination of the effects of rising demand for vegan products on the myriad animals, plants and people (framed by some as non-humans, see Jackson 2020*b*) enrolled in these systems. Building on longstanding research on GCNs to explore the connective opportunities posed by ideas of journeying (George and Wiebe 2020) and metabolism (Cusworth 2023) offers a means to promote an inclusive, care-full and holistic approach to analysing network relations (Sexton, Garnett and Lorimer 2022). Working through assemblage theory would add further nuance to understanding the heterogenous and placed connections and conflicts that define contemporary veganism across its multiple places and scales of operation (Herman 2019), folding in the materials and (digital) technologies that mediate VFPs (Clear et al. 2016; O'Neill et al. 2019).

- **Foregrounding invisible others.** VFPs have roots in, and routes to, the diverse places and practices that sustain and reproduce veganism. Engaging with producer spaces and communities is critical to consider how commodities become 'vegan' and the impacts of vegan consumer ideologies in shaping agricultural practices and experiences, often at a distance. After all, environmental as well as socio-cultural issues arise from the monocultures, ecological harm and cultural appropriation, which are part of conventional as well as vegan GCNs. Again, an assemblage approach would enhance investigations of relationships between local variations and contested meanings of veganism in diverse places: it is important to connect with places that are not scripted as 'vegan' under hegemonic urban White, middle-class, female discourses. How are 'invisible' vegan spaces, places, plants, and peoples, as well as the non-vegan Other, affected by their enrolment in globalised, corporatised plant-based 'markets'? Responding critically to this would offer important insights into practices of 'alternative' and 'ethical' movements more broadly.
- **A challenge to the conventional.** Veganism's 'mainstreaming' has established a corporate, industrialised 'marketplace' centred on a health-and-beauty-focused, depoliticised and neoliberal politics of dietary choice. Exploring existing, or potential, connections to food sovereignty, as well as food, social and environmental justice movements would enable analyses of veganism's capability to offer a constructive challenge or resistance to neoliberal diets and ideologies, the political economy of industrial agriculture, and global environmental change. For researchers, understanding the extent to which such 'ethical' networks already, or could, offer an alternative to their conventional counterparts is critical. As such, investigating the geographies of veganism through the lens of justice and/or care is essential to better understanding the challenges and opportunities for attending to gender, race, class, the more-than-human and place in alternative foodscapes and cultures.

Today, there are many challenges across environmental, socio-cultural, economic and political arenas, affecting humans and non-humans at all scales. It is therefore easy to fall into apathetic despair through contemplating Earth's

ruination. However, food is something we all 'do' (Allen 2008; Herman and Goodman 2018) and engaging with VFPs creates hopeful potential; alternative ways of doing, being and relating through such a connective praxis offers the real capability for responsive and care-full research, and an active opportunity for constructive food system change.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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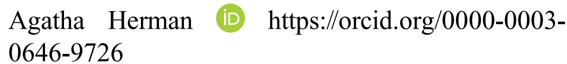
Agatha Herman https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0646-9726

Notes

1. Following Hirth (2020), we move away from veganism as an identity and towards the broader, performative *vegan food practices*, which encompass all the discourses, relations, materialities and skills (Herman 2018) which constitute vegan praxis across its global commodity networks.
2. See, for example, Alpro (owned by Danone), Quorn and Cauldron (owned by Monde Nissin), Pure Free From (owned by The Kerry Group) and Vitalite (owned by Saputo Dairy UK) as instances of brands certified by The Vegan Society, which form part of predominantly animal-based corporate portfolios.
3. Foods such as these, which are frequently labelled as 'vegan', are also eaten by non-vegans. As such, it is misleading to conflate these items solely with VFP, yet many processed vegan commodities do rely on plants such as coconut and nuts for their raw materials.

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