

“I am VEGAN”: Elitism in Los Angeles Veganism

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Writing 101: *You Are What You Eat*

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Introduction

I'll go with... hmmm... okay... I am SATTVIK, and also I am VIBRANT," I say, which is code for "Can I please order the mung dhal bowl and a matcha latte?"

The waiter responds, "Of course! You are SATTVIK and VIBRANT" (See Appendix: Image 1).

I roll my eyes as soon as she turns away. I wait for my dish and drink, observing the room. The overall aesthetics of the place are trendy, but what strikes me are the cheerful affirmations on the wall and the colorful mural full of spiritual and religious symbolism. And the mostly white, mostly young, mostly upper-class set of diners. Such is veganism in Los Angeles.

Perhaps no place in the world is more associated with the vegan movement than Los Angeles. As a haven of vegan restaurants, businesses, services, festivals, celebrities, and animal rights groups, Los Angeles serves as the site of a distinct culture of veganism. Second only to New York City in number, vegan food establishments in Los Angeles are the primary faces of this culture, as the vegan movement most prominently deals with food. Coming from a place of privilege, having eaten at several vegan restaurants, I am personally motivated by the contemplations and questions that have arisen with my experiences in the spaces of Los Angeles vegan restaurants to explore how vegan restaurants in Los Angeles define and reinforce notions of veganism.

In this paper, I argue that vegan restaurants index – that is, establish by way of signs and symbols – the connection between veganism and spirituality, ethics, and positivity, and in doing so, contribute to the elitist notoriety of Los Angeles veganism. The subject and conclusions of this paper allude to the problematic aspects of Los Angeles vegan culture, and more broadly, vegan culture in general. The associations that these vegan restaurants index reflect and further perpetuate the pushiness and insensitivity of vegan culture by appropriating religion and culture, shaming for unethicity and impurity, and promoting toxic positivity. In each of these ways, veganism as a culture excludes rather than invites. In the larger context of food choice the stereotypes of veganism that these restaurants translate into resistance to enjoying vegan food or adopting a more or fully plant-based



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I grew up with all the typical prejudices against veganism, but quickly changed my opinion and adopted a vegan diet after learning about the environmental impact of industrial

animal agriculture and sympathizing with certain aspects of animal ethics. As I became deeply passionate about veganism as a healthy, environmentally conscious, and ethical lifestyle, I encouraged my friends and family to eat more plant based.

For nearly two years before the beginning of quarantine in March 2020, I had largely ignored the aspects of veganism that push so many people away from the diet: privilege, elitism, and the overall feeling that vegans think they're better than you. With the extra time and extra impetus of the BLM protests, I went down an internet hole to understand the intersections of privilege, racism, and diet elitism. I realized that it was not so much the food that posed a problem, it was the insensitive culture of veganism. When the time came to examine a food justice issue for my big paper in Dr. Welji's Writing 101 class, *You Are What You Eat*, the topic I wanted to explore came naturally to me: the problematic ideas perpetuated by vegan restaurants, specifically in Los Angeles. In researching and writing this paper, I questioned my own privileges and pushiness with my diet and confronted the many reasons why veganism remains so problematic as a diet and lifestyle. Even though the topic is quite niche, I hope my paper raises general awareness about diet elitism and encourages readers to question the way restaurants promote diet culture.

I would like to thank Dr. Welji for encouraging me to dive deeper into a topic I'm passionate about and for guiding me throughout the writing process. I would also like to thank Sheryl and all the members of the *Deliberations* Editorial Board who gave me feedback that helped me find the nuance in my argument about veganism.

diet, effectively negating the potential environmental, animal-welfare, and health benefits that could play out, if significantly more people eat fewer animal products.

Methodology

In attempting to understand the elitism of Los Angeles veganism, I focus my research on vegan restaurants – and not other entities, such as vegan grocers or food trucks – as they are not only the biggest players in providing physical and metaphorical spaces of veganism, but they also consistently provide the richest source of cues and standards associated with the culture in which they situate

themselves. More specifically, I choose to highlight the most famous vegan restaurants in Los Angeles, names and places that vegans and non-vegan foodies could recognize. Due to their visibility as popular places, they play a larger part in defining and reinforcing Los Angeles vegan culture. I also choose to exclude restaurants with primarily non-Western international cuisine and cultural influence, as including them would introduce the necessity of discussing authenticity in the context of religion, spirituality, and culture, a discussion that extends beyond the scope of my analysis. For example, I exclude Shojin, an upscale vegan Japanese restaurant, founded upon Japanese values, aesthetics, and etiquette. Therefore, the restaurants on my list are almost exclusively famous, frequented by Hollywood stars, pricey, and white-owned.

Café Gratitude, the icon of Los Angeles veganism and the restaurant I depict in my opening anecdote, serves as the central lens through which I examine indices of

Los Angeles vegan culture, with corroborated by numerous other vegan restaurants to corroborate. My research primarily consisted of combing through restaurants' websites and social media, analyzing the many visual and textual cues of elitism. In the case of Café Gratitude, I sought out further explanations of the founders' principles through interviews and quotes from their book.

A Question of Elitism

In defining the elitism displayed by vegan restaurants, I employ a Bourdieuan perspective. By definition, elitism is social superiority, but the way that elitism is indexed through food and diet is what I examine here. Specifically, elitism applies to food when it is utilized as a means of displaying distinction (Bourdieu 2010, xxix). These displays of distinction are utilized to show a higher status, "through the economic and social conditions which they presuppose" (Bourdieu 2010, xxix). In my analysis of vegan restaurants, I focus on how they conflate veganism with a certain level of social well-being (spiritually engaged, guided by ethics, and unwavering positivity), which in turn, distinguishes vegans as socially superior.

In researching and contemplating vegan culture as mediated through vegan restaurants in Los Angeles, I choose to examine veganism through the lens of elitism defined above, as it encompasses the ultimate result of how vegan establishments position themselves in reference to the rest of the world through displays of distinction. Therefore, when referring to veganism throughout this paper, I mean elite veganism. Veganism, in its purest form as an ethical perspective, excludes the problematic elements of vegan culture that conflate eating no meat and animal byproducts with superiority. I employ Hye Ji Lee's concept of *b-ganism* (*bourgeoisieganism*) to provide the overarching context in which Los Angeles vegan culture is created and upheld: the belief that they are not contributing to animal rights abuses



or speciesism, whether genuine or not, allows vegans “to resolve the potential guilt of privilege status whilst still reaping the benefits of their superior position” (Lee 2017, 1-2). Thus, *b-ganism* describes how Los Angeles vegan culture justifies the conflation of veganism with spirituality, purity, and positivity, simply because the diet does not include animals.

Furthermore, it has been noted that vegans often position themselves as the superior “in-group” vs. unethical “outgroup” (Greenbaume 2012, 132). In a study of 16 self-proclaimed ethical vegans, Jessica Greenbaume observed that these vegans created “hierarchies” based on the “authenticity” of their vegan-ness, placing themselves above all others (2012, 132). Here, “hierarchy” plays the same role as elitism, defining who is superior to whom. In my analysis of Los Angeles vegan restaurants, I extend this idea further, illustrating that it is not just individual vegans, but also vegan restaurants that construct hierarchies of status. In “Positioning Food Cultures: ‘Alternative’ Food as Distinctive Consumer Practice,” Jessica Paddock noted a similar conclusion in her study of how people with alternative food consumption choices positioned themselves as superior to others, or “as Bourdieu argues, separated by degrees of cultural capital” (2016, 1042-1045). Here, Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital equates to elitism in the sense that merely by eating a certain unconventional diet, one is automatically of greater wealth, resources, or education, which inevitably equates with being “greater” (Bourdieu 2010, 191). In other words, Paddock observes what Bourdieu describes: that food cannot be viewed outside of the contextual relationships in which it is constructed (2010, 191). With vegan and plant-based diets considered alternative, Paddock’s study sets the stage for the way in which vegan restaurants position vegan food, and by extension veganism, as elite.

Spirituality and Spiritual Appropriation: “I AM IMMORTAL”

Many cultures and religions have a long history of beliefs and practices that restrict the consumption of meat or animal products. However, when restaurants not affiliated with such a culture claim the same foundations for veganism, they run the risk of becoming sites of appropriation. No restaurant in Los Angeles is perhaps more famous for invoking the dogmas of other cultures and religions than Café Gratitude. The restaurant chain regularly utilizes borrowed words, phrases, and concepts at various levels of their business and marketing, ranging from buzzwords on Instagram captions to the underlying foundations of their management practices.

Café Gratitude appears to conflate their vegan food with practices of spirituality, without genuine acknowledgement or consideration of the origins of these practices in history and tradition. Their website states, “We select the finest ingredients to honor the earth and ourselves, as we are one and the same” (Café Gratitude 2021). The first phrase in this statement reflects a deep commitment to using ingredients that support environmental and human health, which is, at the surface level, a harmless sentiment. It is the use of the word “honor” that invites the question of spirituality, as it is uncommon in our generalized white American culture to explicitly honor something, in the way it is explicitly and culturally embedded in say, Hinduism. This word choice reflects a desire to index sacredness in the food establishment. The second phrase of this statement implies the belief in the “oneness” of planet and people, a belief common in many Indigenous cultures as well as Buddhism and Hinduism. By invoking oneness, Café Gratitude suggests that veganism or vegan food promotes unity among people and planet, and presupposed knowledge of and belief in this concept. Disguised in



a rather poetic manner, this statement appropriates cultural practices of honoring and religious beliefs in oneness to index a sense of spiritual enlightenment. Here, spiritual enlightenment not only stems from a *b-ganist* perspective that it is acceptable to borrow from other cultures to promote veganism (Lee 2017, 1-2), but also distinguishes veganism as elite because it is supported by spiritual practices.

Furthermore, Café Gratitude is supposedly founded upon the concept of “dharma” (Bronner 2017), as espoused in “Sacred Commerce: Business as A Path of Awakening,” a book by the restaurant’s founders (Engelhart et al. 2008). The book provides insight into the eagerness of vegan establishments to index their enlightened ways of running a business. Because dharma, interpreted as the right way of conduct (Johnson 2009), purportedly underlies the what and how of Café Gratitude, it makes it seem as if Café Gratitude is ultimately ‘right.’ Common words utilized throughout Café Gratitude’s marketing and likewise mirrored in the book include: “awakening,” “consciousness,” “divine,” and “sacred” (@cafegratitude 2021). These spiritual buzzwords represent cherry-picked pieces of various religions (such as Hinduism and Buddhism), taken out of their traditional contexts (such as prayer and ritual) and so made palatable for the average non-religious American. The very invocation of “dharma” and other such words in a white-owned vegan business indicates a lack of sensitivity to the significance of such a concept among practicing peoples. This is problematic not only because the ‘borrowing’ is done for the sake of appealing to Los Angeles’s wannabe spirituals, but also because it takes away credit from the original source as it becomes associated with veganism instead.

Café Gratitude may be famous or notorious among Angelenos for its employment of spirituality, but it is by no means the only restaurant that does so. A variety of vegan establishments in the Los Angeles area, ranging from raw-organic juice bars to hamburger trucks to high-end cuisine, claim to be founded on spiritual or cultural traditions. Take Monty’s Good Burger, the vegan equivalent of the fast-food establishment In N’ Out, which describes itself as the “manifestation” of a passion for quality vegan food (Monty’s Good Burger 2021). Perhaps because their offerings do not lend themselves to health-consciousness, Monty’s Good

Burger compensates by throwing in the word “manifest,” thereby playing into the vegan culture that values spiritual foundations.

In the same sense, Plant Food + Wine, a high-end vegan restaurant, emphasizes its food and wines grown under biodynamic agriculture (Plant Food Wine Venice 2021). Biodynamic agriculture is organic agriculture in practice, but with mysticism, spirituality, and sometimes astrology used to support and justify plant growth. In much the same way as Monty’s Good Burger, Plant Food + Wine creates the sense that vegan food is made with spiritually sound (though scientifically unproven) practices, further establishing the connection between veganism and spirituality. By forging a connection between spiritually awakening and vegan food, vegan restaurants serve as a space of what Bourdieu calls

“distinction,” whereby veganism is distinguished as elite from non-veganism. This appropriated version of spirituality, a *b-ganist* move, ultimately reflects how Café Gratitude and other vegan restaurants come off as elitist.

Ethics and Purity: “I AM PURE”

Perhaps the most significant aspect of veganism, serving as an attraction for some while a contention for others, is its inherent tie to ethics and morality. There



are a variety of reasons people choose to be vegan, but none are more prominent than health and animals ethics, both of which have their merits. However, the current vegan movement in Los Angeles, and elsewhere, equates these otherwise noble intentions into indicators of purity and superiority.

Café Gratitude excessively touts qualities of their food that reinforce the notion that by eating vegan, one is eating – or extending further, is themselves – pure. In a promotional video for the restaurant, the narrator mentions Café Gratitude’s goal of “building a clean supply chain,” while a clip of vibrant, unblemished chard leaves being cleaned in water plays (Café Gratitude 2021) (See Appendix: Image 2). Here, Café Gratitude places a double emphasis on “cleanliness”: explicitly, as they repeatedly mention their “local” ingredients and “artisanal” products, and implicitly, as they visually present only picture-perfect produce and well-known health foods (See Appendix: Video 1). In doing so, Café Gratitude deems industrially-produced and un-whole foods unclean. “Clean” is just one word in a long list of adjectives – fresh, finest, plant-based, sustainable, organic, natural, detoxifying, etc. – that Café Gratitude, among other vegan restaurants, use to elevate their food by implying purity and righteousness. What’s more, by claiming that vegan food – and by extension, veganism as a whole – is “natural,” vegan restaurants imply that non-vegan food is unnatural, thereby elevating veganism relative to other diets (Paddock 2016, 1042-1045). Thus, Café Gratitude fosters the connection between the purity of food in the health sense, with the purity of morals.

It is trendy for vegan places to incorporate explicit cues of purity directly into their names, as if to suggest that simply by consuming vegan food, one is somehow more pure. Here, I specifically refer to Pura Vita and Real Food Daily. With the former, a popular vegan Italian restaurant, the name translates to “pure life” (Pura Vita 2021), equating eating vegan with living a righteous life. The idea that eating vegan somehow rids one of all sin imparts a sense of shame on those who do not eat vegan. In the same vein, the name Real Food Daily (2021) implies that only vegan food carries the quality of being ‘real.’ This blatantly ignores the fact that vegan food, including food served at Real Food Daily, can be just as ultra-processed and “far removed from nature,” which is what people traditionally associate with “fake” food. Both of the aforementioned cases are especially problematic in the context of accessibility. To shame people for eating “impure” or “fake” food discounts the high level of financial privilege required to eat at these pricey vegan restaurants, a prime display of *b-ganism* (Lee 2017, 2). Many people, such as the those in the huge low-income and homeless population of Los Angeles, do not have the means to eat at such restaurants, let alone sustain themselves and their families on a vegan diet with food from the grocery store.

Vegan restaurants likewise serve as sites where ethics are delineated and deliberated. The good good, a vegan café and bakery, touts the tagline, “the good stuff, without the guilty conscience!” (the good good 2021). Here, the good good suggests that one feels or should feel guilty upon eating animal products, thereby framing veganism as free from sin or “right.” It is safe to assume that the guilty



conscience derives from animal ethics, or the knowledge that animals may have been exploited in the making of non-vegan food. Therefore, in context, this tagline positions vegans as ethically superior to non-vegans, thereby creating a hierarchy of ethicality (Greenbaume 2012, 132). As a set of theories, animal ethics has its merits.

However, the way that the good good appeals to it fails to capture the nuances of the philosophy and instead positions consumers who eat non-vegan food as guilty. In reality, it is just a marketing strategy that essentially guilt-trips non-vegan consumers, while reinforcing aloofness among vegans. To equate a specific diet with ethicality, or conversely, everything that does not fall within that specific diet with a lack of ethics, fails to account for the culture and preference that shape an individual's diet and presupposes privilege and access. Therefore, vegan restaurants index their elitism by imposing ethical standards on consumers, disregarding the "cultural capital" required to eat at such vegan restaurants and the context in which people make food choices (Bourdieu 2010, 191).

Positivity and Perfection: "I AM THRIVING"

Vegan restaurants often personify veganism as a happy-go-lucky movement that only makes people (and animals) happier and healthier. In reality, this plays out as a shortcoming of the vegan movement, especially vegans and vegan establishments in the upper echelons of Los Angeles, to acknowledge and discuss the nuances and pitfalls of veganism. In restaurants specifically, this observation appears as preoccupation with positivity, or the "sunshine and rainbows ethos" (Shoeneman 2011).

Café Gratitude is perhaps most well-known in Los Angeles and beyond, not for its food, but rather for its obsession with gratitude. From the quotes on the walls of the restaurants to website descriptions to Instagram captions, Café Gratitude creates a space in which it seems only positive thinking is tolerated. Nowhere is this more apparent than when one must order from the menu. When ordering, a customer is supposed to say, "I am..." and then the name of the dish they want – "thriving," "magical," "glorious," "optimistic," or "empowered" (Café Gratitude 2021) (See Appendix: Image 1) – to which the waiter responds, "You are... [dish name]." On a superficial level, ordering the mushroom sandwich by saying "I am enthusiastic" is a fun, if not slightly awkward, process. However, in the context of Café Gratitude's "cult of gratitude," it can seem a bit much to ask customers to make such statements, even if they are not meant literally. In the broader scheme, it seems to connect veganism to an unattainable level of positivity, gratitude, and satisfaction with one's life and circumstances. This is not to diminish the feeling of escaping the burdens of the real world during a dinner at Café Gratitude, where the happiness can be infectious. Instead, I hope to illustrate how, as a whole, the ultra-positivity promoted by vegan restaurants paints veganism as a culture full of optimistic and satisfied people. These vegan restaurants position vegans as elite in that they have a higher degree of fulfillment than non-vegans, a sense of fulfillment that is assumed to come from having cultural capital (Paddock 2016, 1042-1045). The ordering system at Café Gratitude contributes to this illusion of perfection as customers internalize the association of veganism and ultra-positivity as they make statements about themselves, which are then repeated by the waiters. Here, as with elsewhere, the elitism arises out of the exclusive association with happiness, and complete disregard for the nuanced meaning of veganism, food choices, and privilege (Lee 2017, 1-2).



I AM
THRIVING
MAGICAL
GLORIOUS
OPTIMISTIC
EMPOWERED

Crossroads Kitchen: “I am UNIQUE”

Los Angeles vegan culture is famous, to some in an alluring way and to many in a negative way, for its interplay of spirituality, ethics, and positivity. All of the famous vegan restaurants I have examined thus far exemplify these elements, and in doing so, signify their elite status. However, one famous vegan restaurant in Los Angeles serves as a kind of anti-vegan-culture symbol: Crossroads Kitchen. In describing Crossroads Kitchen, I illustrate how vegan restaurants can become successful establishments and well-known for the vegan food they serve, without imposing appropriated spirituality, morals, or positivity on the consumers.

Crossroads Kitchen describes itself as “not what people picture when they think of a vegan restaurant” (2021), and this description holds true (at least for me). On the front page of their website, the words “vegan,” “plant-based,” and practically every other vegan buzzword are absent, instead replaced with a classy aesthetic and images of fancy dishes (most of which are vegetables, of course). The tone set by the front page suggests nothing more than a classy restaurant in Los Angeles, and it is this lack of “obvious vegan cues” (Crossroads Kitchen 2021) that distinguishes Crossroads Kitchen from Café Gratitude. The covertness of the plant-based cuisine at Crossroads Kitchen signifies a desire to dissociate with exactly what makes so many vegan restaurants so famous. To be fair, Crossroads Kitchen services those privileged enough to afford the high price and plays into cues of elitism typical of fancy restaurants, such as refined dress and atmosphere. However, Crossroads Kitchen defines itself “not by what’s missing but by what it is” (2021), distinguishing its elitism from that of a vegan restaurant by purposely not invoking spirituality, purity, or positivity within their space.

The fame of Crossroads Kitchen derives from the fact that their mission and space speaks equally to and of vegans and non-vegans. They do not elevate veganism to a state of enlightenment, ethicality, or perfection, but rather focus on elevating vegan food from a culinary perspective. For this reason, Crossroads Kitchen places itself among the ranks of high-end restaurants in Los Angeles, not the ranks of exclusively vegan restaurants, as it lacks the connection to all that makes these vegan restaurants so well-known for their “vegan-ness.” I share the case of Crossroads Kitchen as a model of how vegan restaurants in Los Angeles can avoid forging elitist connotations of veganism, and instead promote eating vegan through less problematic means.



To Be or Not to Be a Vegan Angeleno

As I have explored in this paper, vegan restaurants in Los Angeles reinforce and define a niche culture of vegans by creating associations that suggest superiority. Invoking practices such as “manifestation” and concepts such as “sacredness”, vegan restaurants appropriate legitimate religion, culture, and spirituality to conflate veganism and enlightenment. Likewise, their obsession with displaying purity and ethicality sends the message that non-veganism is immoral, ultimately shaming people for diet choices and ignoring the level of privilege and accessibility necessary to dine at such elite establishments. Finally, vegan restaurants create an image of

perfect positivity, thereby equating veganism to happiness, and thus its inherent “betterness,” all the while ignoring the realities and challenges of life.

To better promote veganism and the benefits of consuming fewer animal products, vegan culture in Los Angeles needs to change. The way that vegan restaurants portray veganism as superior has the unfortunate side effect of alienating, shaming, and excluding many people. In short, appealing to veganism’s elitism does not attract newcomers to the diet. I believe that if the vegan movement promoted veganism through a more factually-based, sensitive, and welcoming approach, more people would be inclined to support vegan restaurants and adopt plant-based eating. Restaurants, specifically, could take a hint from Crossroads Kitchen and simply promote veganism through taste and fine dining. In general, I believe that no one should see themselves as superior or inferior to others based on what they eat, and vegan restaurants should not perpetuate this mindset.



Ultimately, the elitism of Los Angeles vegan culture elicit two different responses. The first is allure, wherein it is exactly these spiritual, ethical, and positive elements of these restaurants that attract patrons. The elites who fall into this category desire the sense of being enlightened, pure, and optimistic that vegan restaurants seem to offer. These people uphold the culture of diet elitism, which only serves to spread shame around food choices, rather than appreciate and rejoice in vegan food. The second is notoriety, which gives Los Angeles vegans such a bad reputation. To various extremes, many people hold a conscious disdain for this elitist vegan culture and the problematic way in which the culture shames, excludes, and appropriates. I fall into this category, yet I admit I still occasionally dine at these restaurants. One regular customer of Café Gratitude, a high level executive at Warner brothers, told the New York Times (Shoeneman 2010) that she has “found a way around the flakier aspects of the place,” by just pointing when she orders. This epitomizes how many Angelenos feel about vegan culture: Eat the delicious food, but don’t eat into the culture.

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